



Peace and Democracy Go Hand in Hand – Or Do They?

When you hear the word “Democracy”, what is the next word that comes to mind? Maybe “Elections” or “Freedom”. Maybe “Equality” or “Human Rights”. Or maybe “Peace”. Indeed, most countries that we consider strong democracies – Canada, Sweden, New Zealand, for example – are also peaceful countries. Peace and democracy seem to go hand and hand.

But that’s not always the case. Kenya, considered one of Africa’s strongest democracies, erupted in violence following the December 2007 presidential poll, amidst allegations of widespread electoral fraud. Colombia is South America’s oldest democracy, but also home to one of the longest and deadliest civil conflicts in the region.

In the Grey Zone

Democracy is often weak, even in formally democratic countries with regular elections, parliaments, judiciaries, and the like. In fact, more and more countries find themselves in a “grey zone” between authoritarian and democratic rule, with little movement in either direction. Most countries in Latin America’s Andean region seem to fall in this category: In Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela, the political reforms of the past 15 years have produced inconclusive results, failing to deliver the sought-for political integration of the popular majorities and instead leading to popular mobilizations,

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riots, impeachments and depositions of presidents, as well as referenda and constitution-building processes, sometimes of

doubtful legitimacy. More serious violent conflict has been a distinct possibility in recent years, and remains so to this day. IDRC’s Peace, Conflict and Development is supporting a project led by the Instituto de Estudios Peruanos (IEP), which responds to the need for strong analyses and policy options that would both enable the democratic participation of social movements and strengthen political institutions in the Andean region.



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No Blueprint for Democracy

The need for strong and legitimate institutions is most keenly felt in post-conflict settings, where institutions are often absent or at least severely damaged. In fact, peace processes are a time of hope and opportunity, not just to end the violence, but also to create a more democratic and just society. The key challenge here is not just to settle on the right institutional design – many blueprints are on offer by international consultancy firms and bilateral donors, including seductive-sounding ones like “government out of a box” – but to ensure that the resulting institutional framework is sustainable in the long run.

A crucial element for sustainable democracy everywhere, not just after violent conflict, is that it must be based on local ownership and respond to local realities. Unlike coffee, bananas, or computer software, democracy cannot be quickly imported. It has to put down roots in local traditions and customs if it is to acquire any legitimacy. These processes, which are complex and can take a long time, are at the heart of PCD’s recent research competition into Democratization, Violent Conflict, and Peacebuilding.

The first of four research awards examines how “modern” and “traditional” forms of authority can interact and hopefully strengthen one another. The Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa explores if and how traditional African institutions can contribute to conflict resolution and prevention, peaceful process of state building, and democra-

tization. The goal of the project is to assess how a coherent mix of both traditional and “modern” governance institution can strengthen both democracy and peace in places such as South Africa, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Tanzania.

A second key theme of the research competition is the role of foreign donors in promoting democracy in other countries. The second project, under the auspices of the Lebanese

elections alone do not make a “true” democracy

American University, will take a close look at the role of foreign democracy assistance around elections in Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories, Iraq and the Sudan. In particular, the researchers will ask why this “foreign intervention” achieved some successes at election time, but fell short of expectations regarding the empowerment of local civil societies in the longer term.

PCD is supporting a third project, run by FLACSO-Mexico, that examines the tensions that can exist at different levels in formally functioning democratic regimes. The project will look at municipal citizen councils in Mexico, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. These citizen councils are an innovative response to demands for greater public participation in local government. However, despite increased public voice at the local government level, this government often still remains hierarchical, corrupt, and marked by favoritism. The result is a low quality of democracy at local levels and potential for social conflict.

Also concentrating on local democracy, PCD’s fourth award went to the Social Scientists’ Association in Sri Lanka. This time, however, the focus is not on tensions and contradictions brewing under the surface of a seemingly peaceful institutional setting, but on how a strengthening of local democracy might offer avenues out of the ongoing civil war in Sri Lanka. In particular, the project explores how political reforms at the local level could lead to more inclusion of civil society, minorities and women. The goal is a more peaceful and pluralistic democracy through social change, more economic equity, and increased government accountability.

Beyond the Ballot Box

It is clear that elections alone do not a true democracy make. Democracy and good governance must extend beyond the ballot box, particularly in post-conflict or conflict-prone settings where a return to violence is never far away. Over the years, PCD has supported research exploring different aspects of this *problématique*, focusing on the inclusion of previously marginalized groups into society, the integration of non-state armed groups into the political mainstream, strategies for holding governments accountable, or key governance areas such as legal reform.

The Judicial Observatory of the Guatemalan Institute of Comparative Studies in Criminal Sciences is a good example. During years of civil wars and decades of authoritarian regimes, the population suffered serious human rights violations. The Observatory monitors the criminal justice system in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, seen as a key indicator for the quality of democratic governance – or lack thereof – under the new regime. Law students observe tribunals and participate in changing the system. Judges and lawyers are also involved in this debate. The Observatory is groundbreaking in all three countries and identifies practical solutions in reforming the judicial system, from the ground up.

The relationship between democratization and peacebuilding is not always simple and straightforward. We need more evidence on what makes democracy work and peace sustainable, and how both can advance in synergy. We need to know more on why democracies are sometimes prone to violence, where this violence comes from and how it can be countered. Most importantly, we need to find a way out of the grey zone of “semi-democracy”, if only because it breeds more conflict than either full-blown authoritarianism or true democracy.



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The **International Development Research Centre**, a Canadian Crown corporation, has provided funds and expert advice to researchers in developing countries for more than 35 years. IDRC supports researchers’ efforts to solve the problems they identify as crucial in their communities.

Peace, Conflict and Development’s objective is to generate evidence-based findings that can be used to inform policy and programing decisions on root causes of violent conflict, the prevention of conflict, and equitable and sustainable development; to build domestic ownership of peace processes; to open spaces for discussion and dialogue; to influence global policies and practices and to build capacity for more rigorous, methodologically creative, and collaborative research.