

The Vicious Cycle: Political Fragility and the Perils of Transition in Africa

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Abstract: In many African countries emerging from conflict, political transitions are intended to mark the start of a new chapter, one focused on peace, development, and democratic governance. However, these transitions often reveal deep and persistent fragilities, including weak institutions, exclusionary politics, and socio-economic instability. This paper examines why such transitions often fail to deliver lasting change and how states can break the cycle of fragility. Grounded in the theories of social contract and accountability, the study emphasizes that sustainable peace requires more than elections or elite power-sharing deals. It calls for rebuilding trust between citizens and the state, strengthening institutions, promoting inclusive economic growth, and fostering a secure environment founded on justice and equity. The five-pillar framework, comprising social contract, governance, social cohesion, economic reconstruction, and security, guides resilient political transitions. Overcoming fragility demands an integrated approach that places people, trust, and inclusive governance at the heart of state-building.

Keywords: Political fragility, Political transition, Social contract, Sustainable peace, Africa, Governance, Security

I. Background to the Study

Political transitions in post-conflict states often mirror deeper structural fragilities. Rather than serving as clear pathways to democratic consolidation, these transitions tend to highlight persistent vulnerabilities rooted in weak institutions, fragmented governance, and limited citizen engagement (Hoeffler, 2019). Ideally, such transitions mark the beginning of a process aimed at escaping fragility traps by reconstructing the state's political, economic, and social foundations (Pitamber, 2015). Discussions surrounding fragility and political transitions emphasize recurring development challenges in post-conflict African states. These include cycles of poor governance, economic stagnation, and political volatility. To establish durable peace and resilience, post-conflict states must strengthen three core dimensions of statehood: service delivery capacity, political legitimacy, and authoritative control to prevent conflict (Michailof, 2013). These elements are essential to shield transitional processes from relapse into fragility.

The effects of fragility extend beyond state institutions; they also impact livelihoods, increase poverty levels, and reduce resilience. Although fragile contexts make up only about 24% of the global population, they represent nearly 73% of people living in extreme poverty (Hoeffler, 2019). Therefore, political transitions must be planned not only to fix governance issues but also to create a foundation for inclusive socio-economic recovery. A failed political transition, particularly in its early stages, often results in a deviation from the roadmap to democratization, reinforcing fragility traps characterized by exclusion, poor governance, and institutional weakness (Asrat & Getachew, 2024). Moreover, when states cannot withstand environmental or economic shocks, their vulnerability deepens, undermining recovery and stability (Magidu, 2010).

Importantly, peace agreements do not instantly eliminate fragility. Even after conflict cessation, post-conflict states remain vulnerable, requiring time and strategic interventions to build resilience and adapt to emerging risks (Adebayo, 2012). Thus, transition periods must be treated as critical junctures in which states must manage uncertainty while laying the groundwork for inclusive governance. In this context, development refers to a

multidimensional process of transformation involving institutional reform, socio-economic improvements, and the elimination of structural inequalities (Denton & Nkem, 2022). Achieving such transformation requires collaborative engagement among transitional governments, civil society, and international development actors to effectively stabilize fragile systems (Kifle & Olonisakin, 2023).

It is noteworthy that Africa's democratization efforts in post-conflict states are often characterized by the dual processes of political liberalization and democratic consolidation. While liberalization empowers citizens to express their socio-political rights, consolidation ensures sustained citizen participation and institutional legitimacy. However, lasting democratic stability also requires a restructuring of power to prevent elite dominance and authoritarian backsliding (Olowu & Chanie, 2016). In conclusion, political transitions in post-conflict Africa represent fragile opportunities for state-building and democratic transformation. These transitions must be supported through intentional governance reform, institutional strengthening, and continuous risk mitigation to ensure they evolve into resilient and inclusive systems (Narasimhan, 2012).

II. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study employs a comprehensive analysis of existing literature to examine political fragility and transition. Academic discourse on the fragility trap and its adverse effects on political transition provides a broad understanding of the challenges facing a state in flux (see Norris, 2012). The concepts of fragility and post-conflict are intrinsically linked, while the political transition process itself is theorized to act as a social cohesion mechanism. It aims to settle a fragile period by accelerating conflict resolution through the establishment of robust governance, improved socio-economic development, stabilized political institutions, and enhanced state capacity (Call, 2008). The definition of state fragility is central to this inquiry. As asserted by the OECD, states are fragile when their structures lack "the political will and capacity to provide the basic functions needed for poverty reduction, development, and to safeguard the security and human rights of their populations" (OECD, 2007). This conceptualization hinges on a state's political structures, its capacity to deliver services and reduce poverty, its authority to guarantee security, and its legitimacy in gaining public trust. Importantly, the discourse on fragility remains highly dependent on specific contextual and evolving situational vulnerabilities (see Di John, 2010).

