When Political Violence Stops: The Problem of Psychosocial Reconstruction in the Third World

Editor
After political violence--e.g., insurgency, civil war--ceases, those who remain are still faced with physical, psychological, and spiritual survival. Challenges to survival concurrently come from the traumatic past, the chaotic present, and the ambiguous future.

The traumatic past. Survivors of political violence may experience "flashbulb memories of trauma" that intrude into consciousness, subvert coherent and sequential problem-solving, induce forms of learned helplessness, and precipitate emotional dysphoria. Cognitions, emotions, and motivations perceived as anticipatory to the flashbulb memories also can contribute to psychological dysfunction. As well, memories of war crimes and the tangible and personal consequences of these memories, knowledge of war crimes, and the socio-political consequences of war crimes present significant adaptive challenge. Often, a dictator or kleptocratic elite has amassed huge material resources and great wealth at the expense of large segments of the general population. This amassing has left a scarcity of physical resources that can overwhelm not only physical need, but psychological and spiritual ones as well.

The chaotic present. Although political violence has stopped, the threat of its recurrence has not. There still may be a pro-dictator or pro-kleptocratic elite military wing with the assets and motivation to re-initiate violence when convenient and opportune. There may well be an anti-dictatorship or anti-kleptocratic elite underground movement primed for violence to settle real and imagined scores with real and imagined collaborators. Individuals from the latter movements and still other individuals also may form a new autocratic regime destined to be as brutal as the one it replaces or even more so. In a state of transition, the political state, if it indeed still exists--e.g., Somalia--may be buffeted by violent infighting and power struggles engendering further atrocities.

The ambiguous future. The future may offer a potential of promise--the operative word being potential. Free and fair elections may help induce benign political power shifts. Paradigmatic shifts and attitude change may decrease ethnocentric hostility and exploitive predilections. Social restructuring may eventually occur to at least afford political space and breathing room with dignity to the powerless and the oppressed. More than this may be too much to dare hope.

However, given the frequent involvement of First World political entities--whether intended to be humanitarian and/or politically exploitive--in the resolution of international political violence
throughout the Third World, a clash of values that engenders conflictual goals may well contribute to 
short-circuiting the ambiguous future's potential. What characterizes this clash?

The First World may focus on the welfare of individuals, while the Third World's focus is on the 
collective. The First World may socially construct specific problems requiring resolution--each problem 
being uncontextualized and separated from other problems--while the Third World's construction of 
problems is contextualized, interactive, and embedded within a larger whole. The First World may focus 
on influencing or coercing opposing parties to cooperate without seeking to significantly change 
underlying disparities in power among the parties, while the Third World focus of change is on these 
disparities. The First World's model of political change is based on the premise of primary efficacy 
through foreign intervention, while the Third World's model is based on the premise of indigenous 
evolution. The First World's preferred agents of reconstruction often are secular professionals and 
technocrats of change, the Third World's preferred agents are spiritual leaders as well religious images, 
practices, rituals, and beliefs.

While many foreign policy experts cite a clash of cultures between liberal democracy and Islamic 
thecracy or, perhaps, between moral relativism and dogmatic fundamentalism as challenging the 
cessation of political violence on a grand or global scale, they often miss the everyday clash of cultures 
between the First and Third Worlds that--even through the best of intentions--too often subvert peace. 
Before social reconstruction after political violence must come a social construction that reconciles 
competing narratives of conflict. (See Bueno de Mesquita, B., & Siverson, R.M. (1997). Nasty or Nice? 
Political systems, endogenous norms, and the treatment of adversaries. Journal of Conflict Resolution, 
41, 175-199; Henderson, E.A. (1997). Culture or contiguity: Ethnic conflict, the similarity of states, and 
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(1997). Citizen-based peacemaking in a protracted war: Two Philippines cases. Peace and Conflict: 
Journal of Peace Psychology, 3, 115-134.) (Keywords: Conflict, Peace, Political Violence, Social 
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