DO ELECTIONS UNDERMINE PEACEBUILDING?
A PSYCHOLOGICAL ARGUMENT FOR CRITICIZING ELECTIONS WITHIN LIBERAL PEACEBUILDING EFFORTS

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Abstract. The liberal peace theory and, within it, statebuilding have come under increased criticism in the last two decades. Oliver Richmond and other critics have illustrated the flaws of liberal peacebuilding efforts by scrutinizing the harmful effects that such peacebuilding efforts have had on peace, justice and human rights. In addition to criticism focusing on the empirical effects such peacebuilding efforts have on states emerging from conflicts, however, relevant psychological research gives further explanations for why liberal peacebuilding efforts can be detrimental to recipient states, societies and individuals. I claim that liberal peacebuilding efforts exacerbate intergroup divisions and interpersonal tensions, which, according to psychological understanding, are fundamental to building sustainable, positive peace. I demonstrate this point by analyzing the psychological effects of liberal peacebuilding efforts, specifically, that of electoral democracy and that of capitalist reforms, and argue that in states divided by deep intergroup cleavages, the tendency of liberal peacebuilding efforts is to exacerbate, rather than to improve, existing conflicts and tensions.

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THE LIBERAL PEACE THEORY

The liberal peace theory continues to provide the foundation for peacebuilding efforts in states emerging from conflicts today despite increasing criticism of its methodology and outcomes. The liberal peace theory claims that implementing democracy, capitalism and multilateralism will lead to a future in which the world’s states, communities and individuals will enjoy peace with justice. As Oliver Richmond explains:
The liberal peace is defined as that contained within the methodological and objective-oriented peacebuilding consensus where like-minded liberal states, international, regional and local actors coexist in a western-oriented international society in which states are democratic, human rights are observed at an acceptable level, markets are open and transparent, and multilateralism is the norm except in extreme circumstances. (O. P. Richmond, 2005, p. 121)

One of the most common approaches to spreading democracy, capitalism and multilateralism as prescribed by the liberal peace theory is through statebuilding. Statebuilding includes institutional and structural reform efforts to introduce or strengthen democratic structures and capitalism. The United Nations and other international organizations have traditionally used statebuilding as the focus of their peacebuilding efforts in states emerging from conflicts. Although the UN has begun to broaden its peacebuilding efforts since the end of the Cold War to incorporate more holistic elements of peacebuilding (Lambourne & Herro, 2008), statebuilding remains a significant part of liberal peacebuilding efforts today.

In this paper, I will focus specifically on states emerging from conflicts within which deep intergroup divisions exist, the conflicts concern mainly intrastate violence, and where liberal peacebuilding efforts are being undertaken. By deep intergroup divisions, I am referring to situations in which societies are divided into what are usually mutually exclusive groups along ethnic, religious, tribal, cultural, racial or other lines and in which individuals’ group identities strongly supersede any intergroup identities. Deep intergroup divisions are usually visible due to intergroup rivalry and violence, although such violence may lie dormant for long periods of time or develop unseen before manifesting itself visibly. My findings may apply to some degree in other situations, for example, in states in which intergroup tensions exist but are not deep; however, such situations are beyond the scope of this analysis, and further investigation into such cases would be needed.

**ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY**

Liberal peacebuilding efforts often aim to increase democracy in states emerging from conflicts by strengthening electoral democracy. According to the *Guidance on Evaluating Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Activities* issued by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, one of the common theories of change underlying peacebuilding policies and projects is that of *good governance*, which claims that: “peace is secured by establishing stable/reliable social institutions that guarantee democracy, equity, justice, and fair allocation of resources.” Within the frameworks of both good governance theory of change and the liberal peace theory, peacebuilding efforts commonly pursue good governance through a variety of methods that aim to create new constitutional and governance arrangements, introduce power-sharing structures, establish democratic/equitable economic structures, support democratization, and hold elections (OECD DAC, 2005, p. 83). I will consider the psychological effects of only two means used within these methods, namely, that of 1) holding democratic elections and 2) empowering political leaders. I will also consider the importance of political culture to electoral democracy.

