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Rebel Movements and Political Party Development in Post-Conflict Societies – A Short Literature Review

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In post-conflict societies, political parties are expected to play an important role in the creation of sustainable peace, stability and democracy. There are, however, different views as to how political parties develop in war-torn settings. One of the key issues is the participation of former rebel movements in the political process. This synthesis reviews some of the recent academic literature on peacebuilding and post-conflict party development with particular emphasis on the transformation of rebel movements into political parties. Paying specific attention to the role of international actors, it outlines several implications for future policy engagement.

Introduction

In the immediate aftermath of conflict, politics tends to be volatile, insecurity remains high and state institutions are often very weak. Within this challenging context, many international donors hope that political parties will develop so that they can contribute to peaceful politics in the post-conflict period. Yet the post-conflict environment is usually not conducive to the development of political parties, although particular challenges vary from country to country.

There are many different types of political parties in post-conflict countries, including parties that were formerly armed movements engaged in conflict. Indeed, the way in which former armed groups contribute to post-conflict governance is seen as a decisive factor in the success or failure of peacebuilding. If armed groups are not integrated into a new national army, transformed into political parties, or disbanded, the recurrence of violence is likely. Certainly, not all former armed movements will transform into political parties and not all post-conflict political parties have links to armed groups. Yet non-state armed groups are significant actors in post-conflict politics, whether or not they become formal political parties. As such, they have received attention within the larger peacebuilding literature.

This synthesis provides a non-exhaustive review of the current literature on peacebuilding and post-conflict party development, with particular emphasis on the transformation of armed movements into political parties after conflict. The synthesis is divided into four parts. First, it briefly discusses the literature on post-conflict party development. Second, it reviews the particular challenges facing the transformation of armed movements to political parties. Third, the synthesis assesses the role of international actors in the process of rebel group transformation and discusses why international programs have not always had their desired effect. Lastly, this study makes some suggestions for policy-makers, arising from the insights of this research.

Post-Conflict Party Development

Political parties in post-conflict countries share many of the attributes of other young parties in emerging, developing-world democracies. A growing literature on non-Western party development has highlighted the lack of a clear ideological profile, the elite- and urban-based focus, the highly personalized nature of decision-making, the strong dependency on the state, as well as the weakly-institutionalized party organizations as key features of many political parties in Africa, Asia and Latin America (e.g. Randall 1988 and Salih 2003).

However, recent research indicates that political parties in post-conflict settings face a number of additional challenges, which can deeply affect their growth, organization, leadership and behavior (the next few paragraphs are adapted from Kumar and De Zeeuw 2008). For instance, in post-conflict countries the security situation and the rule of law often remain precarious and state institutions do not always reach all regions of the country. This means that it is difficult for political parties to operate in all parts of the country and to attract broad-based popular support in election campaigns.

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Second, poor economic conditions in post-conflict countries negatively affect the institutionalization of party organizations. Due to the scarcity of resources, most political parties find it difficult to establish local party offices or take part in expensive electoral campaigns. Some political parties are co-opted by powerful economic interests. Under such conditions, corruption is common and public disillusionment over party performance is high (Kumar and De Zeeuw 2008).

Third, many post-conflict countries experience social dislocation and fragmentation. Bonds of family, kinship and community are adversely affected by prolonged war. Political parties often find it difficult to reconcile the interests of different socio-economic and political groups, and to foster trust across communities. This makes inter-party dialogue and cooperation with other civil society actors more difficult (Burnell 2006).

Finally, the context of the previous conflict affects the behavior of political parties in the post-conflict period. In countries where conflict ended through military victory, victorious parties tend to monopolize power and use their incumbent position to legitimize their rule through elections. As a result, opposition parties often remain weak. Similarly, when the conflict was organized along ethnic lines, parties may have difficulty recruiting across ethnic divides. Especially in deeply divided post-conflict societies, international, domestic and regional actors have tried to 'engineer' and regulate party behavior in order to redress the potentially most divisive and conflictive aspects of party politics, but with mixed results as recent studies indicate (see the various contributions in Reilly and Nordlund 2008).

