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Addressing and Mitigating Violence

High-Level Roundtable on Political Settlements
Goodenough College, London, 15 October 2014

Becky Mitchell

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Abstract

This roundtable was held at Goodenough College, London, on 15 October 2014. Its purpose was to engage high-level policymakers and academics on the relevance of the political settlement lens for the comparative study of political settlements within countries across different time periods and levels. The discussion was based on specific case study examples that focused on violence and political settlements, and ways of strengthening state competencies and citizen agency to address and mitigate violence.

1   How useful is the concept of political settlement?

As shown in many different contemporary international crises and in our various case studies (Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Kenya and Egypt), the concept of political settlement is useful in understanding how the deep structures of authority and power are contested at critical junctures in a country's history. Political settlement is a process of negotiation that involves formal and informal actors, formal and informal spaces. It is not an agreement, rather a dynamic process that may go on for several years and months, and may break and resume again. Political settlement may or may not involve an increase in violence; there are multiple faces of negotiation and the use of violence is one of them, even if it is not directly attributable to actors involved in settlement processes.

When researching our case studies, we found that existing peace and conflict literature was problematic in terms of the binaries that informed the theoretical frameworks. We wanted to compare countries that had experienced ruptures and countries that were coming out of war, and there was no framework that worked, but we found political settlement to be a useful tool here. We offer three key insights, necessary for ensuring the effectiveness of the concept of political settlement. Firstly, political settlement should be understood as an intrinsically violent process. Secondly, the relationships between the state and elites with local actors, donors, business networks and transnational corporations must not be neglected and necessitate both a political economy and power analysis. Thirdly, useful variables to consider are the micro *and* macro level issues, historical context, spatial dynamics, and the informal *and* formal.

2   How does an inductive approach inform us in a different way (if any) about the concept of political settlement?

Our starting point was that many studies on political settlement are conceptual. An inductive approach, starting with research and observations, with theories subsequently formulated, allowed for several advantages. We were able to develop a better understanding of what political settlements look like when applied in different political contexts, and we were also able to use different methodologies for each study, and still be able to compare the results.

An inductive approach also allowed us to observe two unique aspects of political settlements that have previously been largely missing from the literature. Firstly, the aspects of violence that often appear intrinsically within political settlements, and understanding that violence is not always negative. And secondly, seeing what was happening from the bottom up increased our understanding of what was happening at the micro/local level and with informal actors, as well as at a national/formal level. There has been a tendency to understand political settlements at the national level, but this has missed the importance of what is happening with the wider population.

3 How useful is the idea of 'inclusive political settlement' in terms of state–society relations?

The concept of an 'inclusive political settlement' was argued to be problematic for several reasons. Firstly, understanding what 'inclusive' means creates a practical issue. Does it mean all elites, all civil society, and all citizens? Secondly, the concept underestimates the agency of citizens, who (with a few important exceptions) will demand inclusion in these processes through their representatives, and if they are not satisfied with the results will (through various violent and non-violent means) make their feelings known. The legitimacy of elites is understood to mean that citizens passively accept what is happening. Thirdly, it is possible that including certain actors can create or embed violence within a political settlement. For example, in Nigeria, including armed militants in government structures and in sharing associated oil revenues has been deeply problematic.

We argue that the debate should be moved away from 'inclusive political settlements' towards the idea of 'inclusive outcomes' *from* political settlements; it is not inclusivity of political settlements that is needed, but 'inclusive-enough' political settlements, that allow for all to benefit from the outcome.

4 What evidence do we have about the relationship between national political settlement and sub-national elites?

Sub-national elites are important actors in the formation and maintenance of political settlements. Within our case studies we have observed these groups influencing national political settlements, but we have also seen national political settlements influencing sub-national elites.

In Sierra Leone there is a strong relationship between the national political settlement and sub-national elites that is working hard to maintain their exclusionary power, influence and economic advantage. Decentralisation of government power (driven by donors) has created a new stratum of elites (including the chiefs), rather than devolving power to excluded parts of society. Young people and women are excluded from the chieftaincy structure, and the national government and extraction industry have created wealth that does not trickle down to the rest of the population. Economic and political control in Sierra Leone remains in the hands of the elites who have connections in the government.