**Democratic Elections**

With a view to ensuring citizen participation in government and that states emerging from conflicts are ruled by free and fairly elected political leaders who enjoy support from the majority of their people, one of the key elements of liberal peacebuilding efforts is holding elections. Democratic elections in states emerging from conflicts are often heralded as signs that states have advanced beyond their former internal conflicts and taken a significant step on their paths to becoming liberal democracies. In a statement reflecting the importance that major international peacekeeping actors undertaking peacebuilding efforts in states emerging
from conflicts place on democratic elections, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon declared on June 9, 2010 that the Burundian elections constitute “important progress in consolidating peace” (The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2010).

From a psychological perspective, however, there is extensive evidence to suggest that holding elections in states emerging from conflicts does not contribute to and, in fact, often runs counter to the overarching goal of peacebuilding, which is building a sustainable, positive peace that includes justice, inclusive democracy, and respect for human rights.

Despite the theory that if citizens participate in government by voting in elections then elected governments will be “democratic,” reality has demonstrated that democratically elected leaders do not necessarily allow their citizens to participate in and influence the government in a democratic manner. Although democratic structures and institutions may exist in theory, a deeper democracy, in which all citizens are fully represented and have the opportunity to be involved in making decisions and governing, does not necessarily follow. According to psychological research, it is “deep democracy”, rather than democratic elections, that is needed to bring about positive peace. The concept of deep democracy was introduced by process-oriented psychologist Arnold Mindell, who explains that “(f)or organizations, communities, and nations to succeed today and survive tomorrow, they must be deeply democratic—that is, everyone and every feeling must be represented. Deep democracy is awareness of the diversity of people, roles, and feelings, and a guesthouse attitude toward whatever comes to the door of one’s attention” (Mindell, 2002, p. vii). Mindell’s research demonstrates that active participation and emotional involvement of members of groups and nations is needed to create communities and enhance relationships among people in a way that can create positive peace. He goes on to explain that “(d)emocratic methods, rules, and laws alone do not create a sense of community. Rules and laws may govern mechanical systems, but not people” (Mindell, 2002, p. 4). Thus, instead of the statebuilding approach whereby peace is “installed” through state “regulation, control and protection of individuals and civil society” (O. P. Richmond, 2005, p. 28), a psychology-based approach would suggest that the focus of peacebuilding efforts needs to shift from statebuilding to engaging people emotionally and providing forums where people can represent themselves fully (see, for example, Mindell, 2002).

Secondly, psychological analyses repeatedly demonstrate the importance of positive emotional interpersonal interactions across group lines for overcoming deep intergroup divisions. Whereas liberal peacebuilding efforts stress the importance of state institutions and elections as guarantors of respectful, equal treatment to all citizens in order to overcome deep intergroup divisions, such efforts typically neglect to encourage the interpersonal, emotional connections that must be built across group divisions in order for positive peace to emerge. Such emotional connections indicate that instead of simple respect, which “is critical and yet may be conveyed with emotional distance or discomfort”, equally important in overcoming intergroup divisions is warmth, which “conveys more fully that the other is part of the same team and belongs” (Andersen, Saribay, & Thorpe, 2008, p. 62). Ironically, despite the extent of such psychological research on the importance of intergroup relationship building through emotional connections and warmth in order to create peaceful societies, liberal peacebuilding efforts that are undertaken in states emerging from conflicts persist in holding elections that pit rival groups against each other. Earlier, at the negotiation table following armed conflicts, armed factions are encouraged to sign peace agreements in which they agree to lay down their arms and work together for the good of their countries, and in the immediate aftermath of such agreements, violence tends to decrease between the deeply divided factions. However, within a few months or years, peacebuilding efforts undermine the trend of increased intergroup cooperation by calling elections that once again incite intergroup competition. The deeply divided armed factions from the conflict era have not yet been forgotten and are reborn under the guise of political parties that emerge to compete in the elections. Although the international actors perceive a fundamental difference in the political, theoretically nonviolent, competition that elections introduce, the old, intergroup rivalries are nonetheless
rekindled. In the wake of the recent armed conflict and with the old armed factions still in competition, a resurgence of violence takes place.

