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Written in stone?

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When rivals in an armed conflict agree to make peace, it invariably entails a formula to delineate post-conflict roles and distribution of power. But, as this article argues, such arrangements are a starting point on the long road to reconciliation and not an end per se.

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The perils and prospects of power sharing

Maria Lundin Hartman, Martin Magnéli and Benjamin Schaller

Formal conflict resolution in the form of peace agreements only constitutes a first step on the road of peacemaking. These ceremonial processes do not bring about a swift return to the societal status quo ante bellum; they only lay the formal groundwork. Reconciliation between former warring parties is necessary to form peaceful relations that will last and hence prevent relapse into war. Without successful reconciliation, tensions and mistrust persist which facilitates a breeding ground for new grievances to be acted upon, ultimately through armed violence. Given the possibly negative side-effects of power sharing on reconciliation between parties, we ask under what circumstances power sharing can have a positive impact on peace processes, what the short- and long-term effects are and how this impacts the process of reconciliation.

Political power sharing is a method often used in peace processes designed to let parties restart their coexistence through cooperation (Lekha Sriram, 2008). In their influential work, Hartzell and Hoddie (2003) define political power sharing as the “distribution of political power among the parties of a settlement” limited to electoral, administrative and executive proportional representation. This political dimension of power sharing comes in various forms, for example by holding democratic elections to determine the shares of representation or by “a guaranteed distribution of key ministries, or shared control over executive positions [...]” (Walter, 2002:30; Hartzell and Hoddie, 2003), the latter here being the key aspect, since executive power in

the early stages of post-war societies face rather little restrictions (ibid.).

Power-sharing arrangements, however, do not always facilitate peace, since such arrangements formalise the conflicting parties’ relative power in the way of political representation at the end of the conflict, and these parties and their relative power holdings tend to settle and become static over time. As a result, the ability to achieve reconciliation between warring parties may suffer, which has been proposed as a pertinent cause for the recurrence of armed conflicts (Bar-Tal, 2000:355). Karen Brounéus (2003) succinctly defines reconciliation as a “societal process that involves mutual acknowledgement of past suffering and the changing of destructive attitudes and behaviors into constructive relationships toward sustainable peace”.

A politician’s way out of conflict

Power sharing has seldom been called the ideal way to democratically govern a state, and it could be regarded as a way of merely keeping the previously warring parties content with the post-conflict situation and maintain a sense of security (Hartzell, 1999). Power-sharing arrangements between former warring parties may be less favourable to other actors who did not take part in the conflict, as these arrangements run the risk of resulting in perceived under-representation for such non-fighting actors (Cammet and Malesky, 2012). Failing to include enough interests may consequently ease recruitment for new rebellions. Non-inclusion may

also be harmful to the legitimacy of the settlements agreed on or the joint decisions made by the power sharing government in the eyes of the people. Decisions might for instance tend to benefit the elites present at the negotiating table and may therefore not be accepted by the population at large.

Sudan is a case in point. During the interim period of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed in 2005, neither of the people on the Sudanese and South Sudanese side did perceive the elites who were included in the power sharing arrangement as legitimate representatives of the people’s interests and therefore fought against both governments after the secession of South Sudan.¹

Broad inclusion of actors in the power sharing arrangement or at the very least in the negotiations of the arrangement may appear as a solution to the issue of legitimacy. Not limiting power sharing to a few actors or elites would not only make joint rule more legitimate, it would also lessen the risk that actors both inside and outside the peace agreement would attempt to spoil the peace process (Cammet and Malesky, 2012). Studies aimed at understanding the effects of including civil society in negotiations show that there is a connection between inclusiveness and the durability of a peace process (Wanis-St. John, 2008; Nilsson, 2012). It does therefore not seem as much of a stretch to assume that the same effect could potentially exist in power sharing arrangements where this is possible to implement.

Inclusiveness would not necessarily make the power sharing arrangement more democratic, however. Ideal-type democratic governance has never been the purpose of a power sharing arrangement. It is meant to be used as a transition instrument from armed conflict to durable peace in divided societies.

Including more parties into the power sharing arrangement could nonetheless be a difficult task, since the warring parties may not be interested in sharing the 'spoils' of war with those who did not fight. The outcome of inclusiveness is, however, dependent on context and can therefore, arguably, not be considered a general rule. Nevertheless, there is a risk that wider inclusion may become a reward for violence, meaning that if a group is violent enough, then it will be included in negotiations and/or a power sharing arrangement (Tull and Mehler, 2005). For instance, in the Central African Republic, rebellious behaviour was 'rewarded' by the government in a settlement as a measure to stop the fighting (Mehler, 2005). However, this argument assumes that there are enough potential recruits available to spoiler groups. If a power sharing arrangement is inclusive enough and also proves effective, the reasons to stay out of a spoiler group may outweigh those in favour of joining. However, with a wider inclusion of parties in power sharing arrangements, there is also an increased need for careful implementation.

A balance of political power

Inclusive power sharing based on the distribution of key executive positions can ensure that neither party to a conflict is able to abuse the state apparatus slanted towards their own interest (Walter, 2002). It can therefore in its implementation have a resolving effect on the security dilemma and commitment problems of both conflict parties and may therefore increase the likelihood of sustainable peace through several mechanisms. In fact, political power sharing in its ideal form can create a balance of political power, which may force former enemies to cooperate on an executive and administrative level to achieve moderate and consensus based solutions (Hartzell and Hoddie, 2003), enabling the necessary trust and a system of checks and balances which both lessen the security dilemma and the credible commitment problem (Hoddie and Hartzell, 2003).



