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Research Report

Civil war outcomes and a durable peace: setting the record straight

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Civil War Outcomes and a Durable Peace: Setting the Record Straight

Summary

One strand of current conflict research claims that military victories are beneficial for peace. It is argued that these outcomes produce more unified post-conflict societies, thereby facilitating reconstruction and economic development. The implication of this view is that, instead of encouraging negotiated settlements, international actors should either support one side to victory or allow a conflict to run its course. This briefing paper argues that the case for “peace by victory” is weaker than supporters claim. The most successful conflict resolutions address their root causes and involve a broad range of stakeholders.

A quick glance at all civil war terminations since 1946 seems to suggest that military victories are slightly more stabilizing than other outcomes. Rough comparisons, however, are insufficient for drawing conclusions or offering policy advice. A full review of the context and content of peacebuilding reveals a very different picture.

- Focusing only on military victories and peace agreements ignores the most common outcome of civil strife: an ongoing contest between belligerents, albeit with a limited use of force.
- On average, the civil wars that ended with peace agreements lasted eight times longer than those that were terminated through a military victory. Indeed, a one-sided victory almost only occurs when fighting is counted in days or months rather than years. This indicates that protracted conflicts are unlikely to end if allowed to run their course and that negotiations are the only way to end a long-running war.
- Differences in conflict duration mean that the challenges for reconstruction are substantially greater after negotiated settlements than after military victories. In-

ternational actors seeking to contribute to the rebuilding that follows peace agreements are faced with societies with more victims and divisions, and greater physical destruction.

- Regardless of how a conflict ended, the most important factor for post-conflict stability is the orderly demobilization of former fighters. After a war, it is also imperative for the underlying grievances to be addressed through non-violent policies such as offering the vanquished side the opportunity to form a political party and/or share power in the government.

Long-term success in conflict management calls for dismantling troop mobilization structures as well as those used for repression. This includes ensuring that both the army and militias return to the barracks and come under official civilian control. External actors can best contribute by helping to create outlets where grievances can be aired and addressed peaceably. Although it is very important to reduce violence quickly, armed belligerents must not be seen as the sole representatives of conflicting views.

The following recommendations can be drawn from this paper:

- Talks about the issues are the only realistic outcome of a protracted conflict.
- Conflict negotiations should not only involve the violent parties but also other non-violent, legitimate stakeholders.
- While peace negotiations must be held in a central location, local efforts to promote intra-societal trust also need to be initiated and supported. Many potential peace-process spoilers are less concerned with the terms of a national agreement than with their immediate local security.

How civil wars end

Analysts and policymakers often assume that armed conflicts end either through a victory for one of the warring sides or a negotiated settlement. As a consequence, the debate about how to respond to any crisis is often limited to the options of using military means or offering concessions or compromise. However, the empirical record does not substantiate such an oversimplification regarding civil war termination.

The most comprehensive global data on civil war reveals that in the period from 1946 to 2012, on 357 different occasions in 99 countries, 35 per cent (124 cases) of armed struggles between a government and (at least one) insurgency ended with a military victory, while 12 per cent (42) ended with a peace agreement (Themnér & Wallensteen, 2014). In another 15 cases, fighting ended when talks began although the actual agreement was signed many years later. This means that in the last 65 years just about half of all civil wars ended as a result of one side's military superiority or through successful negotiations.

In 45 instances, fighting was stopped by a ceasefire and a formal peace was only agreed much later. However, the most common outcome (41 %, or 146 cases) was that violent interactions ended without any clear "outcome" (Kreutz, 2010, updated in 2015). This figure includes situations where exploratory talks failed, rebel groups were distracted by fratricide or violence dropped below the threshold for inclusion in the data (25 deaths/year). In such "frozen conflicts", both the dispute and the mobilization remain but one (or both) of the warring sides avoids fighting. These situations may still be very violent, though, with the state and rebels abusing civilians and their local rivals.

The situations differ greatly. Sometimes the belligerents are separated by a recognizable front line (Nagorno-Karabakh) or the contested areas are fluid (Myanmar). Conflicts may receive significant international attention, like Israel–Palestine, or be largely unknown, like those in North-East Ethiopia. In any case, although a cessation in high-intensity fighting does create temporary stability, the belligerents' capacity and intent to act violently remains and may well resume.

