HOW CAN FORMER REBELS, WOMEN, AND MINORITIES BE INCLUDED IN DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES?

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The Context
Democratization in post-conflict situations must proceed in a context that in most ways is hostile to the democratic process. Governments exercise limited sovereignty, are severely incapacitated (by foreign debts and other costs incurred during the war), and lack legitimacy among some are all of the population. Conflict also produces governments that are highly centralized as a result of a concentration of power at higher levels in pursuit of victory. And more ominously, they tend to be highly militarized having devoted much of their energy and resources building up their coercive capacity during the war.

The impact of these factors on the leadership of a post-conflict state is to make political elites insecure about their authority and deeply suspicious of any efforts to incorporate former challengers into their regimes. As a result, loyalty is often prized over competence, and basic goals consistent with democratization such as power-sharing with former enemies, building state capacity to provide public goods, and decreasing the size of the military establishment are often viewed as anathema, and potentially, as a conspiracy advocated by those who would seek to undermine their power. Faced with such conditions, is there any possibility of incorporating formerly marginalized groups into the new post-conflict political dispensation?

Two competing approaches: Democratization versus Stability
Many analysts and politicians have advocated that democratization must be sidelined in favor of stability. Advocates argue that the political fragility and ingrained suspicion that characterizes divided societies in the aftermath of a conflict renders democratization a dangerous and superfluous luxury. They point to considerable evidence demonstrating post-conflict elections are frequently accompanied by violence. And they argue that democracy can be sequenced after a proper period of stability has been achieved.

The case of Rwanda is often hailed as one such example. Following the dramatic end of the civil war in 1994, Paul Kagame, the leader of the victorious Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) forces, entered Kigali and began the arduous process of reconstructing the country’s economic and political infrastructure. Rwanda today is a peaceful society and its economic record is the envy of the region.
But two related issues—one domestic and one regional—cast a cloud over the impressive veneer that the RPF has created. First, despite promises that stability would lead to democratization, the Rwandan regime has become increasingly autocratic. Hutus remain marginalized within Rwandan economic and political life. Even Tutsis not associated with the regime have come under surveillance by a regime that has become highly suspicious of potential rivals and increasingly concerned about its survival.

Second, having never resolved its domestic ethnic crisis, Rwanda exported it to a neighboring country, directly contributing to the prolonged crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Rwanda played an integral role in initiating and shaping the conflict in DR Congo by funding proxy rebel armies to attack the vast Rwandan Hutu population that fled across the border in 1994. Fifteen years after the genocide, the intense divisions that triggered the civil war in Rwanda are no closer to being resolved and the possibility of reintegrating this vast population seems ever more remote. Increasingly, human rights organizations and international agencies are recognizing the destructive and destabilizing role that Rwanda continues to play in the region. However, now firmly ensconced in power, the Kagame regime pays little attention to such criticism.

What can we learn from the Rwandan case? By not pressuring the RPF to democratize after coming to power, the international community fostered a culture of impunity within the Rwandan regime. By savvily exploiting international guilt about the genocide, Kagame was effectively given carte blanche to carry out devastating massacres, engage in massive and illegal resource expropriation, fund undisciplined proxy militias, all while cracking down on dissent in Rwanda and further closing the democratic space. Few would argue that after more than a decade in power that Kagame has any intention of stepping down in the near future. In fact, rather than stability leading to democracy, the opposite appears to be true.

**Democratization in post-conflict situations**

There are many challenges to promoting democratization in the aftermath of a conflict. But the experiences of Rwanda (and many other countries) demonstrate that leaders must not be given a free hand. Instead, the international community and Canada in particular must have a more nuanced understanding of the challenges of navigating a post-conflict context while pushing for the incorporation of marginalized groups into a broader democratization process.

One overarching dilemma often hinders the ability of the international community to contribute productively in such situations. Governments generally view post-conflict reconstruction through the lens of security. This focus on security concerns can enhance the sense of mistrust characteristic of relations between former belligerents requiring the intervention of the international community in fostering reintegration efforts. But the entrance of the international community can actually delink marginalized groups from engagement with domestic political and economic processes. Instead of promoting participation, the heavy involvement of international actors can depoliticize marginalized groups which look abroad instead of engaging and developing local political structures, whether political parties, NGOs, media or so on. However, a greater awareness of the positive and negative role international actors can play can prevent this dynamic from taking hold. A few questions that should be considered:
1. Can democratization proceed without accountability? Governments and former rebels often have little interest in being held accountable for actions carried out in the context of war. But a lack of accountability can be poisonous to any efforts to bring a durable peace. International actors must balance pursuing justice for victims of both rebels and government actions with the risk of all sides withdrawing from the broader peace process. In this context, rather than shifting accountability to the global level, strengthening both domestic and regional legal mechanisms and ensuring opportunities for local civil society actors to participate in this process are essential.

2. Can the international community be a neutral arbiter? The assumption undergirding much international involvement in post-conflict situations is that international actors can serve as an unbiased mediator between hostile groups. However, too often international actors pretend as if their actions during the war can be disaggregated from their post-conflict involvement. This is a false assumption. Instead, international actors must understand that their actions during a conflict are likely to affect their ability to play a constructive role in post-conflict situations. Recognizing the relationship between their involvement during a conflict and post-conflict is essential for international actors to live up to their potential.

3. Do former belligerents speak in unison? A common assumption in post-conflict situations is that former rebels speak for the marginalized groups that they claim to represent. Generally, only leaders of former rebel groups are incorporated into peace processes. However, situations of political violence can repress internal divisions within communities over what their interests are and the best path forward. Peacetime can bring out these internal divisions, often violently. For democratization to proceed, not only those with guns, but representatives from all major interest groups, including women, youth and minorities must be brought into broader democratization efforts.

4. Does the behavior of belligerents during war shape post-war outcomes? Recent scholarship on this subject tends to show a strong continuity between the behavior of both rebels and governments during war and their behavior in the post-conflict period. This tendency must be recognized and mitigated by strong efforts to encourage pro-democracy forces within both the government and the former rebels.

5. Does the manner by which the war ends affect democratization efforts? Consider two wars that recently ended in Sudan (2005) and Sri Lanka (2009). In Sudan, the SPLA rebellion insisted on retaining some amount of military capacity during the post-conflict period, allowing the ex-rebels to continue promoting the interests of the Southern population in the post-war period. In contrast, the defeat of Sri Lanka’s LTTE has left the Tamil minority without any actor capable of defending their interests in the face of the increased centralization of power under the regime of Mahinda Rajapaksa. The lesson-- political context matters and must not be pushed aside in favor of facile categories and generalizations.