



Emerging Issues:

Governance, Democratization and Violent Conflict

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Preface

Over the course of the development of Peacebuild's five-year Strategic Directions Document (2008-2012), consultations with network members reaffirmed a strong interest in generating and articulating new evidence, analysis, and policy and programming options relating to the changing nature of armed conflict, and governance and democratization processes.

This report on Governance, Democratization and Armed Conflict represents a first step in a larger, ongoing process of identifying emerging issues, challenges and opportunities for action on this priority theme by the community of practice Peacebuild is a part of. The research areas and recommendations advanced in this report will be considered by Peacebuild's members, Board of Directors, staff and Working Groups to ensure that governance and democratization are an important focus of Peacebuild's activities.

The methods used to generate this report were loosely modeled on the 'Fast Talk' process developed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT). In January 2008, experts in the fields of governance, democratization and armed conflict were identified by Peacebuild. Six experts, Hany Besada, Marc Lemieux, John Lobsinger, Siphosami Malunga, Dr. Marina Ottaway and Dr. Gerd Schönwälder, submitted written contributions to a set of questions developed by Peacebuild (listed in Annex 1).¹ These were circulated to the eight experts listed below, who were then invited to discuss the collective responses. Of the eight experts, John Lobsinger, Robert Miller and Dr. Gerd Schönwälder partook in the discussion, which was recorded and subsequently circulated as an audio file to all participants to elicit further comment. Ursula Daxecker drew on both the written submissions and the oral contributions to produce the following report, which summarizes and expands upon all the previous inputs to identify conceptual frameworks, programmatic options, and areas for further exploration and analysis.

Peacebuild would like to extend its gratitude to all the participants who so readily lent their expertise to the development of this report.

¹ Written contributions submitted by expert participants are available on the Peacebuild Forum:
<http://www.peacebuild.ca/action/?page=whatsnew&lang=e>.



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Executive Summary:

Democracy is widely seen as the best form of government to reduce the potential for armed conflict. In democracies, institutional channels exist for the resolution of conflicts arising from divergent interests, thus reducing the risks of violence. Increasingly, democracy is viewed as a universal value and demanded by more and more people around the world. The process of democratization itself, however, may increase the potential for violent confrontation, thus threatening successful transitions to democracy. Democratization opens up space for contestation and participation, yet nascent institutional mechanisms to mediate conflicting interests are still fragile and unable to meet the demands of groups seeking a stake in future governments. In addition, more and more states get “stuck” along the way and do not fully democratize. Finally, the risk of violence is particularly high in post-conflict societies, where the key challenges of political institution-building, economic reform, demilitarization of society, and truth and reconciliation mechanisms are seen to be urgent, simultaneous necessities.

International actors engaged in democracy promotion, then, must balance growing expectations for democracy and the conflict-exacerbating effects of democratization. Contextual factors such as historical dynamics, ethnic or religious cleavages, cultural characteristics, or specific economic conditions must be taken into account, and the establishment of general timeframes and methodologies for democratization should be rejected. Nevertheless, democratic institutions can mediate structural problems, and emerging research on the effects of election timing and the role of power-sharing agreements could provide important suggestions for international actors. In addition, the integration of democracy promotion into the agendas of NGOs active in other issue areas could create useful synergistic effects. Finally, a shift from a preoccupation at the national level to greater support for local organizations holds promise, particularly in countries where such local communities play an important role.

