The Institutionalization of Paramilitary Forces and the Fragmentation of the State: Evidence from Sudan



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Abstract:

Why do some states that formally incorporate paramilitary actors into their institutional structures experience fragmentation of authority rather than stronger centralized control? Existing scholarship typically views non-state armed actors either as external challengers to the state or as substitutes for weak institutions. This article advances a different argument: under specific political and institutional conditions, paramilitary actors incorporated into state structures may evolve into autonomous centres of coercive power that contribute to state fragmentation.

The article develops a causal mechanism linking delegation, institutionalization, autonomization, competition, and fragmentation. It introduces the concept of Multiple Centres of Military Power to describe a configuration in which state-embedded actors exercise competing claims over coercive force. Using process tracing in the Sudanese case, the study shows how strategies intended to strengthen regime survival and centralized control may unintentionally generate institutional fragmentation.

Key words: *Paramilitary Institutionalization; State Fragmentation; Multiple Centres of Military Power; Rapid Support Forces (RSF); Sudan.*

Introduction:

A foundational premise in political theory is that the survival and stability of the state depend on its ability to monopolize the legitimate use of force. From Max Weber's classic definition of the state as "a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory" (Weber, 1946, p. 78) to Charles Tilly's argument that "war made the state and the state made war" (Tilly, 1985, p. 170), the centralization of coercive power has long been viewed as a defining feature of statehood. According to this perspective, the modern state derives its authority not only from laws and administrative institutions but also from

its capacity to concentrate the means of violence under a single central authority and prevent the emergence of competing centres of military power.

Yet contemporary states frequently rely on paramilitary organizations and auxiliary security forces operating alongside formal military institutions. Often created to address security threats or strengthen regime survival, these actors are incorporated into state structures while retaining varying degrees of organizational autonomy. This raises a central puzzle: how can states preserve centralized control over coercive force while simultaneously empowering actors that may evolve into competing centres of military power, and under what conditions might strategies intended to strengthen central authority ultimately contribute to its fragmentation? This article argues that the institutionalization of paramilitary forces may unintentionally redistribute coercive authority within the state. As these forces acquire independent resources, organizational capacities, and operational autonomy, their relationship with the state can evolve from hierarchical subordination to institutional competition. To explain this process, the article develops a causal framework linking delegation, institutionalization, autonomization, competition, and fragmentation, and examines this mechanism through the Sudanese case.

1. Theoretical Framework

This study develops a theoretical framework to explain how the institutionalization of paramilitary actors may contribute to state fragmentation. While conventional approaches generally assume that formal incorporation strengthens state authority and enhances centralized control, this study argues that institutionalization can, under certain political and institutional conditions, facilitate organizational autonomy, competition, and the redistribution of coercive authority within the state. The framework proposes a sequential causal mechanism linking delegation, institutionalization, autonomization, competition, and fragmentation, and identifies the processes through which state-sponsored armed actors may evolve into autonomous centres of military power.

1.1 The Institutional Origins of Paramilitary Forces

A recurring limitation in the literature on armed non-state actors lies in the tendency to conceptualize such actors as operating outside the institutional structure of the state. Civil war studies often examine them as external challengers and focus on patterns of violence, insurgent organization, and territorial control. Influential accounts of civil war emphasize the breakdown of the monopoly of violence through territorially based armed challenges and analyze fragmentation primarily as a consequence of competition between the state and insurgent actors. In this perspective, fragmentation emerges when armed groups contest state authority from outside the state apparatus (Kalyvas, 2006, p. 88). However, this focus tends to overlook another pathway through which fragmentation may emerge: the institutional incorporation of armed actors into state structures. Rather than challenging the state from the outside, such actors may become embedded within formal institutions while gradually acquiring organizational

autonomy and independent sources of coercive power, thereby generating fragmentation from within.

A different strand of the literature, particularly state fragility scholarship, explains the emergence of armed actors as a consequence of declining state capacity and the inability of formal institutions to provide security and other essential political goods (Rotberg, 2004, p. 3). Similarly, studies of hybrid political orders emphasize the coexistence of formal and informal systems of authority within fragmented political environments, arguing that "other actors within society may possess political, military, or social influence that, in certain contexts, surpasses that of the state itself" (Boege et al., 2009, p. 6). Despite their differences, these approaches pay limited attention to the role of the state itself in creating, institutionalizing, and sustaining armed actors that subsequently develop autonomous organizational capacities and become increasingly independent from central state control.