In Nigeria a layer of sub-national elites has been created through the co-option of violent leaders. This has led to demobilisation of armed groups but has not addressed the root cause of the conflict. The national political settlement was expanded to include the armed group leaders, whilst remaining exclusive and undemocratic. The armed groups that operate within the Niger Delta have variably served as paid thugs for politicians, ensuring that the national political settlement remains in place. The wealth created by oil extraction has meant that it has been easier for the government to use bribes and financial incentives to create and maintain regional elites, rather than to change repressive systems. As both sides benefit financially from this, they remain complicit in the process.

In Kenya devolution has resulted in increased economic opportunity for local politicians and sub-national elites and a struggle for power between local political entrepreneurs, each with a portion of old customary institutions and elites lined up behind. Sub-national elites maintain the national political settlement using low levels of violence, and are incentivised financially by the national government to continue to do so.

5   Durability of existing structures of power

All of our case studies offered examples of the durability of old structures of power within states. In Sierra Leone it was observed that the current political settlement is almost a restoration of the pre-civil war situation; the same groups of elites were able to regain control of the country through a largely democratic process. It is crucial to understand why and how this has happened, to look back and understand why it broke down into civil war initially, and extrapolate what is different now and what is the same. In Nigeria the resources associated with oil extraction have created enduring structures of power since the 1960s; business elites and international oil companies maintain a strong hold on government power, regardless of democratic systems. In Egypt the military establishment has endured throughout each cycle of the revolution, and perhaps this is a reason why each settlement since 2011 has failed. Armies are of crucial importance to a government to maintain their monopoly of power, but they also alter the possibilities for power and violence.

6 Case studies as examples

6.1 Power and politics at national level

6.1.1 Sierra Leone

A political settlement lens has been useful in understanding the different levels of political maturity in Sierra Leone.

The case of Sierra Leone (1996–2012) was interesting as it lies at a particularly critical juncture, in a new pathway towards stability. Sierra Leone is seen as a model for the international community, particularly as a result of the 'successful' collaboration of many agencies and the United Nations peacebuilding mission. In 2012, the third successive and non-violent presidential election took place, and was used as a proxy to determine whether or not the post-war political settlement could be deemed successful. The current political settlement is of particular interest because it has recreated a situation that is, in reality, quite similar to what was present before the war, and led to the war, with the restoration of the institution of chieftaincy, the same rural elites and the same exclusivity. Violence and fear have been used instrumentally by the government to contain the violence of the population that has been linked to marginalised groups, resource extraction, and the development of urban youth cultures. Donors have been critical actors in the political settlement, driving, for example, government decentralisation and security sector reform.

Despite exclusive political settlement, Sierra Leone is seen largely as a success story. The violence has been low-level and controlled; security agencies have performed 'reasonably well' (compared to their counterparts in neighbouring countries); and the elections have been reasonably free and fair. One workshop participant suggested that further evidence of the relative success of the Sierra Leonean political settlement can be seen in its response to the Ebola outbreak. Despite an initially slow government reaction, the army has been successfully deployed in a peaceful capacity and the chieftaincy network has been effectively utilised to manage rural populations.

6.1.2 Nigeria

Nigeria is not a failed state. There is an operational political settlement in existence, with ongoing rules and practices of power. Since the 1960s, oil has been the mainstay of the economy and key to political power, making business elites very important. Our case study explores the democratic transition in Nigeria in 1998/9, analysing the shifting alliances between the different elites, the military and ex-military, political godfathers, the oil companies, senior civil servants, and chiefs. Despite alliances moving between these actors, the structure of power has basically remained the same over time, and the democratic transition has been observed as a realignment in the corridors of power; despite a transition to democracy and broadening in political settlement there was no fundamental change.