Transformation of Rebel Movement to Political Party

Although there are many different types of post-conflict political parties, some post-conflict political parties are borne of former armed movements. For instance, the FMLN in El Salvador, RENAMO in Mozambique and the RPF in Rwanda are all political parties that were once armed movements. Literature that specifically addresses the transformation of armed movements to political parties is still fairly limited but there are several valuable studies of particular cases (e.g. Pool 2001, Garibay 2005, Allison 2006, Manning 2007, De Zeeuw 2008, Dudouet 2008). There is also a much more extensive peacebuilding literature, which is relevant for understanding the different trajectories of armed movements in post-conflict politics. For instance, within the broader literature on peacebuilding much has been written on power-sharing agreements, and whether or not rebel leaders should be accommodated in national unity governments where representatives of different groups share executive office (Jarstad and Sisk 2008, Roeder and Rothchild 2005). Arguments in favor of power-sharing say that this increases the incentives that former rebel groups will credibly lay down their arms, since they will benefit from peace. Critics however point to the possibilities of inefficiencies and stalemates in power-sharing governments, fragmentation of armed movements, and ethical problems due to the inclusion of leaders who may be accused of committing human rights violations during the conflict (Sriram 2008, Mehler and Tull 2005, Spears 2000).

There is also a well-known literature on the problem of "spoilers" in peace processes (Stedman 1997 and critique in Zahar 2003). This literature argues that recognizing the goals and motivations of armed groups can help international actors choose the best response towards them, namely whether they should attempt to socialize, co-opt or marginalize them. And finally, there is a large and growing body of literature on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) as well as security sector reform (SSR) that is increasingly taking notice of the crucial role played by non-state armed actors and political parties in peacebuilding (e.g. Lyons 2006, Porto, Alden and Parsons 2007, and Ball and Van de Goor 2007).

The specific question of whether and how armed movements become political parties is situated within this broader peacebuilding literature. But what determines the trajectory of former armed movements in the post-conflict period? A number of recent studies have contributed to our understanding of the strategies and choices made by armed movements, which provides some insight into how and why armed movements may or may not transform into political parties.

Christopher Clapham's edited volume develops a helpful typology of rebellion with rich case analyses of different rebel movements (Clapham 1998). He distinguishes between liberation movements (which fought against colonial rule), separatist movements (which sought independence or autonomy for particular regions such as the EPLF), reform movements (which aimed to create a different kind of state, such as the NRM in Uganda and the RPF in Rwanda), and warlord insurgencies (a residual category of rebel movements that tended to have highly personalized leadership such as the RUF in Sierra Leone). Different types of rebel movements differ in their structure and motivation, and one might expect that this will lead them towards different trajectories after the formal end of hostilities. A more recent edited volume extends Clapham's discussion and provides an updated set of cases that analyze the evolution of African insurgencies in changed internal and external environments (Bøås and Dunn 2007). The volume gives a historically grounded account of the strategies and constraints faced by several different rebel movements.

There is some debate within the literature as to whether it is the organizational structure of a former armed movement, or its leadership, that determines whether and how the transformation to a political party takes place. Jeremy Weinstein's research shows that the different strategies used by rebel groups during civil war depend on the environment in which the group originated and the types of resources that they are able to mobilize (Weinstein 2007). Carrie Manning draws attention to the interaction between institutional context and internal organizational dynamics in armed opposition

groups. She argues that challenges to intra-elite relations and strategies to secure a voter base influence how institutions affect party behavior and, ultimately, whether parties choose to adapt or subvert the democratic rules of the game (Manning 2007).

A recent study by the Clingendael Institute has argued that there are multiple factors that either facilitate or impede the political transformation of a rebel movement after the formal end of hostilities (De Zeeuw 2008). Based on a comparative study of eight cases, this study finds that 'success' of rebel-to-party transformation depends not only on the motivation, structure and leadership of a rebel movement, but is also influenced by the type of conflict settlement (i.e. negotiations or military victory), the domestic and regional political and security context, as well as the role played by international actors. It further demonstrates that there are different types of transformation and that the transition from a military group to peaceful political party in practice is a complex non-linear and multidimensional process. Findings from this work point to the need for a better match between the type of rebel movement and policy programs to assist in political party development. A comparative project by the Berghof Research Center focusing on six resistance and liberation movements and their transition to post-war politics similarly highlights the importance of sustained international support for political capacity building (Dudouet 2008).

International Involvement

Research suggests that international actors can influence the transformation of armed movements to political parties. In some cases, international actors have deliberately blocked or hindered this transformation. For instance, support from neighboring countries or foreign allies acting through regional trading networks have sometimes prevented a full severing of ties between new politicians and armed elements. Outside sources of support can make it easier for groups to maintain ties to militia groups, even if they have formally renounced violence (Reno 1998).