For African nations emerging from periods of conflict, constructing a secure and stable state hinges on a political transition that successfully forges the core pillars of statehood: authority, legitimacy, and capacity. Historically, such transitions on the continent have faltered due to deficiencies spanning economic, environmental, social, political, and security spheres. To successfully navigate ongoing fragility, these states must therefore focus on a profound functional and structural overhaul aimed at achieving developmental benchmarks, instituting effective governance, fostering socio-economic progress, and implementing wide-ranging security sector reforms. This persistent fragility is commonly explained by inadequate governance, intense limitations on domestic resources, and a pronounced susceptibility to political and economic disruptions. These factors manifest as chronic political turmoil and violence, a lack of secure property rights, unenforceable agreements, and pervasive corruption, collectively creating a self-perpetuating cycle of ineffective rule. This dynamic is observable in a number of states, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Burundi, Ivory Coast, Somalia, and Libya, where transitions have broken down and conflict has resumed.

III. Theoretical Framework: Social Contract and Accountability

The analytical framework for this paper is grounded in social contract and social accountability theories, which help contextualize state formation and stable political transition. The literature indicates that the theory of the Social Contract was profoundly shaped by Thomas Hobbes in his seminal work, *Leviathan* (1651). Hobbes debated that in the "state of nature," human life was solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. To escape this condition, individuals voluntarily surrendered their rights and freedoms to a sovereign authority in exchange for protection and order, a contract that demanded obedience (Tuck, 1996). However, this Hobbesian view, which discourages individualism in favour of absolutism, was subsequently challenged by philosophers like Locke and Rousseau. They argued that individuals did not surrender their sovereignty entirely but sought protection, and that the governing authority had no right to dictate individual sovereignty. Instead, they posited equality as the basis of state formation, leading to a social organization that guarantees rights, liberty, and equality through the "general will" (Rosen, 1996). In modern governance, the social contract is operationalized as a form of 'contractarian governance,' a pact between citizens and the elected officials they empower. These powerholders are bestowed with the legitimacy and authority to govern (Beetham, 2013). Consequently, whereas political fragility represents a Hobbesian state of nature, an effective social contract is realized through political transitions that successfully embed functional and structured governance principles. This theory is particularly salient in transitioning states, establishing electoral frameworks.

Here, citizens express their collective will by endorsing the constitutional order of the sovereign state, and factions in a post-conflict environment acknowledge that establishing basic governance institutions necessitates subsequent elections (Linz and Stepan, 1996). Conversely, the absence of these foundational principles drastically diminishes the prospects for stable governance, increasing the likelihood that the political transition will unravel back into a state of fragility. To further elaborate on the markers of a successful transition, this review integrates the theory of social accountability (Fox, 2015). Accountability is conceptualized as the requirement for powerholders to answer for their conduct, especially regarding their use of political and financial authority (Schedler, 1999).

Social accountability functions as a critical mechanism that evolves from its origins as a citizen-led initiative into a state-sanctioned process. It enables governing elites to foster civic participation by institutionalising electoral frameworks that underpin a transitional democracy, guided by universal normative standards of governance (O'Donnell, 1998). Consequently, social accountability serves as a reinforcing loop, providing citizens with a structured channel for dialogue with powerholders throughout the state-building process. This facilitates consensus on foundational constitutional matters. By effectively merging bottom-up civic engagement with the top-down imperative of establishing recognized authority, it bridges a crucial gap. This synergy smoothens the political transition and creates a bulwark against a regression into fragility and political stagnation.

IV. Political Transition and the Recovery Process

The paramount objective of a political transition is to construct the administrative and institutional capacity of contending parties within a post-conflict settlement. This process is predicated on the assumption that it will pave the way for democratization and fortify conflict resolution mechanisms, serving as a critical pathway for transforming deficient governance structures and mitigating shocks of political vulnerability (see Cammett & Malesky, 2012). For nations emerging from violent conflict, the foundational step in overcoming political fragility is the initiation of a transition that allows the state to restructure its institutions and reposition its capacities to identify and manage potential conflict triggers. These transitional arrangements provide a negotiated political framework, offering opportunities for conflict parties, alongside regional and international actors, to develop visible and actionable peace roadmaps (Jeong, 2025). The enhancement of political capacity through this process enables stakeholders to delineate the parameters of a sustainable political settlement and identify core intervention measures that address the underlying issues fuelling contention.

