The Political Transformation of Armed and Banned Groups

Lessons Learned and Implications for International Support

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CONTENTS

Conflict actors have the potential to serve as partners in statebuilding and peacebuilding endeavours

1. Background and purpose of this paper

The majority of armed conflicts since the end of the Cold War have been characterised by an asymmetric paradigm with State actors (governments, security apparatus, etc.) on one side of the 'front' and non-state actors (opposition parties, irregular armed forces, etc.) on the other. Not only is the world currently experiencing a resurgence of such conflicts – as evidenced by the on-going conflicts in Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, South Sudan, and Syria, amongst others – but the cross-border, regional and global implications of these conflicts have also significantly increased in scope and complexity. These dynamics affect regional stability, the strategic and economic interests of States, levels of development, as well as the influence of international organizations, which are purely based on the relations between and among States.

Researchers and policy-makers alike are increasingly aware of the need to understand the motivations of non-state armed groups and to engage with them in order to prevent, manage and mitigate impacts on human security, international peace and deteriorating rule of law in countries and regions affected by their presence and operations. While the global "war on terror" discourse tends to regard many of these actors as security threats and, therefore, as obstacles to sustainable peace (Dudouet, Giessmann and Planta 2012b), such an assessment hampers a more constructive approach to engaging with conflict actors, who may have the potential to serve as partners in statebuilding and peacebuilding endeavours. In particular, the "demilitarisation of politics" (Lyons 2006) as a result of the transformation of non-state armed groups into peaceful political entities forms an important part of creating sustainable peace settlements; this process helps assure militants that they can effectively protect their interests and voice their views through non-violent channels i.e. it generates the political will to undergo disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) processes and to then enter formal political channels.

However, while some of these groups manage such transitions effectively and are able to become major democratic players in the post-agreement political landscape, other groups fail to embark upon or complete the transformation into peaceful and democratic actors and, therefore, remain excluded from the political system; others, furthermore, may abuse their newly gained political power. These dynamics often lead to an entrenched risk of such groups becoming "spoilers," creating potentially risks for a return to violence.

Consequently, this paper seeks to answer several key questions: how can we define and explain successful political transformations on the part of armed and banned groups, and how can we account for varying degrees of success regarding integration into the formalised political landscape? What factors help or hinder armed and banned groups in the process of transitioning into actors capable of engaging in peaceful political activity, and willing to pursue their goals through peaceful means? Are there particular strategies or actions that international actors can pursue in order to help support such groups to undertake this transition? What are the lessons learned from past engagements by external actors, and which approaches/instruments can be nurtured to support such transitions, notably by UNDP?

This framework paper has been commissioned by UNDP's Bureau for Policy and Planning Support (BPPS) in the context of its ongoing reflection regarding the transformation of armed and banned groups towards actors engaged in peaceful political activity. Findings are based on collaborative research activities carried out by the Berghof Foundation since 2006 with support from the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC); this research, which has examined non-state armed groups' transitions to peaceful politics in a range of contexts, including Aceh, Burundi, Colombia, El

Salvador, Kosovo[1], Nepal, Northern Ireland and South Africa, served as an initial catalyst for this paper. These findings have since been substantially enriched through scholarly resources, lessons learned from reflecting upon internal UNDP e-discussions, and as a result of a three-day retreat on the political transformation of armed and banned groups.[2]

The paper begins by clarifying some key terms that will be used throughout this work, before analysing the factors that support or impede such transitions, including: the nature of the actors under scrutiny; the characteristics of the conflict and its settlement; and, the international context. It then concludes with key implications and recommendations for external actors –and more specifically UNDP –concerning how to effectively support these transitions.

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1   References to Kosovo in this paper shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council resolution 1244 (1999)
2   The workshop entitled "The challenge of political transformation of armed and banned group", held in June, 2014 in Naivasha, Kenya was organized by a team from UNDP's former Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery (BCPR) as part of its endeavour to (re)define new approaches for UNDP engagement in this domain. Facilitated by the Berghof Foundation, the workshop brought together representatives from HQ and UNDP Country Offices, as well as international experts and representatives from former armed groups. (The workshop report is available separately.)

