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Research Report

Democracy support and peaceful democratisation after civil war

Briefing Paper, No. 7/2019

Provided in Cooperation with:

German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), Bonn

Suggested Citation: Mross, Karina (2019) : Democracy support and peaceful democratisation after civil war, Briefing Paper, No. 7/2019, Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), Bonn, <https://doi.org/10.23661/bp7.2019.v1.1>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/200165>

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Democracy Support and Peaceful Democratisation after Civil War

Summary

Evidence exists that democracies are particularly stable, yet also that processes of democratisation are highly susceptible to conflict, especially if democratisation occurs in the aftermath of violent conflict. New research from the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) indicates that external democracy support can help mitigate the destabilising effects of post-conflict democratisation. Since the 1990s, democracy support has been integral to most peacebuilding efforts. Supporting free and fair elections or a vibrant media seems well-suited for fostering peace: Democratic institutions can actively deal with societal conflicts, in sharp contrast to authoritarian regimes, which often rely on repression. However, altering power relations through more political competition can also trigger power struggles, which newly emerging democratic institutions may have difficulty containing. Therefore, questions arise regarding countries that have embarked on a process of democratisation after civil war: Can democracy support help to mitigate destabilising effects, or does it reinforce them? If it can foster peace, how should it be designed in order to avoid renewed violence?

The wisdom or folly of supporting democracy to build peace after civil war has caused controversy, yet has rarely been tested empirically. This briefing paper summarises findings from DIE research that addresses this gap. The results demonstrate that:

- External democracy support that accompanies post-conflict democratisation can help to foster peace after civil war. Importantly, it does not trigger renewed violence.
- Analysing the effects of two donor strategies to deal with trade-offs between stability (preventing renewed violence) and democracy shows that prioritising stability over democracy does not contain fewer risks than gradualist support, in contrast to widespread assumptions. In fact,

the prioritising strategy can also fail, and even be counterproductive.

- The competitive elements of a democratic system explain both why it can help to avoid, or provoke, renewed violence. Democracy support facilitating “controlled competition” can mitigate the destabilizing effects: *Support for political competition* strengthens the peace-enhancing effects by promoting meaningful choice and enabling the peaceful allocation and withdrawal of political power. *Fostering institutional constraints* limits the discretionary power of the executive and enforces a commitment to democratic rules.

These results can provide guidance to policy-makers when engaging in post-conflict situations:

1. Donors should actively accompany post-conflict democratisation processes with substantial democracy support. They should not refrain from offering such support until stability has already proven to be sustainable, since it can make an important contribution towards strengthening peace and help in avoiding destabilising effects.
2. When facing trade-offs between stability and democracy in post-conflict situations, donors should bear in mind that prioritising stability is not less risk-prone than a gradualist approach, which promotes both stability and democracy in an iterative way. Thus, prioritising stability should not be the obvious choice in post-conflict situations. Instead, donors should carefully scrutinise the political dynamics before applying either strategy and recall that a gradualist approach offers considerable potential for strengthening peace sustainably.
3. Engaging in a context of post-conflict democratisation, donors should provide substantial support both for political competition and for institutional constraints.

Post-conflict democracy support

When a civil war has ended, post-conflict elections are often held to create a new, legitimate political order. This seemed beneficial for peace in Nepal and Nicaragua, but less so in Liberia (1997) and Angola (1992), where new violence erupted. Nonetheless, democracy support has become integral to peacebuilding efforts since the 1990s. This includes, for example, international support for organising elections as well as strengthening marginalised groups and the media. Yet, the wisdom or folly of providing democracy support in fragile contexts has remained a matter of debate. Can post-conflict democracy support help to foster peace, or does it risk provoking renewed violence?

