Internal Conflict and the International Community
by
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Aldersgit: Ashgate Publishing, 2004,
pp.242

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As Roderic Alley states in this useful study of internal conflicts since the end of the Cold War, "there is little international consensus over when, where, or how to negotiate with non-state entities for purposes of internal conflict settlement." One of the reasons for the lack of consensus is due to a lack of agreement among both scholars and government officials as to the causes and cures of internal conflicts.

Alley's book deals in detail with the difficulties faced by international relations scholars who were used to a State-centered approach and a balance-of-power theory for the Cold War years to deal with the breakdown of States, with tribal and clanic leadership, with strange religious movements often without written texts. Africa, in particular, has been most difficult to analyse in traditional international relations terms. The continuing struggle of the Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda is a particular nightmare, it not being very clear who the Lord is. He is probably the Christian God, but he speaks directly to the Resistance leaders who do not use the Christian Bible as a reference or standard. (The Conciliation Resources study: Okello Lucima Protracted Conflict, elusive peace—Initiatives to end violence in northern Uganda, 2002 is a good record of the difficulties of negotiating with leaders whose policies can change radically when the Spirit speaks). Likewise, the divisions and total breakdown of State institutions in Somalia defies even the best of the balance-of-power theorists. International relations specialists are more than willing to leave the study of African States to anthropologists. However, anthropologists, whose findings were often used by European colonial administrators, are today reluctant to be the handmaidens of governments, even if peace and order are the official aims. The 1994 genocide in Rwanda was misjudged from the start and has led to soul-searching in the United Nations and in some national governments. There is a little intellectual cooperation among anthropologists used to microanalysis of societies, development economists who can stress the interrelatedness of factors and international relations specialists who can place an internal conflict in its regional setting.

As Alley notes "This study's discussion of social and economic rights suggested that the external assistance of greatest use is most likely to ensure job creation for the demobilized,

property entitlement for the dispossessed, and educational facilities for the illiterate. Failing that, then material hardship, stunted national citizenship values, and poverty of opportunity create space for ethnic entrepreneurs, or those who rent patron/client social structures to loot local resources, and trade violence for services. The scale of this activity in Africa has seen international neglect, indifference and fatalism…The Republic of Congo is a good example, minimal international attention to ongoing civil conflict eclipsed by even worse conditions in bigger, immediate neighbours of Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Republic of the Congo citizens remain armed against looting militias, French-based oil interests play ethnic factions and their leaderships, internal displacement is chronic, Brazzaville adjudged among one of the worst capital locations anywhere in the world."

Alley writes, "Averaging 53 months in duration, internal wars are often protracted, their bitter political effects and legacies of crime, lawlessness and impunity lingering even longer after the guns have fallen silent. Even when seemingly 'settled' they often maintain a lethal potential to reignite…To revise Hobbes, internal wars are nasty, brutish and long." Given the difficulties of agreement on the root causes of internal conflict and thus the difficulty of developing a multi-sector approach to peace building, both governments and NGOs have stressed certain elements as an "entry point"

One entry point has been efforts to control the flow of small arms and light weapons. These are the weapons of choice in most internal wars. With the success of the campaign to ban landmines and its Ottawa Treaty outcome, many of the same NGOs have turned to the question of exercising constraints on the production and transfer of small arms. Governments have been very reluctant to move on this front. Within the United Nations, a 2001 conference was held looking only at illicit trafficking of small arms and light weapons. Yet as a US State Department background paper maintained correctly "Legal and illegal transfers are so closely intertwined that it is difficult to establish a clear basis for distinguishing them. Many weapons originating as legal production or exports eventually fall into illegal circulation. It is impossible to know with certainty what percentage of small arms and light weapons are legal or illegal, or when and how weapons that were originally transferred legally became illegal at some point in their history." The difficulties have led to slow motion acting, just enough movement to keep NGOs   'off the back' of governments but no motion to stop the flow. As Alley concludes "Here, compromise in the name of supposed 'consensus', deference to major power hegemony, and exigencies of sovereign prerogative emulsify possible agreements to a point of irrelevance."

Another point of entry is to deal with refugees and internally displaced persons related to internal conflicts. As a result of the Second World War, there is the 1951 Refugee Convention and a permanent Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. In close cooperation with the Office, there are strong NGOs who have specialized in the care of refugees and who work directly in refugee camps.

The UN Commission on Human Rights has taken the lead on drawing attention to persons displaced within a State by conflict and who have not crossed a frontier. While there is no treaty covering internally displaced persons, there are strong resolutions of the Human Rights Commission. As Alley states "The plight of those uprooted by internal conflict opens a window into the human costs of deeper-seated inequities, institutional deficiencies, and political failures

driving flight abroad and internal displacement…International humanitarian law, human rights law, and refugee law offer sufficient complimentarity to protect those uprooted by internal conflict." Yet this complimentarity has not been well defended nor advanced. So far there has been a lack of political leadership both among govern-ments and NGOs to foster such complimentarity and so to influence the lives of the people 'on the ground'. In the same way that internal conflicts require leadership to turn grievances into violence, so positive responses to internal conflict requires leadership. However, there are few institutions, which are structured to provide peace building leadership for internal conflicts. The UN was structured to deal with conflicts between States. As Alley notes "As a response system, the UN is not equipped to act as an intermediary between state and non-state actors, nor to manage the deep cultural and ethnic differences that can derail attempted internal conflict settlements."

There is a need for new creative leadership from within the UN, within regional multilateral institutions, within national governments, and from within the NGO community. For as Alley concludes, "Internal wars and their manifest human tragedies need not persist, but their alleviation will require release of the latent social magnanimity and political imagination currently immobilized by existing global asymmetries."