Frequently, interventions codified in peace agreements serve as a conduit for adapting to international standards of sustainable peace. These agreements aim to enhance economic performance and build a robust democratic transition through electoral arrangements and the systematic transformation of autocratic structures that often act as catalysts for violence (Levitsky & Way, 2019). This endeavour is typically supported by a consortium of stakeholders, including policy practitioners, civil society organizations, and regional and international actors, who intervene through humanitarian assistance and multilateral diplomacy to reinforce a fragile political transition. However, a significant challenge persists, as countries undergoing political transition are susceptible to reverting to conflict if the transition collapses before the full realization of democratic transformation, particularly before the agreed-upon elections can be held. Research indicates that a substantial percentage of post-conflict societies relapse into violence due to the poor political fragmentation of agreed frameworks and the inadequate implementation of intervention measures (Jeong, 2025). These predicaments worsen democratic fragility, which is often amplified by external misfortunes like economic crises and the weak execution of transitional policies. To mitigate political fragility, stakeholders need to focus on creating a revised social contract and fostering social cohesion as key steps to prevent state failure. This contract involves fair resource redistribution, responding to citizens' calls for democratic change, and closing the gap between marginalized groups and those in power. Conceptually, the social contract can be seen as a set of formal and informal agreements that define rights and duties for different societal groups and government authorities, helping to make relations between the state and society more predictable and stabilize political processes (OECD, 2011; Hobbes, 1651/1996).

In fragile transitions, conflicting parties can reduce the risks of renewed violence by collectively pursuing social cohesion through inclusive governance, social recovery, economic reconstruction, and the provision of essential services. Social cohesion thus functions as a stabilizing bridge during political transitions. In this context, international, national, and regional actors can create critical opportunities, such as constitutional reforms, peacebuilding programs, and capacity-building initiatives, that serve as milestones for peaceful transformation (Jeong, 2025). Cohesion-building practices, including trust-building initiatives, shared norm development, and strengthened social networks, not only create security but also provide fertile ground for institutional development that advances public welfare. This reflects the broader peacebuilding principle that lasting stability requires addressing the root causes of conflict through structural transformation, moving beyond the mere restoration of

order to modifying the social and economic inequalities that sustain group grievances (Jeong, 2025; Paris, 2004). A critical deficiency in many African contexts is the elite assumption that political transitions will proceed smoothly without a dedicated investment in forging a new social contract. States fragmented by violence require in-depth efforts to strengthen social interconnectedness to ensure a healthy transition and avoid regression into conflict. Empirical examples, such as Libya and South Sudan, demonstrate how the neglect of this foundational work has led to a return to conflict, primarily due to the failure to mend the impaired social fabric of the state.

Equally imperative in ensuring the sustainability of political transitions is the establishment of sound governance principles such as inclusive constitution-making, the rule of law, accountability, responsiveness, equity, and broad-based participation. These principles serve as safeguards against political fragility and are essential for building institutions that command legitimacy. Good governance strengthens the democratization process by fostering inclusivity, thereby engaging both citizens and elites in shaping political outcomes (Linz & Stepan, 1996; International IDEA, 2005). In contrast, transitions that adopt a narrow, top-down approach, concentrating power in the hands of elites, are empirically more vulnerable to fragility, internal rivalries, and recurrent violence (Levitsky & Way, 2019; Carothers, 2002). This underscores the necessity of embedding democratic accountability and citizen participation at the heart of transitional governance frameworks to reduce the risks of authoritarian relapse and conflict recurrence. This creates an "uneven playing field" where incumbents use state resources to systematically weaken opposition, control media, and manipulate electoral rules, fundamentally compromising democracy even without overt violence or fraud (Levitsky & Way, 2019). Furthermore, governance imbalances between the governed populace and power-holding elites, especially in systems characterized by centralized control, frequently reignite struggles that return the state to fragility and upheaval.

Therefore, it is essential for a fragile state to invest in the three pillars of recovery:

1. **Social Recovery:** Social recovery is the cornerstone of a fragile state's transition from conflict to legitimacy. It begins with the consistent and equitable delivery of basic services such as healthcare, education, water, and sanitation. These services are not merely technical functions; they are political instruments that shape state-society relations. When the state delivers services effectively and inclusively, it reestablishes its presence and authority, generating what some scholars term "output legitimacy" (Haar & Rubenstein, 2012).