Although full democracies are particularly stable, democratic transitions contain an increased risk of violence. The destabilising potential of democratisation processes has led some scholars to warn against promoting democracy after civil war to avoid triggering renewed violence. Yet, the effect of post-conflict democracy support on peace has hitherto not been assessed directly. This briefing paper presents DIE research (Mross, 2019a, 2019b) investigating the effect of official development assistance (ODA) that accompanies post-conflict democratisation processes. It should be noted that the research regards countries that have managed to end major violence and embarked on a process of democratisation after the civil war ended, such as Bosnia, Nicaragua, Nepal and Sierra Leone. The discussion does not refer to Afghanistan, for example, where violence never actually stopped, or Azerbaijan, which has not started to democratise.

Box 1: Key concepts	
Democracy	Political system characterised by public participation and contestation, accompanied by civil rights and the rule of law
Democratisation	Institutional change towards a more democratic system (not necessarily leading to full democracy)
Democracy support	External engagement to foster democratisation

What are the benefits and risks of democratisation for peace?

Conflicts exist in every society. However, the main question is whether a society is able to resolve them in a peaceful way. In contrast to autocratic regimes, which often rely on repression, functioning democratic institutions offer mechanisms to deal with conflict peacefully: Democratic elections and accountability mechanisms provide institutionalised, transparent and open channels to allocate, but also withdraw political power. Thus, political leaders can be voted in, but also out of office and be held accountable before a court for abuses of power. Moreover, guaranteed rights and freedoms directly reduce grievances and prevent the repression of minority groups and divergent opinions. Therefore, democracies can respond to societal conflicts with accommoda-

tions instead of repression. As a consequence, democratic institutions can theoretically help to foster peace after civil war.

Empirically, research indicates that full democracies are indeed particularly stable. Yet, evidence also demonstrates that the process of becoming a democracy bears an increased risk of violence. This can be explained by two challenges a country faces when it starts to democratise. First, changing power relations can endanger political stability. By allowing new actors to gain political power through competitive elections, former power holders are challenged. Incumbent authorities, however – be it old elites or new, democratically elected incumbents – seldom yield their power and privileges willingly and might choose to defend them violently. Second, emerging democratic institutions are often not strong enough to effectively constrain violent behaviour and ensure that democratic practices prevail. In contrast, autocratic regimes are often relatively successful in repressing diverging opinions and violent activities. When these repressive institutions are dismantled during democratisation processes, an institutional vacuum can emerge that makes it easier for actors to use violence, for instance, incumbents who see their position threatened. In this regard, democratisation can bring conflict to the fore.

Democratisation after civil war is considered to be particularly conflict-prone due to high degrees of polarisation and mistrust as well as cultures of violence that characterise most post-conflict societies. Among groups that have partaken in violent conflict, it is likely that democratic competition is interpreted as a zero-sum game. Moreover, competitive elections require mobilising constituencies, generally by emphasising differences. In divided post-conflict societies, strategies to gain votes often exploit – and thereby reinforce – wartime cleavages, for example by adhering to hate speech, with detrimental effects for the peace process. Indeed, it seems that the introduction of competitive, democratic elections in the aftermath of civil war caused renewed violence in some cases. In the 1997 elections in Liberia, for example, the warlord Charles Taylor gained a landslide victory, also because many assumed that he would not peacefully accept defeat at the ballot box. He soon used his democratically legitimated power to crack down on the opposition and media, which resulted in a second civil war. This is a typical example of the credible commitment problem: In post-conflict situations, it is difficult to believe that all actors will *credibly commit* to democratic rules, and that neither the winning party will usurp power nor electoral losers return to warfare.

Since we know that peace and democratisation do not necessarily go hand in hand, a prevailing view in policy and academic circles is that external actors should focus on maintaining stability in post-conflict situations and refrain from democracy support, since it might create new instability. This is also visible in Figure 1, which indicates a down-trend in post-conflict democracy support, which is not reflected in democracy support provided to all recipients or general ODA. However, little evidence exists on the effect of *external*

democracy support on peace. New DIE research indicates that external democracy support can help mitigate the destabilising effects of post-conflict democratisation, in particular when not prioritising stability and when supporting “controlled competition”.

Prioritising stability over democracy?