Often however, international actors try to assist the process of armed movement transformation as part of wider peacebuilding initiatives. This support can take a variety of different forms ranging from conflict settlement facilitation and electoral assistance, to more ambitious initiatives that aim to create multi-party democracies in countries with little experience of this kind of politics. International assistance may include both short-term and long-term measures.

For instance, international actors may attempt to alter the incentive structures available to the leadership of a rebel movement to encourage the group to disarm, demobilize and opt for peaceful political compromises. Positive incentives may include offering attractive power-sharing offices to the leadership of a movement through mediation or facilitation, or offering some form of financial compensation or "trust fund" if members of armed groups agree to demobilize. Negative incentives can also alter the cost-benefit calculations of leaders, and may include the threat of economic sanctions, restrictions on travel visas or the 'freezing' of foreign assets if they do not cooperate (De Zeeuw 2008 and Curtis 2007). Over the longer term, international actors may encourage certain institutional arrangements and electoral rules that will entice former armed groups to participate peacefully. Redesigning the electoral system so that it becomes easier for the new party to be represented in parliament is an example (Reilly 2006).

There is also the provision of "technical" assistance and advice that can help a former rebel movement in the transition to become a political party. Technical advice may be given in areas like arranging party financing, developing party platforms, or establishing party offices. Foundations such as the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute engage in this kind of work. Donors and technical experts may also offer to help design the constitutional and legal provisions for the registration of political parties and therefore help establish the terms under which an armed movement can become a political party (UNDP 2006).

Donors sometimes also support a range of programs that attempt to "socialize" former rebels to work together within the "rules of the game" and adopt a "culture of democracy." Typically, these may include leadership training programs, awareness-raising campaigns, inter-party confidence building programs and so on. Often such programs also include a wide range of civil society actors in an attempt to stimulate dialogue and 'embed' former rebels in the broader societal context (for example Wolpe and McDonald 2006).

These various types of international programs and policies to support the transformation of armed movements into political parties have not always had their desired effects. The literature points to several reasons why these initiatives may have unintended consequences. First, there may be a mismatch between the incentives promoted by donors and the context on the ground, reflecting an inadequate reading of both the post-conflict environment and rebel motivation. For instance, initiatives that focus on bringing the leadership of former armed movements into power-sharing arrangements as the representatives of political parties generally assume that if leaders are "transformed", their members will follow. This is not always the case. Sometimes, armed movements are highly factionalized, and power-sharing incentives may contribute to increased factionalization. Members of armed movements will not necessarily follow their former leaders. Furthermore, the process of political party transformation often focuses on national issues rather than local concerns, thus contributing to a disconnect between leaders and members. Incentives that focus on the leadership of movements may therefore overlook the organizational structures and constraints faced by those leaders (Manning 2007 and Curtis 2007).

Likewise, international programs and policies do not always take a country's historical context into account. For instance, it may be harder for international actors to promote the transformation of armed groups into political parties in countries that have little prior experience with multi-party politics.

Second, the process of political party development is not linear and there is not one kind of transformation. Donor policies and training programs tend to assume that there is a clear, distinguishable, linear path moving from rebellion to a political party, leading to "one size fits all" programming. This approach ignores the context in which armed movements emerge and operate, as well as the historical and societal structures in which they are embedded. For example, in some countries armed militias have been linked to civil society groups whereas in other places there has been a sharp divide between the two. Such relations influence the prospects of party development and will certainly have an effect on how new parties relate to civil society organizations. What remains unclear, however, is what such party-civil society linkages mean for post-conflict democratization and peacebuilding. Therefore in reality a much greater number of contingent factors influence the decisions and often uneven trajectory between armed movements and unarmed political parties (De Zeeuw 2008).