This pattern of violence, supported by liberal peacebuilding efforts, has repeated itself over and over again in states emerging from conflicts. The current situation in Burundi serves as an ideal example. Ceasefires were signed between the armed factions starting in 2006, and the final rebel group, the Forces Nationales de Liberation (FNL), signed a ceasefire agreement in 2009, amidst much fanfare from the international community. Within the immediate post-conflict aftermath, the international community pressed for elections for commune, presidential, legislative, senatorial, and local positions to be held. These multiple elections were scheduled for various dates between May and September 2010 (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2010). However, the deep intergroup divisions between the parties were still fresh in the minds of Burundian citizens before, during and after the 2010 election period. The former armed factions became political parties, and in the lead up to the elections, the competition left the political arena and returned to the streets. As one FNL member told Human Rights Watch in a January 2010 interview:

 Even though the government took away our arms, we kept some weapons to protect ourselves. If an FNL member is killed, we will fight to the end. We are all ex-combatants. The CNDD-FDD (National Council for the Defense of Democracy - Forces for the Defense of Democracy, the ruling political party and a former armed faction) has weapons, we have weapons (Human Rights Watch, 2010, pp. 27-8).

In Burundi, as in many states emerging from conflicts, such deep intergroup divisions are psychological barriers that had not been overcome before elections and the accompanying political competition were introduced. Within peacebuilding efforts in states emerging from conflicts, political parties should be encouraged to unite and work together to overcome the myriad post-conflict challenges, including deep intergroup divisions, that face their nations and constitute barriers to creating positive peace. Instead of supporting this kind of positive cooperation that supports intergroup relationship building, however, elections force political parties to focus their energies in further intergroup competition.

Finally, the liberal peace theory proposes that democratically elected governments are more likely to rule justly and treat their citizens equally. However, lessons from psychology indicate that holding elections in states emerging from conflicts may actually decrease the chance that political leaders will treat their citizens equally and justly. States emerging from intrastate conflicts lack a recent history of political stability, and their political leaders lack the ability to manage intergroup rivalry. These issues stem largely from the fact that political leaders themselves tend to come from one of the groups that was involved in the conflict, as, for example, President Nkurunziza of Burundi did. Political leaders affiliated with groups from the conflict era feel vulnerable in their positions because they remain acutely aware of the threat to their power that other groups within their state constitute. According to J. Christopher Cohrs and Klaus Boehnke, people who feel vulnerable are generally more likely to be angry and to resort to violence than people who feel secure. “Attitudes toward military intervention become more favorable if people feel angry and outraged and perceive collective threats posed by the target of the intervention” (Cohrs & Boehnke, 2008, p. 5). Cohrs and Boehnke’s results are particularly relevant to the analysis of political leaders because political leaders who feel vulnerable, i.e. due to upcoming elections, would, according to Cohrs and Boehnke, hold favorable attitudes toward military intervention, and they would also be in positions that enable them to initiate military interventions. Political leaders who feel vulnerable may thus be more likely to use their positions of power to engage in violence against other groups within their states rather than to rule justly and treat their citizens equally.

Empowering Political Leaders
In addition to holding democratic elections, liberal peacebuilding efforts stress the importance of creating strong democratic state institutions and structures in states emerging from conflicts. In order to do this, they focus on working closely with the political leaders who are in power. The international actors behind such peacebuilding efforts provide funding, equipment, training as well as opportunities for state political leaders to engage with the international community and political leaders through dialogue. In Burundi, the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) operations are co-managed by the Government of Burundi (Multi-Donor Trust Fund Office, 2009, p. 4). Although working with local counterparts is of course necessary and desirable, working predominantly with political leaders can mean that peacebuilding efforts result in empowering those political leaders as well as the state institutions and structures. Because the political leaders come from parties that reflect the same deep intergroup divisions that existed during the conflict, empowering political leaders is synonymous with empowering the ruling group, or possibly a ruling coalition of groups, over all others within the deeply divided society.

