Post-Conflict Democratization: Pitfalls of External Influence

POST-CONFLICT DEMOCRATIZATION: PITFALLS OF EXTERNAL INFLUENCE

Democratization efforts are a core element in transition phases after armed conflicts. Often, these are initiated and supported by external actors – with ambivalent results so far. However, democratization will remain an important component of peacebuilding. A review of the problems of external influence in such processes reveals a potential for optimization in three areas: More conscious handling of trade-offs, conceptual precision, and a dynamic conflict analysis are crucial.

UN Photo / Martine Perret

The ballot box is a key element of democratization processes. Burundi, 28 February 2008.

Since the 1990s, the number of UN peace operations has been increasing, but at the same time, the nature of these operations has also been undergoing change. While the initial focus was on peacekeeping, UN missions now follow a more comprehensive approach of peacebuilding. This concept not only aims at bringing about a negative peace, i.e., a termination of violence, but strives to create a structural peace by removing the causes of conflict. Peacebuilding consists of a plethora of fields of activity, including economic reconstruction, promoting human rights, fostering the rule of law, the return and integration of refugees, and reconciliation work. The establishment of sustainable peace support structures is intended to prevent backsliding into armed conflict.

Democratization is also a core element of peacebuilding. In post-war transitions, this involves an evolution not only from war to peace, but ideally also from non-democratic governance to more democratic systems. This strategy rests on the assumption that functioning democracies tend to be more peaceful than other forms of government. The liberal peace theory has entered the field of practical politics, including in 1992 with the introduction of the concept of peacebuilding in the "Agenda for Peace". Since then, fostering democracy has been an important element of peace processes in a variety of contexts including Kosovo, East Timor, and Sierra Leone after 1999 or Afghanistan after 2001.

So far, the results have been ambivalent. Often, instead of democracies with a minimum of functional structures, such processes have brought forth hybrid regimes balanced precariously between autocracies and democracy. International actors have frequently been disenchanted by the lack of successful democratization in cases such

as Afghanistan. Recently, the rhetoric of democratization has largely been dismissed; for instance, US President Barack Obama has been avoiding reference to the topic of democracy in important speeches on Afghanistan while the German defense minister has even stated that the country will never become a democracy based on the Western model.

Critics are generally skeptical as to whether Western-style democracy is the appropriate approach in countries that are experiencing, or have recently experienced, armed conflict. This skepticism often refers to deficiencies in economic development, the state of nationbuilding, or in the political culture. Indeed, such countries are often at an inauspicious starting position in these regards.

Democratization remains on the agenda

Nevertheless, democratization is not an obsolete model in the context of peacebuilding. On the one hand, aspirations for more democracy will persist at the local level. On the other hand, external actors are not expected to renounce completely their efforts in this area. Peacebuilding in general will remain relevant. International organizations such as the UN, regional organizations, and other country groupings will continue to intervene in internal armed conflicts. Therefore, a demand for peace promotion strategies and measures will persist.

The international engagement is unlikely to be once again relegated to mere peace-

keeping functions, as was the case during the Cold War. Such limited missions tend to freeze the conflict over extended periods of time without bringing about a resolution, as the Cyprus conflict exemplifies. Also, many elements of peacebuilding, including security sector reform, the return and integration of refugees, and human rights protection, are largely uncontroversial.

The often-questioned element of democratization is likely to remain crucial, too. Besides normative issues, the considerations advanced here are related directly to external involvement in internal conflicts. On the one hand, the question of power is frequently at the core of civil wars and armed violence. Unless this issue is resolved, peace processes have little chance of success. So far, there are few sustainable alternatives to a minimum of democratization with regard to involvement of international actors. On the other hand, adherence to post-conflict democratization is also in the interest of missions or states engaged on the ground. In particular, holding elections is an important element of any exit strategy of international organizations and coalitions, since they signal the end of a political transition period. Elections make it possible to transfer power to a government with at least formal legitimacy and thus to justify the end of a mission.