Third, any kind of international involvement in the political arena is bound to be contested, which is why some international donors are wary of supporting political party development in the first place. Donors that support former rebels in a transformation process under a general framework of facilitating conditions for a longer term peace, run the risk of being accused of interfering in domestic politics or even worse, supporting human rights violators. While supporting the transformation of former armed movements into political parties may serve conflict resolution objectives, it can have negative consequences for democratization efforts (Kovacs 2008). Due to this, donors often prefer less controversial "democracy assistance programs" such as supporting multi-party elections or developing a more "vibrant" civil society in order to link the state and society. What is then easily ignored is that political parties are just if not more important for this. After all, political parties identify, prepare and select candidates for public office, which may give them a unique role and responsibility in peacebuilding and democratization (Doherty 2001 and Gershman 2004). Similarly, international interest and approaches to state-building mean that much of the assistance for state-building ends up with the ruling party which actually undermines the creation of a multi-party democracy. This uneven international approach means that certain activities are emphasized over others for political reasons, without regard for what type of programs and policies are most needed. The result has often been a lack of "transformative impact" in terms of democratic party development (Carothers 2006).

Finally, efforts to socialize former rebels into being "proper" politicians are based on an underlying expectation that the parties will develop ideological platforms and contest elections on the basis of distinguishable policies and alternative visions for society. Donors tend to criticize many post-conflict political parties' lack of emphasis on policy, and their reliance on personality politics and ethnic or regional ties for support. Yet there is a tension between trying to help parties develop distinguishable party platforms and policy visions, and the narrow range of acceptable policies that are promoted by the international financial institutions and donors themselves. Given that so many of the fundamental policy decisions in post-conflict countries are taken outside the country, it is hardly surprising that political parties rely on other strategies to mobilize the electorate.

Suggestions for Policy

The literature shows that there are a number of difficult dilemmas and trade-offs that arise when supporting the transformation of armed actors into political parties. Immediate conflict termination objectives may conflict with longer-term objectives to promote multi-party democracy. Furthermore, since post-conflict countries vary enormously in terms of their histories and social structures, it is impossible to develop a transformation template to be used in all post-conflict cases. Nevertheless, existing research points to a number of factors that practitioners should keep in mind when designing policies and programs to help facilitate the transformation of armed actors into political parties.

Pay More Attention to Historical Context and Rebel Motivation
Power-sharing incentives, "technical" advice and confidence-building measures are not always appropriate or sufficient policy instruments to engage with rebel movements. For instance, the challenges may be much greater in countries that have little prior history of multi-party politics, and the types of institutions and electoral systems that are deemed appropriate may be largely informed by these prior experiences and connections. Policy-makers and donors therefore need to be more aware of what motivated rebellions in the first place and how grievances developed and changed over time. Knowledge about the history and organizational structure of the war-time rebellion is useful, as it provides insights into the degree of coherence of the "post-conflict" organization.

Focus on Linkages To Change Incentives
As rebel-to-party transformation is a complex multi-dimensional process there should be more attention for the different geographic, organizational and institutional linkages that influence that process. To make peaceful political behavior for leaders at the national level more attractive it is crucial to take into account the demands on those leaders from actors at the local level. Such actors, including rank-and-file members, may have powerful agendas, and these may or may not be

grafted onto the agendas of national leaders. Similarly, groups and parties learn from one another, across time and across national boundaries. Some armed movements have extensive links with –and receive funding from– from outside sources, which may have their own preferred outcomes and their own reasons to favor a resumption of armed conflict. And finally, leadership behavior can be constrained by the nature of the electoral system and/or power-sharing mechanisms. To better understand, let alone influence, the incentives that determine party behavior requires a deeper insight into the nature and workings of such linkages.

Emphasize Party Development as an Integral Part of Post-Conflict Programming
Experience shows that there are no short-cuts in the emergence of stable and peaceful democracies. The conventional international post-conflict assistance approach of organizing elections, building state institutions and strengthening civil society while ignoring political parties –or armed groups wanting to become parties– has been ineffective. Especially considering the important functions of parties in linking state and society and in identifying, training and selecting public leaders that have to tackle the enormous post-conflict governance challenges, there is a need to work much more closely with political parties.

Assess Impact Beforehand and Encourage Local Responsibility
While international actors should not overestimate the power of their language and their activities, they must be cognizant of the legitimacy they confer on groups and individuals through their engagement. Language and representation are important. For instance, in their leadership training programs, donors may inadvertently disempower groups through their labeling as "in need of socialization". Similarly, by engaging only a certain group of senior leaders international action will influence a group's internal balance of power. Therefore, different scenarios and contingency plans should be developed, to assess the consequences of any given program before its implementation. Moreover, to ensure that domestic actors take responsibility over their own future international actors should enter into a serious discussion about the authority and reach of international action as well as consult domestic actors about the development of more context-specific and better targeted assistance programs for party development and rebel-to-party transformation.

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