Again, the situation in Burundi serves to demonstrate the potential risk that empowering political leaders poses to peacebuilding. Although power-sharing arrangements have increased the number of Burundian political parties that play some role in governing the state, the current ruling political party, the CNDD-FDD, remains the most powerful, and its strength has been increased by peacebuilding efforts, such as that of the PBF, that have further empowered it. The liberal peace theory envisions that democratically elected political leaders should work for the good of their country by ruling justly and treating all citizens equally, but the political leaders from the CNDD-FDD have failed to stay above the intergroup rivalry during the current election season. The CNDD-FDD has been violently asserting its power over the other armed factions-cum-political parties by beating and killing their members (Human Rights Watch, 2010). Peacebuilding efforts, such as those of the PBF, have thus been empowering political leaders who are now once again resorting to violence.

Furthermore, in the same way that holding elections in states emerging from conflicts reignites deep intergroup divisions from the conflict era in the post-conflict era context, empowering political leaders exacerbates the existing power relations between the groups and undermines the creation of positive peace. Regardless of how political leaders came to power during the conflict era, because of their political positions, ruling political leaders and their political parties necessarily have some amount of power greater than that of their rival political parties. Peacebuilding efforts that empower ruling groups, or political parties, over other groups increase the power differential between the groups, and as psychological studies have demonstrated, power differentials undermine the ability of groups to cooperate and intensify intergroup divisions. Indeed, one of the key focuses of psychology-based peacebuilding efforts is how to overcome the barriers that existing power structures pose to building positive peace. In Johan Galtung’s TRANSCEND approach, for example, “the aim is for equity and symmetric power structures” (Graf, Kramer, & Nicolescu, 2007, p. 129). Similarly, Mindell emphasizes that “(a)wareness is a more comprehensive guiding principle than power” and the problem with democracy is that it “furthers power, not awareness” (Mindell, 2002, pp. 10-11). However, liberal peacebuilding efforts continue to empower the ruling group over other groups in states emerging from conflicts and undermine the opportunities for intergroup cooperation.

Another harmful effect of exacerbating the power differential and, with it, the deep intergroup divisions between the ruling group and other groups within states emerging from conflicts is that this process can lead to infrahumanization and otherization. Infrahumanization refers to “the denial to an individual or group of some of the characteristics that make us human, rendering the target less than human, if not wholly non-human” (Castano & Giner-Sorolla, 2006, p. 805). Emanuel Castano and Roger Giner-Sorolla’s research into intergroup violence has indicated that violence carried out by one’s own in-group against an out-group actually increases infrahumanization of the out-group, a phenomenon that is likely a subconscious
protective strategy for people to reestablish psychological equanimity and vindicate the in-group perpetrators (2006). Similarly, otherization, a process by which out-group members come to be perceived as significantly foreign and different from in-group members, has also been identified as a powerful instrument for inciting and fueling intergroup rivalry (Sumner, 1968; Park, 1968). When peacebuilding efforts that empower one group over other groups intensify intergroup divisions and violence, increased infrahumanization and otherization result. Castano and Giner-Sorolla have noted how critical it is that peacebuilding efforts begin to recognize and tackle this phenomenon:

As several recent cases have shown, although military victory is often easily achieved by United Nations-backed coalitions, peace-building operations tend to meet with enormous difficulties in dealing with postviolence situations. These difficulties are certainly caused by a multiplicity of factors that go well beyond psychological ones, but it seems clear that preventing or reducing infrahumanization processes and ensuring that the “other” is somehow included in the same moral community as the in-group would be an important step. (Castano & Giner-Sorolla, 2006, p. 817)