Conflict outcomes and recurrence

The importance of pushing to settle a conflict instead of accepting a "freeze" of the situation is clear when the risk of a resumption of violence is weighed. If the benchmark of post-conflict stability is 10 years of peace, only 43 per cent of all civil wars that have been terminated achieve this goal. Victories are most likely to lead to a decade of peace (61 %), followed by peace agreements (48 %) and ceasefires (47 %); indeterminate outcomes only avoid resuming violence in 31 per cent of the cases. There have been several examples of the latter in Myanmar, where for a few years,

there was less fighting despite the absence of political negotiations – which then led to a re-escalation.

The differences between conflicts that end with a military victory and those concluded by a peace settlement should be considered more closely. Are the challenges for peacebuilding similar? Victories may be more common in brief conflicts, such as coup attempts or when a rebel movement mobilizes enough troops to threaten the regime.

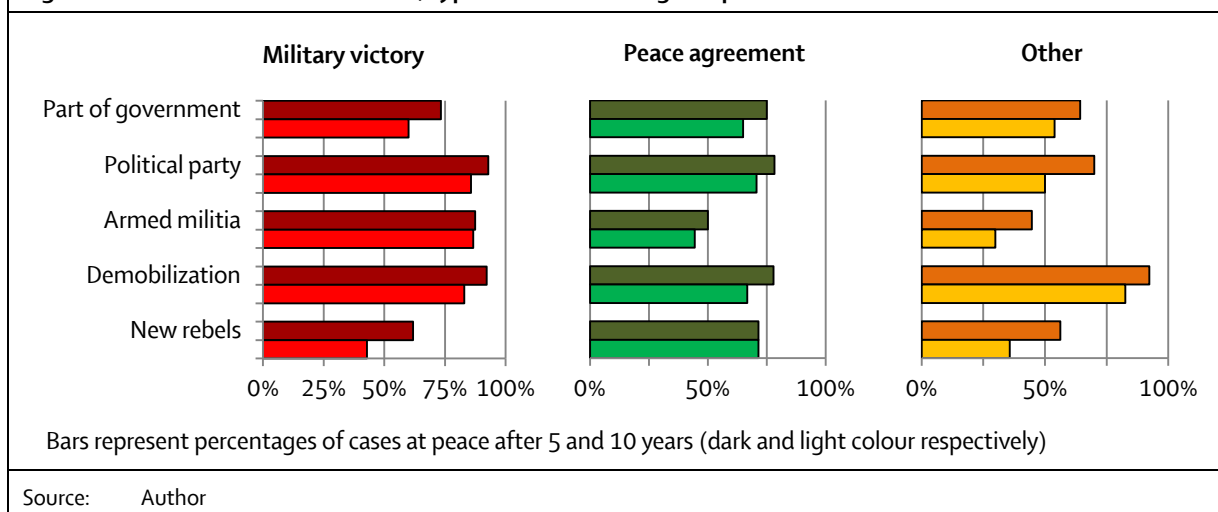
The data support this proposition: victories are recorded when fighting has lasted around six months, while conflicts that end with peace agreements average almost five years, more than eight times as long. Only nine instances of victory (as opposed to peace agreements) have been recorded for conflicts that lasted five years or more. The implications of this finding are clear for conflict management: long civil wars rarely end by military efforts, and must be settled through negotiations. Furthermore, peacebuilding faces greater challenges in post-agreement societies, in which the average level of destruction is much greater, there are considerably more victims and refugees, and societal structures for warfare are firmly established.

Building peace in the shadow of war

Regardless of how a civil war ends and the difficulty of the context, any transformation to a peaceful society must address several factors, some of which, such as power sharing, may be included in a peace deal. All the same, victors may be lenient and grant political rights to the vanquished and then not fully implement the agreed concessions. For this reason, identifying the most important factors for successful peacebuilding requires exploring the content of post-conflict provisions across outcomes. Academic and policy literature emphasize that both access to power and reform of the warring organizations are crucial. Which measures have created a durable peace?

Figure 1 illustrates five key post-conflict scenarios for former rebels and how they relate to the duration of the peace. In the first scenario, former rebels belong to the post-conflict (local or central) government; in the second, they constitute a political party; in the third scenario they are allowed – or manage – to remain an armed militia; in the fourth, most of the rebels are demobilized. In the final scenario, former rebels join or form another rebel movement after the civil war has ended. These scenarios are not mutually exclusive: they may be combined.