PHOTO: DINA DEBBAS/IRIN

A crowd watches the roadblocks burn in Beirut, Lebanon. In a protest against the government in January 2007, thousands of Lebanese demonstrators blocked the main roads in the capital and around the country, burning rubble and tyres.

It appears that political power sharing could be a valid strategy to establish a common ground for more crucial but also more vulnerable issues, such as measures of military and territorial power sharing or disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration. It is therefore not only important to implement as many different dimensions of power sharing as possible (Hartzell and Hoddie, 2003), but also to ensure that these are implemented in the right order and time, with political power sharing in fact being one of the first measures to be executed after former enemies have agreed to a negotiated settlement (Jarstad and Nilsson, 2008).

Now, there is something puzzling about this seemingly workable solution to the commitment problem and security dilemma in post-conflict situations. Assuming that conflict parties are willing to implement an agreement if they are given sufficient assurances of their own security and the commitment of the other party, why do some peace agreements still fail? One key to this puzzle naturally lies in the wrong composition of tools and their incorrectly timed use (Sisk, 2003). Another key lies in the problematic effects of power sharing, especially on the fragile process of reconciliation.

Power sharing and reconciliation

Power sharing may hamper reconciliation and fuel tensions between groups in two ways. Power sharing agreements in divided societies tend to emphasise and

solidify value-loaded differences between groups (Barth, 1969). These arrangements may shift the agenda to issues that already divide former warring parties, which is detrimental to achieving successful reconciliation and unity in societies affected by conflict. In these situations, power sharing appears to provide further fuel to the fire by emphasising divisions in society which once drove the parties into conflict. In addition to emphasising divisions within societies, power sharing may also cause political clashes due to its consensus-seeking design. With emphasis on cooperation, there is a risk that groups are unable to find consensus or near-consensus for decision-making. In these situations, governance may become immobilized, which causes tensions to rise and this in turn may lead to one of the former warring parties departing from the peace agreement and taking up arms once again.

Power sharing in the long term is not only in theory an ill-suited form of governance; there are several real-life examples of its shortcomings. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the Dayton agreement stipulated power sharing between the different ethnic groups, years of external peacebuilding has resulted in nothing more than artificial stability, lacking in both social integration and legitimacy of the state (Kostić, 2008).

The Taif Agreement of Lebanon signed in 1989 is another case in point. Governmental power was divided between the different religious groups. Yet the current situation in Lebanon has

been described by scholars as a “precarious parenthesis between two wars” (Picard and Ramsbotham, 2012). In deeply divided societies such as Lebanon and Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is clear that divisions of governmental decision-making power between ethnic or identity based groups has not led to reconciliation and harmoniously united societies, but rather that these sorts of divisions have caused further rifts between previously warring parties. Power sharing with the best of intentions may be an obstruction to durable peace in the long term, and if taking it one step further, a pertinent risk to a return to violence due to failed reconciliation between former warring parties.

Conclusion

In the long term, power sharing, with its non-durable features as a governance tool, has proven to result in rigidity and mutual vetoes that cause frustrations, tensions, and even the risk of renewed conflict. This unfortunate result tends to prevent successful reconciliation from taking place. In addition, power sharing in heterogeneous societies also tends to harden ethnic divisions, which enforces the polarised views of the other party to continue and fester long after the conflict has ended, and this most certainly becomes a counterproductive effect on reconciliation in post-conflict societies.

In the short term, however, power sharing may aid in overcoming the security dilemmas and credible commitment problems by raising the costs of war and increasing the benefits of peace, given that the arrangements are implemented in a transitional, rather balanced manner and to a high degree. This also reduces uncertainty about the other party's intentions and prevents one side from excluding the other from power. As such a tool in the short term, power sharing might serve as a catalyst towards durable peace, but in the long run, peace can only be sustainable if the incompatibility of the conflict is solved and a peaceful political environment is developed. The outcome of the 2013 elections in Kenya appears to illustrate such a positive example. After the violent riots in the direct aftermath of the elections in 2007, both parties, guided by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, agreed to a set of political power-sharing instruments on the executive level of the state, which have been dis-

solved following the elections in 2013 (Odinga and Kibaki, 2008).

Several important questions in the research on power sharing still remain unanswered. How can it be ensured that power sharing is solely implemented as a transitional tool? How long should such a transition phase be? And, most importantly, in what direction should states move afterwards? In some cases, as in Kenya or Djibouti, power sharing will support conflict parties in their struggle towards durable peace, while in other cases, such as in Lebanon or Bosnia and Herzegovina, political power sharing can significantly hamper the process of reconciliation and durable peace. However, as long as these questions remain unanswered, power sharing as a tool in the conflict resolution process remains a risky gamble without a certain outcome. 🌿

- 1 UCDP (Uppsala Conflict Database Program) (2013), Sudan, http://www.ucdp.uu.se/gpdatabase/gpcountry.php?id=145®ionSelect=1-Northern_Africa#, visited 2013-06-04, latest update 2012

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