**Political Culture**

Closely related to holding democratic elections and empowering political culture is the need to create a political culture that is simultaneously conducive to democracy and reconciliation. While much research regarding the institutional and policy choices that tend to increase or decrease electoral violence has been completed, deeper investigation into feelings and attitudes and their influence over the electoral process and outcomes of elections has been more limited thus far. Although it is often stressed that leaders’ respect for electoral and broader democratic procedures is important, such analysis is often held within the context of discussions on institutional and electoral design and leads to emphasis being placed on designing and enforcing policies that will guarantee compliance. However, as analysts from the fields of both psychology and political science have noted, rules and laws alone cannot adequately enforce compliance where disregard for the rules and laws is widespread (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010). As Peleg notes regarding ethnically divided states, “a vibrant but nevertheless procedural democracy—periodic elections, free press, freedom of association—often camouflage the low level of democracy” (Peleg, 2004, p. 15). Rather than purely seeking to enforce compliance through legal means, attention must therefore also be given to how to change the individual leaders’ attitudes so they are willing to uphold the laws.

Analysis of the values and culture that underpin the attitudes and behaviors that are conducive to democracy has led to a body of research regarding political culture that provides some insight into the correlation of attitudes and feelings to democracy. Values that enable leaders and members of the public to fulfill their obligations and lead to a balance of power and upholding of human rights include respect, trust, moderation, tolerance, civility, efficacy, knowledge and participation. Larry Diamond describes that these “ingredients of liberal democracy” lead to:

…tolerance for opposing political beliefs and positions and also more generally for social and cultural differences; pragmatism and flexibility, as opposed to a rigid and ideological approach to politics; trust in other political actors and in the social environment; a willingness to compromise, springing from a belief in the necessity and desirability of compromise; and civility of political discourse and respect for other views.

This range of values and the related political culture thus include not only intellectual and rational principles but also emotional and psychological attitudes. Cultivating any values within any people is inherently challenging, but it is where such values as these are lacking that democratic governments and the rule of law struggle to survive. As Diamond goes on to say later, these values “will be difficult to sustain unless, for both elites and the mass, they become embedded in a deeper, more coherent and encompassing syndrome of beliefs and
values” (D. L. Diamond, 1999, p. 166). Encouraging both leaders and people to embrace and uphold these values, especially in fragile contexts, is one of the most significant challenges of peacebuilding, reconciliation and conflict transformation.

CITATIONAL REFORMS

Western economic theory holds that capitalism promotes efficiency in the private sector and creates economic growth. Liberal peacebuilding efforts are thus based on the theory that undertaking capitalist reforms can assist states emerging from conflict to improve their economies at the macro-level and ensure financial stability for individuals at the micro-level. However, similar to the way in which democratic electoral reforms exacerbate intergroup divisions by inciting intergroup competition, capitalist reforms also instigate competition that breaks down relationships at the interpersonal level. All interpersonal relations, including both intragroup and intergroup relationships, are thus affected.

Alfie Kohn (1992) explains that “competition acts not only to strain our existing relationships to the breaking point, but also to prevent them from developing in the first place” (p. 134). He goes on to analyze the effects that competition has on self-esteem, by explaining that “…it is difficult for me to feel good about others when I don’t feel good about myself. I feel my worth is in doubt—it is contingent on winning—so I am unable to extend myself to you” (Kohn, 1992, p. 135). Since self-esteem is paramount to engaging in positive relationships, if a person does not feel good about herself, this feeling has the ability to destroy relationships. Because of the scale of capitalism, capitalist competition has the ability to affect relationships at much larger scale than competition in many other contexts. Tim Kasser et al. have noted the effects of capitalism by investigating American Corporate Capitalism from a psychological perspective. They note that “the common and valued human propensities for community, affiliation, benevolence, self-worth, and even autonomy can be undermined when people and institutions take on the self-interested, competitive, materialistic values and goals that are required for the smooth functioning of ACC (American Corporate Capitalism)” (Kasser, Cohn, Kanner, & Ryan, 2007, p. 8).