Key Points:

Defining the Key Terms

To avoid misunderstandings, a discussion of democratization, governance, and armed conflict benefits from establishing consensus on key terms. Democracy is a form of government that provides for contestation through free and fair elections, participation through inclusive suffrage, and liberties through the protection of freedoms and civil liberties.² Governance is a broader term, and concerns the state's ability to serve its citizens. It refers to the rules, processes, and behaviour by which interests are articulated, resources are managed, and power is exercised in society.³ Democratization refers to the transition from non-democratic to democratic forms of government. Finally, *armed conflict* is defined as a contested incompatibility which concerns government and/or territory where the use of force between two parties, at least one of which is a government, results in battle-related deaths.⁴

The Intersection of Democratization, Governance, and Armed Conflict

“It is no surprise that democratic regimes often come under heavy strain following the end of armed violence. Emerging democracies frequently have little or no experience with democracy dating back to the pre-war period.” (Dr. Gerd Schönwälder)

Post-conflict societies are one research area where questions of democratization, governance and armed conflict intersect immediately. Following the termination of armed conflict, a number of key challenges have to be addressed. First, actors need to build institutions, create conditions for good governance, and strengthen the rule of law. Second, an economy destroyed by war needs to be retooled into a modern market economy, and economic activity has to be stimulated. Third, combatants have to give up arms and the security forces must be brought under the control of the new democratic government. Finally, the government needs to establish reconciliation and transitional justice mechanisms to deal with wartime abuses and war crimes.

These are significant challenges, and newly democratic regimes have struggled to meet them following the end of fighting. In particular, countries with little or no previous experience with democratic governance have had difficulty in establishing stable democratic institutions. Furthermore, simultaneous transitions in the economic realm hamper the efforts of new governments. Structural conditions on the ground, such as ethnic or religious divisions, may be difficult to overcome. The establishment of democratic institutions and holding of elections may

² This definition of democracy is based on Dahl (1971). Some authors prefer a minimal definition of democracy that emphasizes the element of contestation, arguing that democracy is a system “for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for people’s vote” (Schumpeter, 1962[1942]).

³ See Sodaro (2008).

⁴ See Gleditsch et al. (2002). Researchers disagree on the appropriate threshold of battle-deaths.



solidify or increase such tensions through the emergence of political parties divided along ethnic or religious lines.

“Fundamentally, democratic political systems still offer the best chance of preventing armed conflict (or its recurrence), since they permit the mediation of competing interests through institutional channels and -at least over time -the redistribution of resources, power, and opportunities.” (Dr. Gerd Schönwälder)

Discussants agree that democracy is the best form of governance to reduce the potential for armed conflict. In consolidated democracies, competing interests are negotiated peacefully through institutional channels, thus limiting the risk of violence. However, while consensus exists on the conflict-preventing effects of stable democracy and good governance, the process of democratization itself can increase conflict propensities. In democratizing states, the holding of elections and the expansion of individual freedoms open up space for contestation and participation, yet mechanisms for effective mediation of interests are not thoroughly institutionalized.⁵ This can increase the potential for violent outcomes at least in the short run. Moreover, an increasing number of states do not move beyond this transitional stage and fail to fully democratize.⁶ These regimes have been labeled “semi-democracies,” “pseudo-democracies,” “anocracies,” or “illiberal regimes” and are characterized by a mix of democratic and authoritarian features. They provide individual rights and civil liberties, hold elections, and allow for the competition of political parties, yet these rights are often insecure, elections are frequently plagued by fraud, and opposition parties suffer from repeated intimidation. Therefore, both democratizing and semi-democratic regimes experience increased potential for armed conflict, further complicating the multitude of challenges faced by states emerging from armed conflict.

While armed conflict clearly indicates the absence of democracy and good governance, some discussants argue that military competition can increase the institutional effectiveness of states. Research has suggested that external military competition forced Western European states to strengthen their administrative capacities and become strong states.⁷ The absence of this pattern of state emergence in other parts of the world similarly helps understand the persistence of weak states. This argument, however, is based on military conflict between states, and does not hold for internal conflict, which clearly is a sign of state weakness or failure.

Transferring Democracy

⁵ See research by Mansfield and Snyder (2005).

⁶ In its 2007 survey on political rights and civil liberties in the world, the NGO Freedom House designated 31% of countries as “partly free,” as compared to 46% judged as “free,” and 22% “not free.” The report is available at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=395>.