To deal with the conflicting objectives of peace and democracy, scholars have recommended two alternative approaches: 1) prioritising stability over democracy in order to keep political competition from jeopardising stability, and 2) the gradualist strategy, which supports both stability and democracy from the beginning in small, incremental steps. A systematic comparison of the alternative strategies at specific moments during the peace processes in Burundi and Nepal suggests that even in highly unstable situations, simultaneous support for stability and democracy is not necessarily more risk-prone. To the contrary, this gradualist approach offers the potential for strengthening peace sustainably. Thus, the dominant expectation in policy and academic circles is not confirmed.

Prioritising stability can help to avoid renewed violence, as it did in the 2008 elections in Nepal. Both domestic and international actors concentrated on conducting peaceful elections that would happen on time and yield acceptable results. This was regarded as being more important than achieving the highest democratic standards possible in the context, and international support was targeted accordingly. At the time, this helped to render the elections as a vital step in the peace process. However, such a prioritisation strategy also contains the risk of failure and can even be counter-productive. Instead of preventing instability, the strategy risked contributing to it in several instances during peace processes in Burundi and Nepal, when choosing to prioritise stability prevented donors from seizing opportunities to actively facilitate feasible democratic achievements. In the context of the Burundi 2010 elections, for example, the international community turned a blind eye on increasingly authoritarian tendencies and human rights violations as long as the country remained relatively stable. Moreover, in their

efforts to convince the last rebel group to give up arms, they emphasised its almost guaranteed electoral victory instead of raising awareness about the uncertainty of electoral outcomes. At the time, the strategy did not help to foster peace. Rather, donors accepted infringements of civil and political rights through repression and the monopolisation of power more generally, which created detrimental path dependencies and eventually contributed to renewed violence.

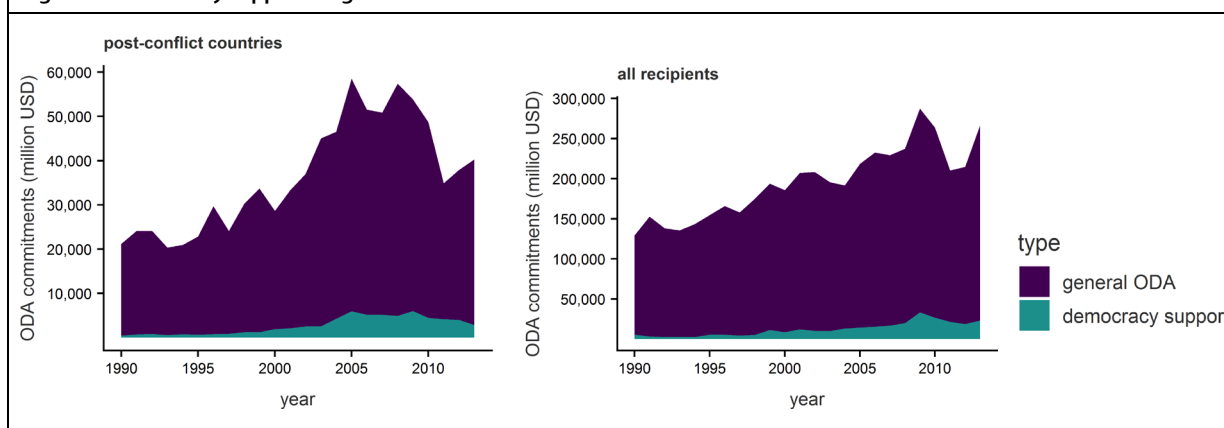
Further research is needed to corroborate the results across a larger universe of cases. Yet, the analysis confirms the conclusions of previous DIE research (Leininger & Ziaja, 2014) and yields a clear message: The dominant expectation – that prioritising stability over democracy in post-conflict situations is the more risk-averse strategy – is not substantiated. Thus, donors should not only support democracy when a country has already achieved sustained stability after civil war. Instead, supporting democracy already early on through a gradualist strategy offers considerable potential to strengthen peace sustainably.

