Conflict Trends and Lessons Learned for Promoting Peace During Political Transitions

This two-pager is an abridged version of the International Republican Institute's (IRI) January 2023 Policy Brief, "Supporting Peaceful Political Transitions: Key Conflict Trends and Lessons Learned for Promoting Peace." The policy brief includes key findings from IRI's in-depth qualitative research conducted in 2021 and 2022 in three transitional environments: Sudan, Guinea, and the Cauca Department in southwestern Colombia. IRI supplemented this with global desk research to investigate conflict trends during political transitions, as well as strategies that domestic and international democracy and peacebuilding actors can use to promote peaceful and democratic transition outcomes.

What is a Political Transition?

A political transition can be understood as a political moment undergoing a significant change in values, institutions, leadership, or government. Political transitions take place when the so-called rules of the game are being fundamentally altered in a manner that can create increased risk of conflict outbreak. Political transitions can include democratic revolutions, peace agreements, political rapprochements, and coups d'état. The universe of cases that fit the definition of a political transition is broader than this, of course. But these are examples that involve a combination of a change in rules, values, institutions, and leadership that results in a radically different post-transition status quo.

Four Cross-Cutting Factors that Influence Conflict Trends During Political Transitions

Conflict trends during political transitions vary greatly depending on the sociopolitical context, which can include whether violence surges, conflict factors are exacerbated, or new opportunities for peace emerge. However, there are several **cross-cutting factors** that can lead to increased susceptibility to outbreaks of violence during a transitional period.

First, *embedded authoritarianism, political exclusion, and violence all influence the trajectory of a transition.* Widespread violent conflict can create conditions where groups and structures like the police, judiciary, and legal institutions are not responsive to citizens. In a political system that retains the vestiges of authoritarianism, long term elites can maintain formidable political influence and may have incentives to disrupt democratic consolidation or exploit the process of democratic development through fraud, intimidation, and sponsoring violence. Violence is especially likely when autocratic regimes face the threat of mass popular revolution.

Second, *systematic disenfranchisement and real or perceived discrimination contribute to an increased risk of violence.* Marginalization and deep societal divisions are pressing conflict drivers. During a political transition, these cleavages are even more vulnerable to politicization and escalation into violent conflict, especially if they are exploited by political actors or other elites. In such cases, ethnic, national, religious, class, or racial divisions may be exacerbated when existing power configurations and means of political competition are disrupted by a transition.

Third, *a shortage of women's representation during a transition—and during peace processes in particular—inhibits transition inclusiveness, thus increasing the risk of conflict relapse.* Peace agreements are 20 percent more likely to last more than two years and 35 percent more likely to last for 15 years if women are involved in the peace talks. Up to 50 percent of peace agreements break down in five years or sooner, demonstrating the risks of elite bargains that fail to adequately engage a broad range of groups. Mediators have credited strategies of gender inclusion coupled with local political buy-in as key to the success of peace efforts even at the hyper local level.

Fourth, *increased opportunity for political competition and new avenues to redress grievances creates incentives for extreme political conduct, which can sometimes turn violent.* During a transition, rapidly evolving circumstances can be manipulated by political entrepreneurs eager to eliminate competition and rival leaders. Polarized political agendas and predatory actors can derail a transition as key stakeholders struggle to cope with foundational issues. Equally, several key stakeholders may attempt to return to a version of the pre-transition status quo, or they may reject the premise that a transition is even taking place. The degree to which key political players attempt to undermine the democratic and peacebuilding goals of transition reformers impacts the speed with which these reforms can be achieved.

Integrating Informal Governance Actors and Armed Groups

Informal governance actors and armed groups pose significant dilemmas for peacebuilders and DRG practitioners during political transitions. Excluding them in a long-term transition roadmap can fatally undermine efforts to peacefully resolve conflict. Creative solutions are required to determine how democratic actors can work with informal political structures (such as traditional or religious groups) that can provide longer-term stability. For a political transition to create the foundations of a democratic and peaceful status quo, it is critical to solve the puzzle of how best

to harmonize state and non-state governance regimes. Failing to do so can result in a vacuum in informal governance and politics at the local level that new groups and political entrepreneurs will be swift to fill.

Seven Strategies for Promoting Peaceful Political Transitions:

1. *Manage public expectations.* Communicating to the public that everyday circumstances may take time to change is a vital step for the success of a transition. Supporting democratic development and governance should not be limited to the first few years of a transition.

2. *Leverage the transitional environment to codify inclusive political reforms.* When advocating for inclusive policies, it is important to mitigate potential backlash from dominant groups. Informing stakeholders of the benefits of a redistribution of sociopolitical dynamics can mitigate backlash.

3. *Where applicable, engage former fighters demobilized from armed groups who can act as brokers and help re-establish trust in government following a peace deal.* This could entail working during the early negotiation phase to support demobilizing rebels help re-establish trust in government.

4. *Consider and integrate existing sources of legitimacy into the political system.* The expansion of public services and responsive governance is critical to stabilizing violence, especially if it is through increasing state capacity or establishing new partnerships with informal governance providers.

5. *Develop consensus-building platforms for civil society groups and influential actors to come together and engage in dialogue on how their intended goals for the transition overlap.* This is important since transitions often comprise actors with competing agendas and complex relations. Balancing these interests is imperative to sustaining a stable political landscape.

6. *Build the skills of political parties and their party members to develop inter- and intra-party coalitions and coherent political agendas.* In transitional contexts, nascent political parties may not have robust policy platforms. Political party engagement can foster values of moderation and reconciliation. These values build trust among key security and civic actors.

7. *Strengthen the oversight role of civil society groups.* Political transitions create opportunities for malign actors to abuse their power, abuse human rights, and renege on complying with mechanisms to safeguard democratic rights. Strengthening watchdog groups' ability to monitor transitional institutions, human rights violations, abuses of power, etc. is an effective tool to expose wrongdoing and ensure local level governance is responsive to citizens' needs.