POLICY BRIEFING

The Underside of Political Settlements: Violence in Egypt and Kenya

Understanding political settlements is important for addressing and mitigating violence. This policy briefing is based on case studies from Egypt and Kenya which confirm that political settlements that only focus on formal actors and spaces at the national level are crucially flawed. Beyond this confirmation, the research also demonstrates that the viability of political settlements can be shaped by local-level dynamics and determined by citizens, who might re-kindle the violence if excluded from the settlement. To be stable, political arrangements and leaders need to enjoy legitimacy and credibility conferred by citizens. Proponents of political settlements ignore citizen-level dynamics at their peril.

How political settlements in Egypt and Kenya evolve

Political scientists and conflict analysts commonly understand political settlements as political processes and moments in which the distribution of power is negotiated, often in formal spaces, among elite political actors. Stable and inclusive political settlements are associated with violence mitigation.

Political settlements vary. Those of Kenya and Egypt are, in many ways, very different from one another. Egypt's political settlement has known rapid fluctuations in the balance of power since the 2011 uprisings, after the relatively stable settlement under Mubarak ended. Kenya's political settlement has remained structurally unchanged for decades. What the countries do have in common is the way in which their formal political settlements were conceived and promoted, excluding certain social groups. This, in turn, has led to violence. A commonly held position is that high levels of violence are simply the outcome of a 'weak settlement'. But current events in Egypt and Kenya suggest that in fact, outside the formal spaces for negotiation, violence is one of the dynamics through which a political settlement is created, shaped and sustained.

Since the January 2011 revolution Egypt has known three political settlements. The first emerged after the ousting of President Mubarak in the form of an informal pact between the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) and the Muslim Brotherhood. The 2012 Fairmont Agreement was an attempt to establish a political settlement based on power sharing between the Muslim Brotherhood and the opposition parties. Yet the informal pact negotiated between SCAF and the Brotherhood excluded the opposition. The Muslim Brothers and Salafists then formally came to power when they won a majority in parliament and with the election of President Morsi in June 2012. Those who did not support the Brotherhood felt increasingly excluded from the political settlement. Violent

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actions and protests against the regime, often instigated by youth, culminated in a revolt, which led to the ousting of President Morsi in July 2013. The current political settlement is negotiated between the military and a range of actors that had been excluded in 2012, to the exclusion of the Brotherhood. The outcomes of this settlement are still unclear.

In contrast, Kenya has a tradition of violent political settlements which began before independence, with violence – actual and threatened - as its persistent and underlying logic. Kenya's three post-colonial political settlements are the Moi, one-party, period (1978–2002), the early years of multi-party politics when one party dominated (2002–2007), and the post-2008 democracy. Throughout this history, the political manipulation of ethnicity characterises the struggles for influence over the distribution of power and resources. The 2010 Kenyan Constitution created a new political dispensation. It devolved power to county governments, influencing the unfolding of the political settlement at sub-national level. Although the creation of county governments was intended to mitigate violence, it has given impetus to local-level violence.

Manifestations of violence: shaping the political settlement

In both Egypt and Kenya 'violence systems' exist. In Egypt, each phase of the political transition was accompanied by violent clashes between citizens and security forces. Citizens experienced the Morsi period as more violent, even though more violent incidents occurred under the SCAF. The incidence of violence sharply increased after the June 2013 revolts, when pro-Morsi groups clashed with security forces and anti-Morsi groups. In Kenya, targeted political violence and threat have become the norm in the run-up to national elections. Elections are often followed by violent attempts to destabilise the political settlement. The post-2007 election violence was shocking in scale, but not unprecedented. Violence did not erupt during the 2013 elections, but levels of violence did intensify.

Aside from major outbursts of violence, citizens in both countries experience 'everyday violence'. In the Nairobi slum Kawangware, political and economic violence and violent crime have become entangled with ethnic politics. Residents belonging to certain ethnic groups feel mistreated by landlords from other ethnic groups and link their difficulties to political power. Women experience discrimination along ethnic lines when carrying out daily chores and using public facilities. In Marsabit, the struggle for the county has been waged using violence, and ethnicity as a dividing logic. The majority group refuses to accept the outcomes of the 2013 local elections, in which all positions were won by the coalition of three minority groups. All political actors are accused of inciting ethnic tensions through random, unexplained killings that set groups against each other. In both sites there is an absence of reliable justice, law and order institutions that can redress violence.