This study adopts a different perspective on paramilitary actors. Rather than viewing them as forces operating outside the state, it conceptualizes them as products of state strategies. In many conflict-affected settings, governments do not merely confront armed groups; they actively contribute to their creation and support by delegating coercive functions to them. The main incentives for such cooperation include expanding available fighting forces, reducing the political costs of accountability, and benefiting from the local knowledge and intelligence these groups provide in counterinsurgency operations (Carey et al., 2015, p. 851). What begins as a temporary security arrangement may gradually evolve into a stable institutional configuration through legal recognition, access to state resources, and incorporation into formal security and political structures, creating conditions for increasing organizational autonomy.

In this study, institutionalization refers to the formal incorporation of paramilitary actors into state structures through legal recognition, organizational stabilization, access to public resources, and partial integration into systems of security governance. Conventional theories of the state generally assume that such incorporation strengthens state authority by expanding oversight and reinforcing centralized control. This assumption is rooted in the Weberian conception of the state as the legitimate monopolizer of violence and in state-building scholarship that associates political stability with the centralization of coercive authority ((Weber, 1919/1946, 1919; Tilly, 1985).

This study, however, argues that institutionalization does not necessarily produce greater control. Once institutionalized, paramilitary actors gain access to organizational resources beyond immediate security functions. Legal recognition facilitates recruitment and organizational continuity, access to state resources enables the development of parallel administrative and command structures, and formal incorporation enhances political visibility and bargaining power. Together, these

processes can reduce dependence on central authorities and foster organizational autonomy.

These dynamics are particularly significant in contexts characterized by weak bureaucratic oversight, fragmented political authority, or access to autonomous economic resources. Under such conditions, institutionalization may redistribute coercive authority among multiple actors within the state rather than reinforce centralized control. It can enable state-embedded armed organizations to consolidate independent capabilities and pursue interests that diverge from those of the central state.

From this perspective, the institutionalization of paramilitary actors should not be understood merely as a response to state fragmentation; it may also contribute to fragmentation by generating competing centres of military power within the state. Institutionalization is therefore treated not as the endpoint of state control but as the first step in a broader causal sequence through which delegation generates autonomy, competition, and ultimately fragmentation.

1.2 Causal Mechanism

The central argument of this article is that the institutionalization of paramilitary actors gradually reshapes the distribution of coercive authority within the state through a sequential causal mechanism:

Delegation → Institutionalization → Autonomization → Competition → Fragmentation

Rather than treating fragmentation as a sudden collapse or externally induced shock, the framework conceptualizes it as the cumulative outcome of interconnected institutional transformations. Each stage alters the incentives, capacities, and relationships that shape the next, making fragmentation increasingly likely over time.

The process begins with delegation, whereby states facing insurgency, territorial insecurity, limited military capacity, or threats to regime survival transfer coercive functions to irregular armed actors. As Carey et al. (2015) argue, governments often support such groups as instruments of control while maintaining only limited institutional integration. Consequently, coercive actors emerge whose loyalties are shaped less by bureaucratic hierarchies than by political alliances, personal networks, and wartime arrangements.

The second stage is institutionalization, through which initially informal actors acquire legal recognition, access to public resources, and incorporation into security structures. Although intended to strengthen coordination and oversight, these measures also enhance legitimacy, organizational continuity, and resource access, creating institutional durability beyond the conditions that originally produced them.

These developments facilitate autonomization, the critical turning point in the mechanism. Sustained access to resources and organizational continuity enable

paramilitary actors to develop independent recruitment systems, command structures, authority networks, and economic channels. Supported by legal protection, political incorporation, and material resources, they become progressively less dependent on central authorities, particularly where bureaucratic oversight is weak or political authority is fragmented.