In fragile contexts, basic service delivery often faces systemic disruptions, damaged facilities, absent personnel, and politicized access. Yet studies show that restarting these services early in the peacebuilding phase significantly reduces the likelihood of conflict recurrence (Desai, 2020). Importantly, service provision should be context-sensitive and participatory, considering local expectations and informal governance arrangements. Without this, state-led recovery risks reinforcing exclusion or triggering new tensions. Furthermore, social recovery lays the foundation for citizen trust, which is critical in societies emerging from war or authoritarianism. It signals that peace is not merely the absence of violence, but the presence of responsive, equitable, and accountable governance (Dia, 2022).

2. **Economic Reconstruction:** The creation of a strong, autonomous private sector. This is critical, as a weak private sector vulnerable to state capture undermines democracy, while a strong one pluralizes power, supports opposition, and funds civil society, creating "democratic muscle. Also, a healthy economy provides employment, fosters social mobility, and generates the fiscal space needed for state functions. However, economic rebuilding in post-conflict contexts cannot simply mimic market liberalization; it must be structured to reduce inequality, rebuild livelihoods, and pluralize power.
3. **Infrastructure Development:** Infrastructure development in fragile states is far more than a technical necessity; it is a foundational pillar of peacebuilding, state legitimacy, and economic renewal. Roads, bridges, electricity, water systems, and telecommunications are not only critical for connecting markets and facilitating service delivery; they symbolize state functionality and presence. In post-conflict societies, infrastructure signals a return to normalcy, the reestablishment of state capacity, and a tangible "peace dividend" to citizens (Akinbi & Oluwole, 2025). Infrastructural projects that are strategically planned promote inclusivity. This is achieved by integrating marginalized regions into national economies, reducing spatial inequalities that often underlie conflict (Nkurunziza, 2018). Moreover, infrastructure projects can generate significant employment opportunities and stimulate local economies, particularly when designed with labour-intensive approaches. This is essential in fragile states where unemployment is often both a consequence and driver of conflict. Importantly, infrastructure also serves a governance function. Its delivery demonstrates state responsiveness and can enhance public trust, especially when projects are transparent and participatory. However, poorly executed infrastructure development, such as that characterized by corruption or unequal distribution, can reignite grievances (Jones & Howarth, 2012).

Integrating political theories of social contract and accountability provides a robust framework for transitions. The legitimacy of state authority formed through transition is deeply contingent on how effectively these mechanisms are interwoven into the new political fabric. A legitimate state must meet a "basic legitimation demand" by providing essential political goods like security and stability and justifying how it provides them in a way that aligns with citizens' beliefs. Furthermore, the proposed theoretical framework below illustrates how a multidimensional approach can resolve the fragility syndrome by simultaneously addressing institutional, social, and economic dimensions.

V. Proposed Framework for Resolving the Political Fragility Syndrome

Dimension	Key Components	Expected Outcome
Revised Social Contract	Formal & informal agreements on rights and obligations, which include political participation, social benefit provision.	Legitimate authority, predictable state-society interaction, and political stability.
Governance & Institutions	Rule of law; Anti-corruption measures; Electoral integrity; Constraints on executive power.	Institutional stability, reduced risk of elite power struggles, and credible elections.
Social Cohesion	Truth and reconciliation; Intergroup dialogue; Civic education; Protection of minority rights.	Restored trust, shared national identity, resilient civil society.
Economic Reconstruction	Strong, autonomous private sector; Property rights protection; Job creation; Equitable resource distribution.	Economic stability, reduced inequality, and independent financing for opposition and media.
Security & Justice	Security sector reform (SSR); Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR); Accessible justice systems.	Physical security, personal safety, and public trust in the state monopoly on force.

Table 1: Framework for Resolving the Political Fragility Syndrome

The proposed framework, as illustrated in the table, provides a multi-dimensional roadmap for navigating a successful political transition and avoiding the fragility trap. It moves beyond a singular focus on elections or elite power-sharing, which have proven insufficient in many African contexts. Instead, it posits that sustainable peace is achieved through the simultaneous and synergistic strengthening of five interdependent pillars.

1. **The Foundation: A Revised Social Contract:** The framework identifies the establishment of a new social contract as the foundational element. This addresses the core failure of many post-conflict states: the lack of legitimate authority. It is not enough for a state to exist; it must justify how it uses its power in a way that aligns with the beliefs and needs of its citizenry. Indeed, the absence of a credible social contract is a hallmark of fragile states. Seyoum (2024) argued that in contexts where state legitimacy has been eroded by authoritarianism or conflict, rebuilding the social contract becomes imperative, and this involves renegotiating formal and informal expectations between state and society to move beyond coercion-based governance. Hence, post-conflict transitions must focus on institutionalizing public participation, social protections, and inclusive representation. This aligns with the OECD's multidimensional fragility framework, which advocates for citizen-driven models of governance as a pathway to durable peace (Desai, 2020).
2. **The Institutional Pillar: Governance & Institutions:** This dimension translates the principles of the social contract into functioning institutions. It emphasizes that democratic legitimacy requires more than a vote; it requires an "even playing field" (Levitsky & Way, 2019). This involves constraining executive power, ensuring electoral integrity, and implementing robust anti-corruption measures to prevent elites from hijacking the state for personal gain, a common trigger for a return to conflict. Inadequate checks and

balances increase the probability of renewed elite conflict. Therefore, effective rule of law, anti-corruption bodies, and independent electoral commissions become the foundational components of post-fragility governance (Dia 2022).