Democracy support beyond elections

How should post-conflict democracy support be designed when aiming to accompany post-conflict democratisation processes? Taking a closer look at potentially peace-enhancing as well as conflict-igniting dynamics of post-conflict democratisation, three aspects are theoretically most likely to make a difference: substantial support for political competition (e.g. promoting free and fair elections), for institutional constraints (e.g. strengthening the judiciary) and for cooperation (e.g. facilitating reconciliation). Investigating which aspects or combinations can foster peace, comparative research of all 18 cases of post-conflict democratisation after 1990 demonstrates that, in particular, promoting “controlled competition” through combined support for competition and institutional constraints can effectively foster peaceful democratisation.

The analysis shows that in order to mitigate the potentially adverse effects of increased political competition, external actors should combine substantial support for competition with substantial support for institutional constraints that

Figure 1: Democracy support vs. general ODA



Source: Author (based on AidData 3.1). AidData offers refined data on ODA flows up until 2013.

effectively thwart abuses of power. One example of this would be to enable an independent judiciary to prevent momentary electoral winners from using their legitimately gained power to entrench their position. Giving the opposition a fair chance to successfully challenge them in the next round of elections makes it more likely that political contestation remains peaceful and that unwelcome or unexpected results are accepted. Moreover, a functioning judicial system can act as a neutral arbiter of clean electoral procedures and offer non-violent means to address (alleged) fraud or procedural deficiencies.

Only supporting political competition without institutional constraints, however, appears to be insufficient to prevent renewed violence. In the first post-conflict period in Liberia, donors only focussed on facilitating the 1997 elections. In the absence of strong institutional constraints, this allowed the electoral winner to use democratically legitimated power to crack down on the opposition and media, which eventually triggered the recurrence of major violence.

After the ensuing civil war ended in 2003, donors fostered "controlled competition". Supporting competition by facilitating free and fair elections, promoting a vibrant press and empowering marginalised groups helped to promote pluralism and allow for a meaningful choice to be made. This support strengthened the conflict-managing aspects of the democratic institutions and significantly increased the legitimacy of the results. However, such support might theoretically also reinforce the destabilising effects of democratisation: Facilitating a (more) level playing field where different political actors have a fair chance of gaining power increases the perceived or actual threat to incumbents. This might provoke repressive responses and can unleash violent dynamics. In the 2017 elections in Liberia, the defeated incumbent party questioned the results, and fears rose that violent contestation might arise. However, donors

had not only substantially supported political competition, but also provided considerable support for strengthening institutional constraints in the post-war period. This support helped to strengthen the capacity, accessibility and independence of the judiciary and rendered it possible for the incumbent party to adhere to legal means instead of taking to the streets. It filed an official complaint with the electoral commission, and later the supreme court. All parties patiently awaited the final ruling and accepted it, facilitating a peaceful handover of power. Thus, external support for competition should be accompanied by support for institutional constraints to mitigate the destabilising – and instead strengthen – the peace-enhancing effects of post-conflict democratisation.

Recommendations

Should donors provide democracy support in countries that have recently experienced a civil war? Robust evidence indicates that although democratisation contains a risk of instability, democracy support that accompanies such processes can help mitigate potentially negative effects. In cases where democratisation has already started, democracy support can help to foster peace after civil war and is *not* linked to recurrence.

A closer look at the effects of two alternative donor strategies to deal with trade-offs between stability and democracy – prioritisation and gradualism – shows that prioritising stability is not the less risk-prone approach. Donors should be aware that, against widespread assumptions, prioritising stability over democracy can also be counterproductive and is not the safer bet. Rather, both strategies can be effective, and a choice requires careful scrutiny. When designing democracy support for post-conflict countries, combining support for political competition with support for institutional constraints is particularly beneficial.

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Published with financial support from the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).



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DOI: 10.23661/bp7.2019.v1.1

Second, corrected version. The first version with the DOI 10.23661/bp7.2019 is no longer available.