The fourth stage is competition. As autonomous organizations accumulate independent resources, decision-making capacity, and organizational networks, their interests may diverge from those of the state. Relations with the military and security apparatus increasingly shift from hierarchical subordination to bargaining, resistance, and institutional rivalry. Independent economic resources, border economies, smuggling networks, extractive sectors, or external support can further intensify this process.

The final stage is fragmentation, which becomes observable when multiple state-embedded organizations exercise overlapping claims to coercive authority, operate through separate chains of command, or challenge the state's capacity to enforce unified security decisions. Rather than functioning through a single hierarchy, the state becomes characterized by competing centres of authority, security provision, and territorial control. In contrast to classical state-building theories that associate consolidation with the subordination of rival coercive actors (Tilly, 1985), fragmentation emerges here through their institutional multiplication within the state itself.

This outcome reflects an erosion of the state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force in the Weberian sense ((Weber, 1919/1946)). Crucially, fragmentation is not the product of institutional collapse but of internal institutional processes generated by state strategies themselves. The framework therefore challenges a core assumption of conventional state theory: institutionalization does not necessarily produce control. Under certain political and institutional conditions, it may instead generate autonomy, enabling paramilitary actors to consolidate independent organizational capacities and contribute to the gradual fragmentation of state authority.

1.3 Micro-Foundations

The causal mechanism developed in this article operates through a set of micro-level processes that reshape the incentives, capacities, and relationships of paramilitary actors following their institutionalization within state structures. These processes help explain why institutionalization may generate autonomy rather than tighter control. Three interconnected dynamics are particularly important:

Resource Decoupling → Organizational Differentiation → Legitimacy Pluralization

Together, these processes gradually weaken centralized authority and embed competition within the institutional structure of the state.

The first process, resource decoupling, occurs when institutionalized paramilitary actors gain access to resources beyond direct state control. Through alternative sources of revenue such as commercial activities, border economies, or extractive sectors, they may reduce their dependence on central authorities and weaken the state's capacity to discipline or contain them (Carey et al., 2015)

Empirically, this process may be observed through the emergence of independent revenue streams, autonomous economic activities, parallel financial networks, or resource flows operating beyond direct state supervision. The greater the ability of paramilitary actors to sustain their activities independently of state funding, the more likely resource decoupling is to occur.

The second process, organizational differentiation, refers to the persistence of distinct organizational structures despite formal incorporation into state institutions. Paramilitary actors often retain separate command systems, recruitment networks, leadership structures, and operational doctrines. Rather than being fully absorbed into the formal military apparatus, they continue to operate according to their own institutional logic (Ahram, 2011, p. 9).

Institutionalization may therefore reinforce, rather than eliminate, organizational distinctiveness, weakening integration and complicating centralized control.

Observable indicators of organizational differentiation include the persistence of separate chains of command, independent recruitment mechanisms, distinct training systems, parallel administrative structures, and operational decision-making processes that remain outside formal military hierarchies despite formal incorporation into state institutions.

The third process, legitimacy pluralization, emerges when paramilitary actors develop independent sources of political and social legitimacy rooted in ideology, regional identity, tribal networks, religious narratives, or claims of security provision and representation. Under such conditions, the state no longer functions as the sole source of legitimate coercive authority. As Weber (Weber, 1919/1946) emphasized, the modern state is defined by its claim to the monopoly of legitimate violence; however, competing claims to legitimacy increasingly challenge that monopoly. Similar dynamics have been observed in studies of hybrid political orders, where authority becomes dispersed across overlapping institutional and social structures (Boege et al., 2009, p. 6).

The existence of alternative sources of legitimacy may reduce the state's capacity to act as the sole recognized authority in matters of coercion and security. Combined with resource decoupling and organizational differentiation, this process facilitates the emergence of competing centres of coercive power within the state.

1.4 Multiple Centres of Military Power

The cumulative outcome of the processes outlined above is conceptualized in this article as Multiple Centres of Military Power. The concept refers to a condition in which coercive authority is no longer monopolized by a single centralized institution but is instead distributed across multiple institutionalized actors operating within the same state. These actors maintain varying degrees of organizational autonomy while exercising overlapping claims to coercive authority.