The figure shows the relative success of each scenario for each type. The practice of integrating former rebels into the government after their military defeat led to at least five years of peace in 73 per cent (22 of 30) of the cases. Peace agreements had a success rate of 75 per cent (18 of 24), and indeterminate (other) terminations, 64 per cent (9 of 14).

Figure 1: Post-conflict role of rebels, type of conflict ending and peace

There is some variation with regard to the scenario that is the most effective for the different outcomes. Following military victories, post-conflict stability is high regardless of whether the former opponent is demobilized (or, in the case of coup attempts, dismissed) or keeps a militia. Given the common claim that victories imply complete repression of the enemy, the fact that retaining its former fighters can help to stabilize a situation is surprising. In fact, beyond permitting the defeated side to maintain a militia, allowing it to form a political party also contributes to post-conflict stability. Another common misconception is that military victories deter subsequent conflict. In fact, new rebellions are more common after them than after peace agreements.

In the case of negotiated settlements, demobilizing former rebels and allowing them to form a political party helps insure that the peace will hold. For indeterminate outcomes, which tend to be less stable, a sustainable peace can still be achieved by demobilizing the rebels – although this rarely happens.

No single policy can guarantee post-conflict stability. The figure shows that demobilization fares best, but even when this has succeeded, one in five conflicts resumes within 10 years. The surest way to support a sustainable peace – beyond the elite-driven processes of institution-building and democratic consolidation – is to encourage the establishment of outlets where the opposition can air its grievances non-violently. While such channels are part of a well-functioning institutionalized democracy, they also contribute to peacebuilding by providing opportunities for former combatants to discuss with local authorities across the various communities. Nevertheless, this implies the development of a free media and basic political freedoms of association and protest.

The importance of creating non-violent channels for political debate also means that when preparing for the post-conflict society, mediators and peacemakers must

consider more than just the warring sides. The figure shows that post-conflict stability is threatened by the emergence of new rebel groups, which indicates the need for international actors in post-conflict peacebuilding to consider conflict prevention, too. Even if former belligerent elites are happy to surrender or sign settlements protecting their personal access to power or wealth, they cannot ensure their former fighters' loyalty.

Other threats to post-conflict stability exist when all or some of the troops are allowed to remain as militias in the form of local security forces or are awaiting demobilization – or when they turn into criminal gangs or become private security agents for political actors. Although these developments do not necessarily destroy the peace, in half the cases following peace agreements (and even more after other outcomes) conflict recurs within five years. This is logical: preserving violent organizations increases the likelihood that minor alterations will occur and escalate to conflict recurrence. When troops and politicians or the regime remain clearly connected, the risk is much higher.

Yet policies to forcefully demobilize former fighters do not necessarily lead to post-conflict stability. After decades of war and human rights abuse in countries like Colombia, neither former fighters nor many civilians in the conflict zone view demobilization as unproblematic. The lack of trust that exists between the belligerents and between the locals and armed groups must be overcome. Effectively building trust is about more than creating institutions or national policies: interpersonal and intercommunal suspicions must be eliminated at the local level. All these processes are linked. For example, the establishment of village fora for reconciliation and community-building must be combined with efforts to strengthen individual perceptions of state institutions as fair and just. Efforts to demobilize one side without restraining the other can themselves rekindle conflict, including the possible formation of new rebel groups by veterans of the last war.

Conclusions

An assessment of how civil wars end and which factors are most important for a sustainable peace leads to three conclusions.

First is the good news that the measures that have been promoted in conflict management efforts over the past 25 years are indeed those with the greatest chances of success. These include support for negotiated settlements that promote broader political participation and the demobilization and reform of the warring parties. Given that long-running civil wars almost exclusively end through negotiations – and otherwise continue or become “frozen” – there is little justification for the claim that military victory leads to stability.

The bad news is that regardless of how a civil war ends or which peacebuilding efforts are implemented, most cases

experience renewed violence within the first decade. This prospect should not discourage efforts at conflict resolution but rather be considered as a realistic possibility. It is crucial to be prepared for a scenario where fighting resumes (however briefly) and to manage expectations accordingly. This is true when planning a project in a post-conflict setting and perhaps even more, when donors evaluate their efforts.

Finally, even if efforts to end a conflict are largely an elite endeavour, peacebuilding must also have a local component. Donors and other third-party actors should focus on efforts to mitigate the lack of trust between members of the belligerent local forces and civilians. This means supporting actors and organizations beyond those involved in the conflict in nonviolent debate regarding issues of importance to the community.

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