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Violence in Peace Processes as they Relate to the Crisis in Kosovo

Unfortunately, peace processes are often accompanied by acts of political violence. These aspects of political violence can prove to be detrimental and thwarting to negotiations aiming towards conflict resolution and peace. In a time during which negotiations are often bypassed for the immediate use of force, one must not look over the importance of peace processes. An understanding of threats to the peace process and the recognition of the role of political violence in peace processes is critical in efforts to avoid future fatal conflicts.

A peace process is an attempt by the main actors involved to reach an outcome to end violent conflict. The goal is to lower the cost of violence through cooperation from both parties involved. Ceasefires are put in place while formal talks are ongoing to provide security for representatives to negotiate. These ceasefires require compliance by the two groups to be effective. As Mac Ginty points out, this may be hard to accomplish due to incompliance and lack of structure of the antagonist group. In some cases, this can also bring concern in that ceasefires can provide perpetrators more time to re-supply so they are ready for armed conflict after the negotiations (2012).

Many times during peace processes, violent reactions are sparked which are called ‘spoiler violence.’ As Mac Ginty suggests, these ‘spoilers’ can be defined as violence from a group or state which views the peace process as being opposed to their interests. These actions are often many times used to halt peace efforts and bring attention to certain concerns a group
has. The actions can be utilized so that the antagonists have a chance at reaching some sort of accommodation while undermining the peace process. These attacks are often a strong statement or a rejection regarding aspects of the peace process that is taking place. These are often targeted not only at the victims being attacked, but spans much larger to make a statement and can include actions to influence media, in-group supporters, and the public. The antagonists may use these techniques as a recruiting tool while also trying to spark a reaction from the community or state (2012).

One problem that many of these groups face is the lack of structure as well as military and political effectiveness but can attract attention by grabbing headlines and attention of the media. The peace efforts often may be too far along for groups to effect the process while gaining support within their group both internally and externally. In many cases, crime levels have dramatically increased during peace processes and after. During this transition time, the state is often exposed to crime due to the inaccurate perception of what constitutes a crime. The legal line is often blurred for people in that different actors such as the United Nations can become involved and enforce different laws. Mac Ginty points out that during and after a conflict, citizens may find themselves participating in activities that they would not participate in before the conflict. Certain actions may be looked at as socially acceptable due to the current affairs. This is why the perception of what is a crime and what is not is important in transitional societies so people know where the line of the law stands. This state of chaos can bring a sense of unease to the public and can bring into question the peace process among citizens (2012).

The implications of crime associated with peace processes and peace accords are serious. If people’s everyday experience of ‘peace’ is marked by insecurity and a decline
in the quality of life because of crime, then they will have few incentives to express political support for a post-peace accord political dispensation (Mac Ginty p. 501).

This gives citizens the impression that peace is unreachable and forgone as they only see more conflict during these “peace processes.”

In conceptualizing violence in the peace process, one must know that every conflict is different and has different aspects to consider. Another factor to consider is that political violence is often consistently flowing and rarely completely stops. Certain measures and tactics often change, but the rate of violence will rarely come to a halt. In some cases, violence can even become more politicized in that violent actors will use multiple angles to fully utilize their movement. State forces, international forces, victims, and support constituencies can be effected and be forced to pick sides or draw conclusions in favor of the violent group. Not all actions by violent groups have the capacity to fully make an impact on political goals or outcomes regarding the peace processes. In some cases, major actors can obtain too much power and legitimacy to be affected by violent acts. It is important, as Mac Ginty points out, to note that not only can direct violence be troublesome, but indirect violence can also largely effect political, social, and cultural life and can shape society in a certain way (2012).

When analyzing political violence and peace processes, Mac Ginty emphasizes the recognition and application of five points; that political violence is context specific, fluid, instrumentalist, occasionally ineffective, and often employs indirect methods (2012). In an attempt to further understand the role of political violence in peace processes, a case study of the Kosovo Crisis in the late nineties will be analyzed employing each of Mac Ginty’s tools for conceptualization.
In Kosovo, warfare in the late 1990’s was the most recent in a series of conflicts between the Albanians and Serbs dating back centuries. Albanians converted gradually to Islam and Serbia, including Kosovo, was conquered by the Islamic Ottoman Turks in 1459. Resentments grew between Christians/Jews and their Muslim conquerors as they were subject to the dhimma or protection in exchange for their lives, which forced them to cede their lands, defer to Muslims under Shari’a law, and pay heavy taxes. After years of this repression, tides turned when the Serbs prevailed in the first Balkan War of 1912 and proceeded to plunder, kill and reoccupy Kosovo and dominate the majority Albanian population. This back and forth domination by either the Serbs or the Albanians continued through the World Wars and flared again in the late 1990’s.