This concept differs from existing approaches in two important respects. First, unlike studies of hybrid governance, which emphasize the coexistence of state and non-state actors within pluralized and overlapping systems of authority (Boege et al., 2009), the focus here is on competition among coercive actors operating within formally recognized state structures. Second, unlike state fragility approaches that primarily explain fragmentation in terms of institutional weakness and limited state capacity (Fukuyama, 2014), this study conceptualizes fragmentation as the outcome of political and institutional processes unfolding within the state itself. The Iraqi experience illustrates that the institutionalization of armed actors does not necessarily lead to organizational integration. Following the fight against ISIS, PMF leaders sought to unify armed factions under the PMF Commission, yet many of these factions retained substantial organizational autonomy and their own networks (Mansour, 2021, pp. 16–17). The study therefore argues that fragmentation may emerge through the process of institutionalization itself, rather than solely as a consequence of state weakness or fragility.

Under certain political conditions, strategies intended to strengthen regime survival, enhance security effectiveness, or expand territorial control may unintentionally redistribute coercive authority across multiple institutional actors. The result is a fragmented coercive order in which competing military organizations operate alongside one another within the state. Such a configuration weakens centralized control and undermines the hierarchical organization traditionally associated with state authority and the monopoly of violence (Tilly, 1985; Weber, (Weber, 1919/1946).

The mechanism proposed in this article is not intended to explain all forms of paramilitary organization. Rather, it is most likely to operate in contexts characterized by direct or indirect state sponsorship of paramilitary actors, access to relatively autonomous sources of resources, the coexistence of paramilitary and formal security institutions, and limited hierarchical enforcement capacity. Where these conditions are absent, particularly when dependence on the state remains high and centralized control remains effective, paramilitary actors are more likely to be successfully subordinated and incorporated into a unified state structure.

1.5 Research Design and Process Tracing Strategy

This study employs process tracing to examine how the institutionalization of paramilitary actors may contribute to state fragmentation through a sequence of

interconnected causal processes (Beach & Pedersen, 2013). The Sudanese case is selected as a full-mechanism case because it provides observable evidence for the evolution of the relationship between the state and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), from their emergence as state-sponsored armed actors to their development into an autonomous centre of military power.

The analysis focuses on key developments in the evolution of the RSF, including its formal incorporation into state institutions, the expansion of its organizational and financial autonomy, growing tensions with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), and the eventual emergence of competing centres of coercive authority within the state. The objective is not merely to describe these developments chronologically, but to assess whether the empirical evidence supports the proposed causal mechanism linking institutionalization to autonomy, competition, and fragmentation.

The empirical analysis draws on Sudanese legislation, academic studies, policy reports, and reports produced by international research organizations. These sources are triangulated to trace changes in the RSF's legal status, command structure, financial resources, organizational autonomy, and relationship with the Sudanese Armed Forces. The analysis assesses observable evidence corresponding to each stage of the proposed mechanism: state sponsorship and delegated coercion; legal recognition and institutional incorporation; independent organizational and financial capacities; institutional rivalry and disputes over military integration; and, finally, the emergence of parallel centres of coercive authority. Alternative explanations, particularly state weakness, civil-war dynamics, and regional intervention, are also considered when assessing the proposed mechanism (Beach & Pedersen, 2013).

2. The Evolution of Paramilitary Forces in Sudan

Unlike contexts in which paramilitary actors remain informal auxiliaries or temporary security instruments, the Sudanese case reveals a sequential transformation in which state-sponsored coercive delegation evolved into institutionalized fragmentation. The Sudanese case provides an opportunity to examine whether delegation, institutionalization, autonomization, competition, and fragmentation unfolded as interconnected stages of a broader causal process. The following analysis traces the empirical evidence associated with each stage and examines how their interaction contributed to the gradual redistribution of coercive authority within the state.

2.1 State Delegation of Coercive Functions:

The origins of Sudan's paramilitary trajectory can be traced to the conflict in Darfur in the early 2000s. Faced with expanding insurgency, limited counterinsurgency capacity, and growing political pressure, the Sudanese regime increasingly relied on irregular armed groups to conduct coercive operations in peripheral regions. Rather than expanding the conventional military apparatus, the regime adopted a strategy of delegated coercion through the mobilization of tribal militias that later became widely

known as the Janjaweed (Carey et al., 2015, pp. 850–851; Flint & de Waal, 2008, pp. 36–38).