⁷ See Tilly (1985).



“Western powers and institutions all too often fail to understand that promoting democracy and, in some instances, exporting “Western-style” democracy to the rest of the world is a process by itself and not an end point. The issue at hand is to consolidate and strengthen transitional democratic states to allow them to build durable democratic institutions.” (Hany Besada)

Democracy is not seen as a uniquely “Western” concept. Numerous examples of democratic governments outside the Western hemisphere exist (India, Japan, Korea, among others). The promotion of democracy by international actors is a relatively new phenomenon that emerged in the 1990s. Discussants agree that democracy cannot be imported as a “blueprint.” Rather, democracy needs to emerge endogenously, at which point international actors can help support the process.

The importance of contextual factors is emphasized by all discussants: Historical factors, cleavages in society, cultural characteristics, differing conceptions of identity, or specific economic conditions in the country influence whether democracy can succeed. Different institutional designs are limited in the extent to which they can alleviate deeper structural problems in society. Economic inequality, for example, has contributed to increasing grievances in developing countries, and was a factor leading to recent violence in Kenya. In addition, group identities tend to be stronger in many non-Western countries, thus conflicting with the focus on individual freedom emphasized in Western democracy.⁸

For this reason, democratic institutions may be better understood as intervening variables that can help mediate structural problems rather than solve them independently. As an illustration, some countries have experimented with many different constitutions, but nevertheless experienced repeated democratic breakdowns (e.g., Thailand). Similarly, institutional designs such as consensus democracy proved successful in countries such as Austria or Belgium, but resulted in democratic failures when applied to others (e.g., Lebanon or Nigeria).⁹ These variations underline the need to take contextual factors into account.

In addition, managing actors’ expectations are integral to democracy’s success. As Dr. Schönwälter points out, “initial enthusiasm for democracy is often replaced by growing disillusionment, made worse when fledgling democratic regimes are incapable of reigning in corruption and public insecurity.” The adoption of democratic institutions may even be detrimental to economic progress, at least in the short term. Increased participation and the need for electoral success can motivate actors to support populist policies that undermine economic growth. Weakly institutionalized democracies, as Dr. Marina Ottaway argues, “are often the worst reformers.” Thus, it is crucial to convey that democracy is a process, and not an end point in itself, and that progress will be incremental, limited, and characterized by setbacks.

The Role of Elections

⁸ Such arguments, however, have been used to justify continued authoritarianism in the past. Singapore’s former Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew, for example, used “Asian values” such as a strong emphasis on group identity to defend his authoritarian leadership. See Zakaria (1994).

⁹ See Horowitz (2000).

“The holding of elections in a fragile state, especially a post-conflict state, is a seriously divisive exercise. Elections must be accompanied by simultaneous support for other elements of democratization.” (Mari Lemieux)

Elections play a particularly important role in the transition to democracy. Elections are considered an essential part of democracy (“people must be asked what they think”) yet they cannot be used as a universal remedy. In the area of democracy promotion, elections have been emphasized over other important issues, such as support for civil society, the media, political parties, minority groups, judicial reform, or the setup of electoral commissions (Lemieux). This over-emphasis on elections should be corrected.

The timing of elections can play a major role for democratic outcomes. Holding elections too early can result in unrealistic expectations and heightened tensions between groups. Yet delaying elections might be seen as an attempt for continued authoritarianism and may result in mass demonstrations and riots. Research could provide useful answers how the timing of elections influences the prospects for democracy.

The fundamental problem with elections in emerging democracies is that uncertainty is a key element in the process. After all, if outcomes were predetermined, they would be a void exercise. Yet, this uncertainty can be a destabilizing force in fragile societies. Research on power-sharing agreements as compared to abrupt transitions to democracy might prove helpful here.¹⁰ A potential caveat is that the stability gained through such agreements results in a loss of democratic elements.