Although not necessarily a civil war, the conflict in Kosovo is demonstrative of Mac Ginty’s claim that, “political violence is context-specific” (2012) in nearly all details of the confrontation. An understanding of why the conflict arose is especially crucial to the application of this claim as it explains why the conflict arose between the two groups, and is able to further shed light on aspects of the violence and the motivations behind them. R. Jeffry Smith and William Drozdiak of The Washington Post identity the source of conflict arising from ethnic Albanian’s desire for self rule in Kosovo, and thus “threatening the internal integrity of Yugoslavia and its dominant republic, Serbia” (1999). The same authors suggest that a history of conflict between ethnic Albanians and Serbians, as detailed above, contributed to the late nineties war in Kosovo (Smith and Drozdiak, 1999) in which a Serbian effort to rid Kosovo of a “rebel threat” in the form of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) resulted in the “radical change [of] the ethnic landscape of the province, even at the cost of certain war with NATO” (Smith and Drozdiak, 1999).
The fluidity of political violence is recognizable when analyzing the Kosovo crisis as well. Mac Ginty stresses that as components needed to carry out violence change, such as circumstances and capabilities, the level and method of violence will change as well (2012). Mac Ginty also notes that as changes in the community occur, those enacting the political violence must act and “adopt a mix of reactive and proactive strategies to protect themselves, maximize gains, and attempt to diminish opportunities for their opponents” (2012). Several instances of proactive and reactive responses are present when looking at the conflict occurring between the Serbs and the ethnic Albanians. Although it is questioned whether the President of Serbia, Milosevic, “razed” Kosovo because of an organized plan or rather a “spontaneous reaction driven by ethnic hatred and the NATO bombardment” (Smith and Drozdiak, 1999), both proactive and reactive actions are identifiable and further the argument that political violence is fluid (Mac Ginty, 2012).

While it is often assumed that political violence, especially during peace processes, is irrational and without a cause, Mac Ginty argues, “it attempts to effect some form of change or response” (2012). This claim is certainly backed once the history of the two ethnic groups is understood and it becomes clear that both the KLA and the Serbs execute political violence in an effort to maintain the territory of Kosovo and their free rule within it. Interestingly, Mac Ginty also suggests, “political violence may become more political during a peace process” (2012), although in the case of the Kosovo crisis, this was not especially evident. If anything, it appeared the violence was ramped up while peace processes occurred, as evident in the reported growth in Yugoslav forces while a ceasefire was declared and negotiations were attempted (Smith and Drozdiak, 1999). Although Mac Ginty suggests that political violence attempted during peace processes is generally ineffective (2012), the opposite proves true when analyzing
the crisis in Kosovo. In some cases, however, “A peace process may have too much momentum, be supported by too many external and internal actors, and have too much legitimacy to be seriously impacted by some types and levels of violence” (Mac Ginty, 2012).

The last point the author of “Political Violence and Peace Processes” draws attention to when suggesting a plan to conceptualize the role of violence in peace processes is the role of structural or indirect violence (Mac Ginty, 2012). Although there was undeniably a significant use of force used in the Serbian expulsion of 500,000 ethnic Albanians from their homes in Kosovo (Smith and Drozdiak, 1999), the use of other, indirect means may have been more detrimental. The creation of a “climate of terror” through mass executions and the Serbian destruction of any “documentary link between the refugees and their homeland” (Smith and Drozdiak, 1999) did much to “shape political, social, economic, and cultural life” (Mac Ginty, 2012).

Although it is unlikely the Kosovo crisis could have been avoided merely through negotiations, much is to be learned regarding threats to the peace process and the recognition of the role of political violence in peace processes so as to possibly prevent tragedies like this from happening in the future. Understanding the violence occurring during these peace processes can encourage preventative measures that could possibly serve as a deterrent to future political violence.
Bibliography