Delegation reflected both political and operational considerations. By relying on irregular armed actors, the regime sought to counter insurgent threats while avoiding the political and institutional costs associated with deploying the regular military. Delegated coercion also enabled the government to project force in peripheral regions through actors possessing local knowledge, social networks, and greater operational flexibility. While this strategy enhanced the regime's short-term capacity to manage security challenges, it simultaneously created armed organizations whose loyalties, command structures, and operational practices remained only partially integrated into formal state institutions. As a result, delegation established the initial conditions under which coercive authority could become dispersed beyond the state's direct hierarchical control.

At this stage, however, paramilitary actors remained heavily dependent on the state for legitimacy, coordination, arms, and financial support. Delegation had introduced parallel coercive actors into the security landscape, but these actors had not yet acquired the institutional foundations necessary for autonomous operation.

In terms of the proposed mechanism, delegation created the initial institutional dependence that would later be transformed through formal incorporation, organizational development, and resource expansion. At this stage, coercive authority remained largely dependent on state sponsorship, even as parallel armed actors were introduced into the security landscape.

2.2 Institutionalization of Paramilitary Forces:

A decisive transformation occurred with the formal establishment of the RSF in 2013. But unlike earlier militia formations, the RSF was not merely tolerated by the state; it was formally incorporated into Sudan's security architecture through legal and institutional recognition (Republic of the Sudan, 2017, art. 6(2); Tubiana, 2014).

The creation of the RSF followed a period of increasing regime insecurity after the failed coup attempt of 2012 and growing concerns within the political leadership regarding the reliability of conventional military institutions. The regime sought to construct a rapidly deployable coercive force capable of confronting insurgencies while simultaneously serving as a counterweight within Sudan's broader security architecture.

Institutionalization fundamentally transformed the relationship between the state and paramilitary actors. In 2013, the RSF were formally reorganized under the leadership of Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo ("Hemedti") through the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS). This process culminated in the Rapid Support Forces Act of 2017, which formally recognized the RSF as a regular force operating directly under the authority of the Presidency (Republic of the Sudan, 2017, art. 6(2); Tubiana, 2014). The law consolidated the organization's legal status, providing it with

formal recognition, regular salaries, official command structures, and direct access to state resources. Over time, the RSF evolved beyond a temporary wartime mobilization force into a durable and institutionalized component of Sudan's security architecture.

However, institutionalization did not produce full integration into the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). Instead, it generated a structurally ambiguous arrangement in which the RSF operated alongside the formal military while retaining distinct chains of command, recruitment structures, and operational autonomy. Rather than eliminating coercive dualism, institutionalization formalized it.

The RSF Act of 2017 represented a significant step in the institutionalization of the organization. The law formally defined the RSF as a regular force and established its legal status, organizational structure, and command arrangements. Under the 2017 RSF Act, the RSF remained legally subject to the Armed Forces Act of 2007, thereby preserving a formal legal link between the organization and the Sudanese Armed Forces despite the RSF's distinct command structure. Although the organization acquired a separate legal identity, it had not yet achieved full legal autonomy from the regular military establishment.

Following the overthrow of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir in April 2019, additional amendments significantly expanded the RSF's powers and institutional autonomy. New responsibilities—including counterterrorism, anti-smuggling, anti-trafficking, and border control—broadened its operational mandate, while subsequent legal revisions removed its subordination to the Armed Forces Act of 2007. These changes effectively transformed the RSF into a parallel military institution with independent legal and organizational standing, substantially increasing its autonomy from the regular army (Salman, 2023, p. 41).

The significance of institutionalization therefore lies not simply in legalization, but in the redistribution of coercive authority that legalization enabled. By formalizing the RSF without fully subordinating it to centralized military command, the state unintentionally created the institutional foundations through which an auxiliary force could evolve into a semi-autonomous coercive center. The persistence of separate chains of command, recruitment structures, and operational authority despite formal incorporation constitutes an observable indicator of organizational differentiation within the proposed mechanism. Rather than producing full integration, institutionalization preserved the organizational distinctiveness that later facilitated the development of autonomous capabilities.