Framing the Issue:

Democratization in Historical Perspective

“It should be recalled that democracy in the West evolved over a long period of time and in response to a particular political, social, and cultural context.” (Siphosami Malunga)

Several contributors stress the need to understand democratization in the historical context. Democratization is seen as a non-linear process that goes through setbacks and reversals. Democratization processes can be long-term and last over centuries, or be short-term and occur rapidly. In the United Kingdom and much of Western Europe, but also more recently in Mexico, democratization lasted over decades or centuries. In other cases, catalytic events led to a rapid unraveling of the existing regime, as in several Eastern European countries. The process can involve violence (as in revolutions) or proceed relatively peacefully (as in the Eastern European cases). Some authors have categorized democratization as proceeding in waves, emphasizing the contagion effects

¹⁰ Studies of post-conflict societies have shown that power-sharing agreements indeed increase the probability for sustained peace, and thus the success of democracy (Walter, 2002). These findings, however, may be influenced by selection effects – actors that are able to negotiate power-sharing agreements may be fundamentally different from ones that cannot.

leading to transitions in neighbouring states. Despite these differences, a variety of causes for democratization have been identified. Transitions to democracy can come about because of pressures from an increasingly assertive middle class, be inherited from colonial regimes, or emerge as the result of war and foreign intervention.

The lack of universal paths to democracy, however, makes it difficult to develop clear frameworks for policymakers. Some observers stress the difficulty of even establishing starting points and end points – how do we know when democratic consolidation is completed, if ever? Clearly, a need for mutually shared categorizations and measurements exists. Academic research on the conditions for successful democratization could provide new insights for such questions, but must be structured in ways useful for policymakers.

Democracy, a Universal Value

“There is an expectation for democracy by more and more people in more and more countries. People need the assurance that they will get to a democratic government at some point.” (John Lobsinger)

Democracy is increasingly seen as a universal value rather than a regionally or temporally bound concept. A commitment to democratic rules is evolving into a shared universal norm, and demanded by a growing number of people. In more and more countries, people develop expectations for democracy, and need the assurance that they will get democracy at one point. Sen (1999) argues that political freedom is a part of human freedom in general. Participation is seen as having an intrinsic value for human life and well-being, and being prevented from participation as a major deprivation.

Yet the development of this global commitment to democracy is largely a product of the 20th century. Prior to that, efforts at establishing democracy were mainly local in scope, and it was quite common to discuss whether a country was “fit” or a suitable candidate for democracy.

Emerging Issues and Research Areas:

Conditions for Successful Democratization

While contributors are cautious with respect to the development of clear timetables and methodologies for democratic change, four emerging areas were identified.

First, the mode of the transition to democracy may impact the likelihood for success. In particular, power-sharing agreements or pacted transitions can provide short-term stability, reduce uncertainty, and thus increase the potential for sustained democracy. This may be of particular importance for post-conflict societies.

Second, the institutional logic of the outgoing authoritarian regime can provide important new insights. Single-party regimes, for example, may be more amenable to successful transitions to democracy because such elites can expect to have a future in a democratic regime unlike leaders in personalist or military dictatorships.

Third, the influence of international actors, or different types of international actors, should be explored further. In the Eastern European transitions to democracy, the influence of the European Union has been suggested to have been a decisive factor in achieving successful transitions.

Finally, better knowledge of the timing of elections and its consequences is necessary. Holding elections too early, especially while a country is still in conflict, can result in the development of parties that are mere vehicles for elites to retain power. Since international organizations often play a key role in the setup of first democratic elections, such lessons must be taken seriously. Recent experiences by the UN in Kosovo, East Timor, and Afghanistan show that postponing elections until after a period of political development holds promise for peaceful outcomes.

Alternative Models

“There is very little room to challenge the core principles of democracy. Unfortunately, those who speak of ‘alternative models’ tend to challenge these core principles. These models should be rejected.” (John Lobsinger)

Alternative models of democracy have often been used to disguise or justify authoritarian regimes (e.g., Arab democracy, African democracy). The integration of existing institutions at the local level (such as a Council of Elders) can prove useful, although few examples of such experiments exist. Moreover, there is not much negotiating room when it comes to basic democratic principles (Lobsinger), making it difficult to integrate such institutions without sacrificing democratic goals.