2. Transition towards peaceful political processes

This section aims to clarify the boundaries and scope of this paper by, firstly, defining our understanding of armed and banned groups and their peaceful participation in conflict transformation processes; and, secondly, suggesting a set of criteria for measuring "success" in war-to-politics transitions..

2.1 Terminological clarifications

Armed and banned groups

This paper focuses on armed groups as the primary unit of analysis, examining the nature and causal mechanisms that form part of their transition towards peaceful political participation. Armed groups are conventionally described as entities that: possess a hierarchical structure (or a basic command structure); use violence for political ends; are independent from State authority; and, have some degree of territorial control over a geographic area (Bruderlein 2000). Various definitions have been offered in the context of political science and conflict resolution literature –from minimalist approaches characterising armed groups as "challengers to the State's monopoly of legitimate coercive force" (Policzer 2005), to more sophisticated descriptions; Ricigliano (2005), for example, defines armed groups as actors "operating primarily within State borders engaged in violent attempts to challenge or reform the balance and structure of political and economic power, to avenge past injustices and/or to defend or control resources, territory or institutions for the benefit of a particular ethnic or social group." This latter definition points to the organizational and motivational diversity of the actors under scrutiny; these characteristics will be covered in Section 2 in the context of a discussion on the factors that promote or impede effective political transitions.

Despite these definitions, it should be noted that most political actors associated with "armed groups" strongly object to being primarily defined by the fact that they possess arms, since the use of (armed) force only represents a temporary means to achieve their broader socio-political aspirations (Dudouet, Giessmann and Planta 2012a, 2012b).[3] It is also important to note that although the primary focus of this paper is organized opposition groups that took up arms to pursue their objectives, most lessons learned explored in this paper can also apply to political groups or social movements that made the transition from being "underground groups" (i.e. as proscribed actors) to conventional political actors, without necessarily pursuing armed activities themselves. Groups such as, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Tunisia, but also Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland or Herri Batasuna in the Basque Country could all be included in this category.[4] While being aware of the limitations of such terminology, for the purposes of this paper we will use the all-encompassing label "armed *and banned* groups".

Peaceful political participation

Participation in peaceful political processes should be understood as encompassing various forms of non-violent political activities that take place through legal or institutional channels. A primary emphasis is placed on party politics and participation in executive and/or legislative power at the national or local level. However, political activity can also imply other channels of participation, as described in the next sub-section, which explores the nature of "successful" transitions to peaceful politics in greater detail.

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3   For the purposes of our research, we have coined the term "power contenders" in order to stress our focus on armed actors that pursue primarily political objectives. As we argued, this term intends to redirect the focus to the core of the problem: violent conflict over the legitimate use of power and responsibility for governing the people. Power contenders, no matter how they are labelled by themselves or their opponents, seek to gain, shift, or transform power (Dudouet, Giessmann and Planta 2012b).
4   For an in-depth analysis on the distinction and relations between political and military components of 'armed political organizations' such as Sinn Fein and IRA, see Berti 2013.

2.2 Criteria for "successful transition"

The most tangible measure of a successful transition towards peaceful political participation can be defined as "taking part and winning seats in the governing authority" (Engeland and Rudolph 2008: 181). However, given the wide diversity of actors – in terms of their political aspirations, size/scope and means of leverage, for example – we find it problematic to reduce "success" to electoral results alone. It is preferable, rather, to identify criteria that can assess a *qualitative* shift in the strategies, behaviour and preferences of armed and banned groups in the context of their transformation processes.

Combining key scholarly literature on the transformation of rebel organizations into political parties (e.g. Söderberg Kovacs 2007, Guáqueta 2007, Deonandan et al. 2007, Manning 2007, De Zeeuw 2008, Sindre 2014, Söderström 2014) with our own research findings, therefore, this section of the paper presents a set of indicators organized on a scale – ranging from "negative/minimal" to "positive/optimal" levels of transformation. We conceptualise the transformation of armed and banned groups on a continuum of incremental changes, indicating different stages and steps. At the lower end of this continuum the renunciation of force and the acceptance of basic rules of political competition represent minimal criteria for successful transformation. At the "higher" end of the continuum, "positive" indicators include internal democratisation processes through organizational and programmatic adjustments, as well as the viability of the actor's political project, and their level of influence over State power and governance.