3. **The Social Pillar: Social Cohesion:** A legitimate state and strong institutions cannot be built upon a fractured society. Rehman Mayar (2018) argued that rebuilding fractured societies requires more than legal and institutional reforms; it demands healing. Truth and reconciliation processes, civic education, and intergroup dialogue are crucial in transforming societal relationships. This component of the framework directly addresses horizontal inequalities that can perpetuate violence, especially in multi-ethnic or sectarian societies (Rehman Mayar, 2018). Where minority rights are ignored, the legitimacy of state-building efforts is fatally undermined. Therefore, initiatives like inclusive public dialogues and culturally relevant education are pivotal.
4. **The Economic Pillar: Economic Reconstruction:** This component highlights that Political fragility is closely tied to economic exclusion and poverty. Crucially, it argues for fostering a strong and autonomous private sector. This is not merely for growth but to pluralize economic power. A state-controlled economy empowers autocrats, while an independent business class can fund opposition, support independent media, and create "democratic muscle" that checks state power (Journal of Democracy, 2025). Equitable resource distribution and job creation are essential to remove the economic drivers of conflict. In contexts such as Nepal, post-conflict economic policies focused on expanding social protection and employment were instrumental in reducing grievances (Diwakar, 2023).
5. **The Security Pillar: Security & Justice:** Finally, no other pillar can exist without physical security. This dimension focuses on establishing the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force through reformed, professional security services, which will guarantee sustainable peace. Furthermore, it links security to justice via accessible justice systems, ensuring that disputes are resolved in courtrooms, thereby building public trust in the state. Similarly, Cheeseman (2025) posits that the process of rebuilding public trust involves transforming security forces from tools of repression to providers of citizen protection. Integrated security sector reform (SSR) and access to justice are crucial for deterring violence and providing peaceful dispute resolution pathways (Cheeseman, 2025). This means that justice delivery should be timely, impartial, and locally accessible to prevent relapse into violence or reliance on informal armed actors.

The framework's power lies in its integration. Progress in one dimension reinforces progress in another. For example, a legitimate social contract (Pillar 1) makes it easier to collect taxes to fund public services, which builds social cohesion (Pillar 3) and strengthens economic reconstruction (Pillar 4). Conversely, failure in one area can undermine the entire transition, as seen when elite corruption (a failure of Pillar 2) destroys public trust (Pillar 1) and reignites social grievances (Pillar 3).

VI. Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates that political fragility in post-conflict African states is not a predetermined fate but a dynamic condition arising from the failure to adequately address the multifaceted roots of conflict. The transition from war to sustainable peace is a perilous journey that extends far beyond the signing of a peace agreement or the holding of an election. As evidenced by the recurrent conflicts in states like Libya, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic, a narrow focus on elite bargains and technical institutional designs, while ignoring the deeper needs of the populace, is a recipe for a return to violence. Hence, the path to a resilient state requires a holistic and integrated approach, as detailed in the proposed theoretical framework. The evidence is clear: sustainable peace is built on the foundation of a *revised social contract* that legitimizes state authority in the eyes of its citizens. This contract must be operationalized through robust, *inclusive institutions* that prevent the concentration of power and opportunity. It must be nurtured within a society where *cohesion and trust* are actively repaired. It must be underpinned by an *equitable economy* that offers tangible benefits and justice for all, not just a privileged elite. And it must be guaranteed by a *secure environment* where citizens are protected by a professional and accountable security sector.

Therefore, the central argument of this paper is that escaping the fragility trap is contingent upon a conscious, simultaneous, and long-term commitment to strengthening all five dimensions of the state-society relationship. For policymakers, regional bodies, and international partners, this means moving beyond short-term stabilization projects. It demands sustained investment in the complex, often slow, work of forging a new political compact, fostering inclusive economic growth, and healing the social divisions that conflict leaves behind. The success of Africa's political transitions will ultimately be measured not by the swiftness of the exit from immediate conflict, but by the depth and durability of the peace that is constructed in its wake.

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