In post-Mubarak Egypt, the absence of security and economic decline has sparked economically motivated violent crime, like robbery and drugs and arms trafficking. An informal economy of street vendors emerged, who can become entangled with political violence. New forms of social violence and mob justice emerged such as *haraba* (irreversible physical punishment). Gender-based violence has also increased. The Christian minority experiences

sectarian violence and economic predation. Each form of violence contributes to the notion that the regime cannot guarantee the safety of the citizenry, deepening a sense of insecurity.

The actual as well as the threat of these everyday forms of violence inform perceptions of a political settlement and of other citizens. The perceived threat that the balance of power will tip in favour of 'the other' drives acts of violence, especially by those who feel most vulnerable to exclusion, like youth.

How citizens respond

The case studies in Egypt and Kenya show a connection between citizen perceptions of political settlements (national and local) and citizen responses to violence. Where a political settlement is seen as illegitimate some citizens use and/or legitimise violence against others in Kenya, and against both the regime and other citizens in Egypt. In both countries, citizens engage in violence against each other either because they believe others are gaining from the political settlement, or to influence the balance of power in their favour.

In Egypt, the exclusionary political settlement of the failed Fairmont Agreement prompted citizens, especially the economically marginalised youth, to get organised and engage in violence against the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood. Those who did not support President Morsi were reluctant to condemn such violence; thus legitimising it. This deepened the revolts which contributed to ending the second political settlement. While many Western governments insist on including the Brotherhood in the new settlement, a majority of Egyptian citizens prefer a security crackdown on the Brotherhood to reconciliation.

In Kenya, citizens view local problems as reflections of the imbalance of power of the national political settlement. This characterises violent encounters between landlords and tenants or youth-led violence out of frustration over unemployment in Nairobi. In Marsabit the power struggle over the county government affects how citizens interpret events and actions by the other ethnic groups and by the governing regime. Boycotts of shops owned by some ethnic groups form a tactic to undermine their power in the local political settlement. These kinds of violence contribute to forming reliable political blocs, which bring political leaders to power at county and national levels. In power, they preside over a patronage system that reinforces a political settlement that incites violence and is sustained by it.

In both countries violence is experienced differently depending on age, gender and ethnic or religious identity. The impact of violence is strongly gendered. In Egypt, women and girls restrict their mobility to avoid being exposed to violence. In both countries youth have been affected disproportionally by an exclusive political settlement and economic decline, which informs their response. Aspects of citizens' identities inform the ways in which they cope with or mitigate violence. Social identities overlap, but sometimes one identity particularly shapes a response to violence. An analysis that focuses on 'seeing like a citizen' can unpack the complexities of such multiple identities and how they shape action.

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Policy recommendations

The perceptions and acts of citizens are always integral to the political settlement, but citizens are often included on highly unequal terms. Formal processes seeking to establish a political settlement require mechanisms to ground the settlement in citizen perceptions of the right balance of power and address the unequal terms in which citizens were incorporated, or the settlement risks being brittle.

- Citizens' perspectives on the process and outcomes of the political settlement, as well as their actions need to be taken into account by peace negotiators and conflict mediators. Policy prescriptions and aid budgets that focus too narrowly on policymakers may overlook strategic points of influence if they miss out the citizens.

- Conflict analysts and advisors need to broaden their sources and their repertoire of research methods to understand the perspectives, rationale and agency of citizens who make up civil and political society at local levels.

- Donor agencies, which are often not ideally positioned to understand local citizen-level dynamics, should engage with great care. There is a high risk that interventions become politicised. They should only engage in promoting political settlements once they have gained an understanding of citizens' perspectives and should apply it throughout their intervention.

- Donor policies and programmes destined to help build viable political settlements require different strategies for bringing in youth, women and other relevant social identities.

- Violent conflicts often revolve around aspects of identity, as it is a highly sensitive aspect of both the 'problem' and the 'solution'. Since identities are multi-faceted, aid interventions intended to engage citizens need to be multi-faceted, or at least pursued with an awareness of this multi-faceted quality of citizens' identities.

- Donor agencies should reach out to citizens (groups) skilled in organising, mediating or research. These actors can help gather and consolidate information on citizens' perspectives and present it to domestic elites and external actors who promote political settlements in ways that inform them better.

Further reading

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