Shift in the means and arena of struggle
The first steps of a successful transformation involve, first, the group undertaking a verifiable *shift in the means of struggle* by demonstrating its willingness to abandon its capacity to conduct armed activities and demobilise its military apparatus; and; second, the group undergoes a *shift in the arena of struggle* by continuing its political engagement through active participation within the existing legal democratic framework i.e. by accepting to abide by the institutional 'rules of the game'.

While this most commonly implies a collective transformation into a political party (or the consolidation of a pre-existing party) and access to formal State processes through electoral or power-sharing arrangements, political (re)integration also entails other channels of participation or influence in policy-making and public debates at the local and national levels, such as through think-tanks, NGOs, social movements, veteran associations, lobby groups, journalism or jobs in the public sector – which all provide non-violent outlets for pursuing political agendas.

Organizational and programmatic democratisation
Democratisation refers to the "transformation of the 'political culture' of an armed group", from a "command and control approach to an approach suitable for a pluralistic political reality" (UNDP e-consultation). This process entails two dimensions: on the one hand, *organizational democratisation* implies the capability to move from vertical command structures (designed for military struggle), to a more horizontal and participatory internal decision-making structure. This process should include some degree of leadership regeneration, offering the opportunity for all members (including youth and women) to participate in the political project at all levels. Another important dimension of transformation is the willingness to recruit new members and broaden the group's support base beyond its war-time constituency. However, these processes should not be expected to happen quickly, but should, rather, be understood as an organic dynamic process that can stretch over several decades (UNDP e-consultation).

Programmatic democratisation entails the adaptation or recalibration of war-time agendas to the complex reality of post-war politics, including the shift from a resistance/liberation mentality to a comprehensive governance and policy implementation agenda. This shift includes managing popular expectations and

> *The renunciation of force and the acceptance of basic rules of political competition represent minimal criteria for successful transformation*

delivering on war-time promises, while simultaneously serving the needs and interests of all citizens. However, this process does not necessarily entail a complete ideological shift; the newly-formed political entities may wish to continue striving for their pre-existing aims (be it national liberation, inclusive democracy, socialism, Islamism, etc.), albeit through peaceful means and from within the (reformed) conventional political system.

Viability of the political project

Successful transformation can also be measured by the degree of sustainability vis-à-vis the group's organizational and strategic shifts. Transitions to peaceful political processes are sometimes temporary or may be only partial in form. Former armed groups (or some internal factions) may relapse into armed struggle or abandon political struggle altogether by disbanding and disappearing, or by evolving into criminal entities. In fragile post-war situations especially, initially promising steps towards a sustained transformation can easily fail to consolidate or materialize, so that what may have been regarded as a success shortly after a peace accord may turn out to be a pitfall or set-back later on. A newly established political party, for example, may seem viable if it survives two consecutive post-war elections for the national executive; however, many former armed groups which transition into political parties and then accede to government display the opposite problem: once in government they often face the challenge of (democratically) yielding their power and/or sharing it with political parties they had previously fought, or at least not entered into alliance with due to diverse differences.

Many groups try to seize full control of power during the transition period and are reluctant to cede it until the "transformation" of the State is "fully completed". More often than not, the former power contenders are tempted to transform themselves into the same type of autocratic rulers that they have succeeded in removing from power. Possible explanations for this behaviour include: the personal agendas of leaders unwilling to foster democracy and to allow free and fair elections; internal group dynamics, such as the need to control all levels of power in order to gather enough patronage to maintain group cohesion throughout the transition; and/or a lack of trust in the overall transformation process and/or the rejection of the existing (still unreformed) political system (see Section 3). Consequently, an additional important variable for effective transitions includes the ability to face and accept electoral defeat, and to hand over power – and accept an opposition role – peacefully.

Political influence and access to decision-making

Although we argued above that successful transformations should not be measured only in terms of electoral results, one cannot assess the effectiveness of armed and banned groups' post-conflict political projects without examining their degree of political leverage i.e. their effective participation in national and/or local decision-making and governance processes. This measure of effectiveness is all the more important given the extent to which political leverage influences the other dimensions