There is a history of popular protest in Nigeria, which was harnessed during the transition process by armed groups who have gained increasing control over parts of the country. This was apparently driven by rent-seeking behaviour on behalf of previously excluded groups. There have been attempts to bring the violence under control, partly through state violence, but also the co-optation of militant leaders into government and oil company positions.

The example of Nigeria questions the conventional assumption that it is the exclusionary nature of political settlement that creates violence. Efforts to be more inclusive, particularly efforts to include armed militants in government structures and sharing oil revenues, have been deeply problematic. It is not inclusivity that is the issue but the nature and structure of government, particularly transparency.

6.2 Citizens and political settlements

6.2.1 Kenya

Understanding that violence can be embedded into political settlements has been useful in our work in Kenya. In 1991, Kenya introduced a multi-party state system, which for the first time allowed citizens a perceived capacity to bargain, and resulted in violence erupting. The current government of Kenya is undergoing a programme of devolution to move more power away from Nairobi. However, the devolution of resources has opened up the opportunity for new actors to move into local government, and resulted in rent-seeking behaviour from local elites. This in turn has led to violence. Recruitment of people into local governments is argued to have been unfair, and carried out on ethnic lines.

Our study was carried out in one county in the north of the country, within a marginalised community, far from the capital, Nairobi. Low levels of violence are routine within the region, and small 'wars' that see up to 100 people killed flare up occasionally. These occurrences of violence are recognised by the communities themselves as a tool used by politicians to divide and rule, and physically move voters away from constituencies during elections. Local people sustain this way of life because they feel they have no other option. The most important rent control and negotiations happen informally, and violence is a form of law. Violence is not changing the rules of the game, or the political settlement, in Kenya, but rather it is part of the way the game is played.

6.2.2 Egypt

This case study was carried out in Egypt as the violence of the revolution was unfolding. The political settlement lens has been useful for this case study as it gave the opportunity to move away from the traditional 'transition' literature, which assumes a linear transition between power-holders, which is clearly not the situation in Egypt. The drivers of the revolution were argued, by the international media at least, to be disenfranchised middle- and upper-class youth, triggered by a social media movement. Whilst we cannot deny that this had an important role to play, it is essential to move away from this rhetoric and recognise the important economic drivers and a desire for social justice. The formation of impenetrable business elites, governmental corruption, and the marginalisation of small business owners, along with increasing unemployment rates led to widespread dissatisfaction with the government.

The revolutions started in 2011, and have been through three phases of power struggle and settlement so far. Most recently this saw the removal of President Morsi, after it was felt that the Muslim Brotherhood had not delivered on its political, social and economic promises, and that what had started out as a popular 'grass-roots' party had become entrenched with the violence and corruption associated with former governments. What is interesting about the Egyptian case is that the military has endured throughout each cycle, remaining a powerful key player in the decision-making processes of government.

The revolutions in Egypt shine a useful light on several assumptions made about political settlement, inclusivity and democracy. Democracy does not always have to be an inclusive process, and inclusion does not have to be democratic; allowing members of the old regime and the military to be a part of the democratic process in Egypt has created situations that have led to continued unsettlement and violence. The political settlements that have been reached have broken down. The assumption that elections, a popular Western liberal democracy tool, would be a representative and strong proxy for citizens' voices has been challenged in the Egyptian case when citizens rose against the Muslim Brotherhood regime only one year after being voted in office. It essentially means that electoral democracies are not necessarily proxies for how inclusive political settlements are.

7   Policy implications

From a policy perspective, the political settlement lens offers an interesting approach in that it help to identify critical junctures and at which point to intervene (or not). However, our case study examples show that it is not possible to extract broad policy implications, and that context is of intrinsic importance to any policy. However, understanding the relationships between the state and elites with local actors, donors, business networks and transnational corporations must not be neglected. Both the micro- *and* macro-level perspectives must be included as well as historical context, spatial dynamics, and the informal *and* formal. Our case studies also show that political settlements are not only influenced by local dynamics but by regional and international players, networks and discourses as well. And finally, the violence that can exist to build political settlements, but also to maintain them, must be understood as part of the process.