Against the background of the continuing significance of democratization in the context of peacebuilding, it makes sense to take a look at the problems and pitfalls of external involvement in the promotion of democracy. For even though democratization must be a process with internal support, external efforts in post-conflict situations are influential and must be critically considered.

Goal conflicts in external influence
The goal conflict between peace and stability on the one hand and democratization on the other poses a crucial conundrum for internal and external actors alike, and has been intensely discussed in recent years. In this debate, the intention of democratization is not fundamentally questioned. Rather, the ambivalent record of democratization efforts to date is attributed to the following dilemma: Measures for democratization can have a destabilizing effect, while conversely,

peacebuilding efforts may act as obstacles to democratization.

The goals of building peace, security, and stability on the one hand and fostering democracy on the other hand are not always mutually reconcilable. This is illustrated by two examples: Free elections may be important as part of a liberalization process in order to gain legitimacy for a transformation of the political system. Simultaneously, the political conflicts associated with elections, which produce winners and losers, may be accompanied by violence, as was the case in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2006. In Angola in 1992, such a process even caused a renewed outbreak of the civil war. Conversely, the involvement of armed groups in negotiation processes may be crucial from the point of view of security. However, it implies the risk of undermining the democratization process at a later date when armed groups undergo a pro-forma transformation into political parties and participate in elections. This occurred with RENAMO in Mozambique in 1994 or with the CNDD-FDD in Burundi in 2005. Such a development can lead to a militarization of politics.

The criticism of external actors is mainly due to the prioritization of peace and stabilization over democracy. The stated goal of democratization is then seen purely as lip service or as justification for the assertion of security interests. Indeed, in Afghanistan, for example, even before the change of rhetoric on the part of the Obama administration, the engagement of the US and most of the other international actors was focused mainly on the security agenda and the stabilization of the country.

This goal conflict, however, is difficult to resolve, and the accompanying prioritization of peace and stability can hardly be changed fundamentally. It is important for the actors involved to be conscious of the dilemma and to choose a strategy that is oriented towards local conditions and a long-term timeframe. This creates the possibility of a contextual sequencing of measures. Thus, there are some advocates who argue, in the face of the potentially destabilizing function of democratization efforts, that functioning structures should be established before a

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political system is liberalized. In practice, however, a staggered timetable is difficult to realize, not least since elections remain important as an expression of political competition and the participation of the populace, for reasons outlined above. Also, the functioning of state institutions is difficult to imagine in the absence of certain essential elements of democratic governance such as accountability and transparency.

More conceptual precision needed
The efforts of international actors for promoting democracy also suffer from the vagueness of the democratization concept and the attendant perception deficits. Measures in the field of security such as demining or disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of combatants are often better defined than activities in the area of governance and democratization. Additionally, measures such as decentralization, electoral assistance, and fostering civil society are often accounted for separately by donors, although they are important building blocks of democratization (cf. table below). Thus, the substance of democratization often remains elusive, and it is difficult to present evidence of progress.

In this respect, external actors could provide a remedy by defining their understanding of democratization and the measures to be undertaken in this context. This would enhance the coherence and visibility of democratization and contribute to closing the gap between rhetorical bluster and operative obscurity.

Dynamic conflict analysis and power-sharing
The often too static analysis of a conflict constellation by external actors, particularly in civil wars, creates another set of problems in post-conflict democratization. Frequently, the changing causes of conflicts and the shifts or overlaps in conflict lines brought about by armed conflict are not taken into account sufficiently. This can have negative effects when it comes to settling the question of political power that often drives civil wars.