Opportunities for Action:

Facilitating Discussion between Academics and Policymakers

While academic research on several issues could have a positive impact on NGOs engaged in democracy promotion, it is important that research is done in a way that is policy-accessible. Unfortunately, the current setup of academic institutions does not place a high value on research with clear policy implications.¹¹ Academic departments could improve this situation by giving faculty members greater incentives to participate in the real world. Civil society networks are well-positioned to identify and engage academics, and enable active policy dialogue, collaboration, and knowledge exchange between academics, Canadian non-governmental and governmental agencies.

Aligning NGO Goals with State Goals

¹¹ See Walt (2005).



“No matter how weak the government of a country is, the appropriate agencies need to be in control of the planning process and determine how outside assistance will be used.” (Dr. Marina Ottaway)

The need to align the goals of bilateral and multilateral NGOs engaged in democracy promotion with the national framework is considered crucial for success. NGOs should accompany governments, not force solutions upon them. Attempts to import “toolkits”, prefabricated solutions that lack rootedness in local society, must be avoided at all cost. There is also a danger in developing parallel bureaucracies which result in inefficient outcomes that are not sustainable over time. The need for more long-term support should also be considered in the future. Finally, the higher salaries paid by NGOs can at times lead to a brain-drain of local talent.

Local vs. National Focus

“The movement for governance put much more emphasis on national-level institutions with national scope. We need more preoccupation with community-level projects and focus our support on the building of local capacity.” (Robert Miller)

International actors have sometimes focused on macro-issues, or support at the national level, while neglecting local structures. For example, villages and local communities in Afghanistan have been neglected in the democracy-building effort. NGOs working in the area of democracy promotion should consider local communities in the future. The Canadian government would also do well to develop funding mechanisms that can support smaller local organizations and groups.

Incorporating Other Actors

“All NGOs engaged in development should have as one dimension of their work to strengthen the internal governance and democratization of their local partners.” (John Lobsinger)

Canadian NGOs working on a variety of issues (health care, economic development, etc) could benefit from integrating the goals of strengthening democratic institutions and governance into their missions. As Lobsinger points out, “all NGOs engaged in development should have as one dimension of their work to strengthen the internal governance and democratization of their local partners.” Doing so would increase the chance that their goals would be met once NGOs leave the region or country.

Shifting the Focus from Elections to Other Areas

Instead of engaging in activities where the central emphasis is on elections, Canadian actors should shift their emphasis to other areas, in particular the strengthening of control over security forces (Besada). Particularly in post-conflict societies, the transfer of formal control over security forces to civil authorities is crucial for lasting peace and democracy. Canadian NGOs could assist states “by



providing technical expertise in terms of training and capacity building as well as budgetary support to strengthen and improve the size, structure and operation of security forces.”

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Annex 1. Questions for Discussants

Democratization, governance and armed conflict

1. At what points do democratization, governance and armed conflict intersect? Do democratic institutions and movements toward better governance prevent recourse to/or the outbreak of violent conflict, or do they contribute to instability and possibly heighten the risk of violent conflict? If so, how?
2. Is “western-style democracy” transferable? Or are there alternative models?
3. What do we know about the methodology and potential timeframes for such democratic change?
4. How may Canadian and/or local civil society contribute to processes of democratization and/or to the maintenance of peace? What obstacles may undermine such efforts?
5. What other Canadian actors should be engaged in processes of democratization and/or to the maintenance of peace?
6. How can bilateral, multilateral and NGO interventions be structured so as to not further weaken the legitimacy, authority and capacity of a fragile state or create parallel capacities in the case of failed states?
7. What other critical areas or questions should be explored?