In addition to breaking down relationships through competition, there are further socioeconomic implications of introducing capitalism that disturb psychological wellbeing and thus impact intergroup and interpersonal relationships. Greater income disparity between rich and poor, economic marginalization of some groups within society, and business failures all contribute to a volatile economic situation that undermines financial stability and security, especially for the most vulnerable people. Financial insecurity and uncertainty surrounding the future causes distress and psychological problems among people. These socioeconomic implications of capitalism are visible in the example of Vietnam, which has recently undertaken a variety of capitalist reforms during its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2007. Reforms in Vietnam have included opening markets to international competition and lifting international trade restrictions and barriers. Since joining the WTO, Viet Nam’s macroeconomic data, including its gross domestic product, consumption and foreign direct investment statistics, appear impressive (Kinley, Nguyen, & Murray, 2010, pp. 222-3). However, instead of benefitting the Vietnamese people relatively equally, the introduction of capitalism has benefited some Vietnamese far more than others and has thus increased the income gap between the rich and the poor. Economic instability has also had the consequence of causing severe socioeconomic issues for groups such as the rural poor, women and children working in industrial sectors, and ethnic minority groups, who have already been documented as suffering from a lack food, work, education, adequate standards of living as well as social issues such as discrimination (Kinley et al., 2010, p. 221). Within the context of increased international competition, some businesses are predicted to thrive, but many smaller, local businesses will likely fail. The people whose livelihoods depend on small, local businesses will consequently suffer from a host of socioeconomic
problems, such as a decreasing standard of living, inability to afford basic necessities and costs of living, lack of access to health care, etc. (Kinley et al., 2010, pp. 229-30). The affected populations will suffer psychological issues related to their socioeconomic hardships.

The example of Vietnam demonstrates the socioeconomic and psychological problems that can emerge even when a state that is not emerging from a recent conflict undertakes capitalist reforms. Because states emerging from conflicts have deep intergroup divisions and suffer from economic instability as their economies shift from being war-oriented to peace-oriented, these states are even more prone to the socioeconomic problems caused by capitalism. As Richmond notes with regard to capitalist reforms, “the opening up of the poorest and least stable parts of the world to international markets” has had “generally debilitating effects—from Bosnia to Afghanistan standards of living have dropped and unemployment and poverty has increased according to the World Bank’s own figures” (O. Richmond, 2009). By creating psychological and social challenges and conflicts, capitalism can thus fuel interpersonal tensions and intergroup divisions rather than building peace.

CONCLUSION

Despite the hopeful theory behind liberal peacebuilding efforts, psychological research indicates that many of the effects of such peacebuilding efforts create and exacerbate both deep intergroup divisions and interpersonal tensions in states emerging from conflicts. Psychology-based peacebuilding efforts often focus specifically on overcoming such deep intergroup divisions and interpersonal tensions in order to promote peace and intergroup harmony, but liberal peacebuilding efforts can unfortunately undermine such efforts. I have demonstrated the detrimental psychological effects of liberal peacebuilding efforts by analyzing two elements typically included within such efforts: that of introducing or strengthening electoral democracy and that of undertaking capitalist reforms.

Because conflicts and violence, regardless of their origins, affect the psychological states of conflict actors and victims and can become self-perpetuating (Niesta, Fritsche, & Jonas, 2008, p. 51), the psychological dimensions of conflict are arguably more important than the initial causes and voiced issues in conflicts. Even if the initial causes and open conflicts are overcome, lingering intergroup and interpersonal tensions can reignite conflicts. Because of the importance of such psychological issues in conflicts, in order to truly transform conflicts and create sustainable, positive peace, international actors involved in peacebuilding in states emerging from conflicts must be aware of psychology-based lessons related to peacebuilding and incorporate them into their liberal peacebuilding initiatives rather than relying on institutional reforms alone.

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