External actors tend towards simplification in their conflict analyses. The in-

Areas of external support for democratization	
Starting point	**Measures**
State institutions	▮ Advice in writing constitution
	▮ Fostering the rule of law: Assistance in judicative reform and legislation, training of legal experts
	▮ Support for administration: Capacity-building, counseling and training of bureaucracy
	▮ Decentralization and strengthening of local administration
	▮ Fostering human rights: Monitoring, training, and education
	▮ Security sector reform: Reform and civilian control of armed forces and other security forces
Political process/ system	▮ Election support: Assistance in voter registration, creating electoral commissions, training election officers, monitoring polls
	▮ Promotion of political parties
Civil society	▮ Fostering civil society: Support for women's and youth organizations as well as human rights groups, independent trade unions, and media; political education; exchange programs

terpretation of conflict constellations is usually guided by the main dividing line. Disputes within society that do not agree with this interpretation are neglected. One reason is that outsiders often concentrate more on the outbreak of an armed conflict and less on the subsequent dynamics. During phases of polarization that precede the outbreak of a conflict, the disputes often converge along a specific fault line of conflict. There is a danger that this main dividing line will subsequently be overemphasized by the external actors, especially based on the often-heard assertion that civil wars primarily reinforce the predominant cleavage.

However, a number of studies have shown that civil wars not only harden the existing line of conflict, but also transform them and create new ones. The constellation of actors at the end of a civil war is usually no longer the same as at its beginning. Often, the politically relevant groups experience fragmentation, and a multiplication of actors takes place, for instance, when rebel groups or parties split or new groups emerge.

For example, during the phase of polarization ahead of the civil war in Burundi in 1993, there were two main political parties, each of which was identified with one ethnic group. At the first election after the civil war, held in 2005, there were 34 registered parties, five of which won seats in the national assembly. During the transitional phase, political conflicts predominantly played out between parties within one ethnic group. In addition to the main ethnic conflict line of the civil war, this

showed the political fragmentation along other lines of conflict. Such divisions may come to the fore between former military and traditional political actors as well as between exile groups and locally entrenched factions. In many cases, other politically relevant lines of conflict in addition to ethnic divisions will have existed before the civil war, and will increasingly manifest themselves anew during and after negotiation processes.

International actors pursuing democratization goals must increasingly take into account such changing conflict constellations and the attendant dynamics. This is particularly crucial when it comes to power-sharing, where political power is distributed among the key parties to a conflict. In order to reduce the cost of political competition and to integrate all relevant groups, external actors often tend towards power-sharing according to quotas that correspond to the main conflict line.

There is a danger, however, that such an arrangement will freeze and politically codify the main conflict line of a civil war. This is all the more problematic when power-sharing is based on a truncated and static analysis of the conflict in question that does not sufficiently reflect changes. Essentially, there are two strategies for dealing with societal lines of conflict: Accommodating existing divisions, for instance as part of a power-sharing agreement, or integrat-

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ing groups and demands to overcome the fissures of division. The former is frequently preferred in handling ethnic or religious conflicts, while the latter is often applied to former combatants and refugees.

There is no need to treat all conflict lines as equally important. Certainly, after ethnic civil wars, it makes sense to arrive at a power-sharing agreement that reflects ethnic divisions. However, in the middle to long term, such divisions may diminish in importance, and other tension areas may become more salient. External efforts at democratization must take such changes into account, or political realities may overtake the institutional arrangement and become its captive. A power-sharing arrangement along ethnic lines may, for instance, be limited in time. Thus, in South Africa after the end of apartheid, a formal power-sharing arrangement guaranteed ethnic inclusion. After a transitional phase, this model was replaced in 1996 by a new institutional arrangement. A precise analysis of how the causes and lines of conflict have changed during armed conflicts may provide external actors with suggestions for more dynamic strategies in post-conflict democratization.

Processes of post-conflict democratization are drawn-out and susceptible to reversals. The very notion of democratization in line with Western models is therefore sometimes questioned. However, this approach will remain relevant in the future due to local demand, the role of external actors, and due to a lack of alternatives. Therefore, optimizing strategies for external involvement is a sensible proposition.

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