2.3 The Growing Autonomy of Paramilitary Forces:

Following institutionalization, the RSF gradually developed increasing organizational and operational autonomy, enabling it to pursue its activities with diminishing dependence on the Sudanese state and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). This transformation was driven by the accumulation of financial, organizational, and

political resources that progressively enhanced the organization's independent capacity.

A key driver of this process was the RSF's expanding access to independent financial resources. Revenues derived from gold-related activities, together with payments associated with the deployment of RSF fighters abroad, reduced the organization's reliance on state funding and strengthened its ability to sustain recruitment, procurement, training, and organizational expansion independently. According to Global Witness (2019, pp. 4–5), the RSF's commander, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo ("Hemedti"), publicly acknowledged that the organization derived income from the salaries of fighters deployed abroad, investments in the gold sector, and other commercial activities. Some reports also raised concerns that EU-funded migration-control programs may have indirectly benefited the RSF, although no conclusive evidence has established direct EU funding to the force (Baldo, 2017, pp. 2–4). These developments illustrate the process of resource decoupling identified in the proposed mechanism, whereby access to alternative revenue streams gradually weakens the state's ability to exercise effective control over institutionalized armed actors.

The RSF's autonomy was further reinforced by the consolidation of organizational structures distinct from those of the SAF and by the expansion of its regional and international connections. Recruitment systems, command structures, leadership networks, and operational practices evolved separately from the formal military hierarchy, while ties with actors in Chad, Libya, and the Gulf expanded the organization's economic and political leverage. As a result, the RSF increasingly operated as a parallel security institution possessing its own sources of authority and influence. As noted, the RSF evolved from a counterinsurgency instrument into a powerful political-military actor operating alongside—and ultimately against—Sudan's formal state institutions (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2025, p. 2).

2.4 Competition between State and Paramilitary Forces:

As the RSF's autonomy expanded, its relationship with the SAF gradually shifted from complementarity to rivalry over authority, legitimacy, and control of the state. This transformation became particularly evident after the fall of the Bashir regime in 2019, as the organization continued to recruit, arm, finance, and operate with increasing independence from formal military command structures.

The transition from autonomy to competition was driven by the growing divergence between the interests of the RSF and those of the military establishment. As the RSF acquired independent financial resources, command structures, and political influence, its incentives shifted from cooperation within the existing hierarchy to preserving and expanding its autonomous position. These tensions became particularly visible in debates over security-sector reform and military integration. As Perthes (2024) notes, disputes over the integration of the RSF emerged as a central point of contention during the transition period. While the SAF viewed integration as

essential to restoring a unified chain of command, RSF leaders argued that security-sector reform should encompass all state institutions and should not be subordinated to political contestation. According to Radio France Internationale (RFI), Hemedti stated,: "This force (the RSF) was established through a law passed by an elected parliament. It is neither a battalion nor a company that can simply be integrated into the army. It is a large force." (RFI, 2021). From the RSF's perspective, rapid integration threatened the institutional position and influence it had accumulated within Sudan's security architecture.

Competition also extended into the political and military spheres. RSF leadership increasingly acted as an autonomous political-military actor, conducting independent political and diplomatic engagements and openly criticizing the military establishment's role in politics. At the same time, the organization continued to recruit fighters, concentrate forces, and redeploy units independently of formal military command structures.

By this stage, coercive authority within the Sudanese state had become structurally divided. Rather than operating through a unified hierarchy, competing coercive institutions exercised overlapping claims to political and military authority. This transformation represents a critical stage in the proposed mechanism, illustrating how institutionalization generated competing structures of authority rather than hierarchical integration.

2.5 Fragmentation of State Authority:

The outbreak of large-scale conflict between the RSF and the SAF in April 2023 did not initiate fragmentation; rather, it revealed the extent to which fragmentation had already become embedded within Sudan's institutional structure.

Long before open warfare erupted, Sudan had effectively developed multiple centres of coercive authority operating within overlapping claims of legitimacy. The state no longer functioned as a unified hierarchy monopolizing violence, but as a fragmented arena in which parallel institutions exercised competing forms of coercive power. This condition corresponds to what this article conceptualizes as Multiple Centres of Military Power. Coercive authority was no longer centralized within a single institutional chain of command. Instead, it had become distributed across competing state-embedded actors possessing distinct organizational structures, resource networks, and political ambitions. The emergence of multiple centres of military power reflects not the absence of state institutions, but the multiplication of coercive actors operating within formally recognized state structures.

