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

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

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Abstract. This article continues the IBPP series on research presented at the 1998 American Psychological Association Annual Convention, San Francisco, California. The article is based on a presentation by IBPP Editor Cristina J. Montiel at the symposium--"After the Fighting Stops-Psychosocial Intervention and Reconciliation"-- that was co-chaired by Dr. Corann Okorodudu, Rowan University, and Anne Anderson, Psychologists for Social Responsibility. Dr. Montiel is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Ateneo de Manila University, Republic of the Philippines. She can be reached at tmontiel@pusit.admu.edu.ph. (Any problems of substance, logic, and/or rationality reflect the IBPP analysis of Dr. Montiel's original presentation.)

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 theocracy 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 the onset of war, 1820-1989. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 41, 649-668; Milburn, T.W. (1998). Psychology, negotiation, and peace. *Applied and Preventive Psychology*, 7, 109-119; Montiel, C. (August 15, 1998). Third-World perspective on psychosocial reconstruction. In C. Okorudu, & A. Anderson, (Chairs). Symposium: After the fighting stops-Psychosocial intervention and reconciliation. Presented at the 1998 Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, CA; Montiel, C. (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 Reconciliation, War.)