The 2023 war therefore represented the violent culmination of a longer process of authority redistribution unfolding within the state itself. The conflict emerged not because institutionalization failed to occur, but because institutionalization occurred without full hierarchical integration. By formalizing coercive actors while simultaneously allowing them to accumulate autonomous organizational and economic

capacities, the Sudanese state unintentionally created the structural foundations for enduring institutional rivalry and fragmentation.

The Sudanese case therefore provides observable evidence for each stage of the proposed mechanism. Delegation introduced irregular coercive actors; institutionalization formalized their position within the state; autonomy emerged through independent organizational and economic capacities; competition developed as interests diverged between the RSF and the SAF; and fragmentation became visible through the emergence of multiple centres of military power and the erosion of unified coercive authority.

This outcome reflects a weakening of the state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force in the Weberian sense (Weber, 1919/1946). Crucially, fragmentation is not understood here as the consequence of institutional collapse, but as the result of internal institutional processes generated by state strategies themselves.

Conclusion:

This study has argued that the institutionalization of paramilitary actors can, under specific political and institutional conditions, contribute to state fragmentation by gradually redistributing coercive authority within the state. Using process tracing in the Sudanese case, it showed how delegation, institutionalization, autonomization, competition, and fragmentation unfolded as interconnected stages of a broader causal mechanism. The findings suggest that fragmentation does not necessarily result from state collapse, external shocks, or pre-existing institutional weakness, but may emerge from internal institutional processes generated by state strategies originally intended to strengthen political authority and security effectiveness.

The findings challenge the assumption that formally incorporating irregular armed actors into state institutions necessarily strengthens state authority and promotes stability. The Sudanese case demonstrates that institutionalization and control are neither linearly nor deterministically related. While institutionalization may initially improve coordination, resource mobilization, and military effectiveness, it can also facilitate organizational autonomy, independent resource networks, and alternative sources of legitimacy that reduce dependence on central authorities.

The analysis showed how the delegation of coercive functions during the Darfur conflict evolved into institutionalization that gave the RSF legal recognition, organizational continuity, and access to state resources. These conditions later facilitated autonomy, parallel organizational capacities, and growing divergence between the RSF and the SAF. The resulting competition over authority, resources, and political influence contributed to the emergence of multiple centres of military power within the same state structure.

Fragmentation, therefore, should not be understood simply as the absence of order or collapse of authority, but as a distinct institutional configuration in which multiple state-embedded actors exercise competing claims over coercive authority. The

concept of Multiple Centres of Military Power captures this condition by showing how fragmentation may emerge through incorporation rather than exclusion, and through institutional multiplication rather than institutional absence.

The study's principal theoretical contribution lies in demonstrating that institutionalization does not necessarily produce control. Under conditions of state sponsorship, relatively autonomous resources, organizational differentiation, and limited hierarchical enforcement capacity, formal incorporation may enable actors whose interests and capabilities diverge from those of the central state, eroding the state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force and generating competing centres of military power.

The evidence presented supports more than a chronological sequence. Separate command structures, independent financial networks, and resistance to military integration are consistent with the proposed mechanism linking institutionalization to autonomy and autonomy to competition. Although state weakness, civil war dynamics, and regional intervention shaped Sudan's broader political environment, they do not fully explain the transformation examined here. The gradual institutionalization of the RSF created the organizational and material conditions that facilitated autonomy, competition, and ultimately the fragmentation of coercive authority.

More broadly, the findings suggest that understanding conflict-affected states requires greater attention to the internal institutional dynamics through which coercive authority is delegated, reorganized, and contested. In many contemporary settings, the central challenge may not be the absence of institutions, but the coexistence of multiple institutionalized actors possessing independent sources of coercive power. State fragmentation may therefore emerge not despite institutionalization, but partly because of it, especially when armed actors are incorporated without effective mechanisms of hierarchical control and organizational integration.

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