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Overview

In political systems that we identify as 'violent political marketplaces', policy priorities for democracy activists and external actors include ending armed conflict, building governance institutions in a post-conflict setting, reforming the security sector, and promoting democracy and/or justice. *t r t r v r u r t w r v v uv t v sr vu yv v wt yr v yv uv yv yv w yv v r* This question is the focus of this memorandum.

The obvious point is that these goals are extremely difficult to achieve in the context of violent political marketplaces. These are countries that have been known as 'fragile states' but could also (and more accurately) be described as open political systems on the margins of global capitalism. Not all fragile states are political marketplaces; we use the term to refer specifically to countries/contexts where politics is transactional and structured according to the laws of supply and demand rather than regulated by formal institutions (more on this below). Moreover, these political systems are often very violent. Examples include Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and arguably Syria and Iraq.

We argue that theories of change in these contexts need to focus on the logic of transactional politics rather than on formal institutions. Further, they need to account for constant turbulence and its counterpart unpredictability, while remaining aware of how external interventions are an integral part of the dynamics of these systems. Following from this – we conclude that three broad types of interventions are possible: (a) tactically engineering short term outcomes to reduce violence; (b) a top-down reconfiguration of the political system; and (c) preparing the ground so that domestic actors can take advantage of eventual opportunities for democratic transformation. These interventions each come with their own risks, operate across variable time-scales, and may be combined; in all cases, however, they need to be tailored to the particularities of the political system in question.

1. Background: What is a theory of change? Why does it matter? And why are they so difficult to formulate in violent political markets?

A theory of change is an analytical framework (a) explaining how social, political, and economic change occurs over time,

framework – it usually has multiple causes. It can be both ordering or disordering; some violence that is immediately destructive can lay the foundations for a new social order, but other episodes or acts of violence may generate only disorder. For instance, the consolidation of a rebel group through violence may create a new (relatively stable) political unit, while a strategy of targeted assassinations of armed group leaders may lead to splintering of armed units and make political consolidation impossible in the medium term.

Finally, it is worth noting that many of these systems are also characterized by exclusionary identity politics—which is used by political leaders as an alternate or complementary logic for organizing politics and violence.

What ought to be clear from this brief description of political marketplaces is that interventions which focus on formal institutions are often mismatched to the problems confronting these political systems and therefore are likely to have little impact. Yet, it is the norm for most theories of change, especially in the context of external interventions in peacebuilding, security sector reform, etc. to work through formal institutions. This is not simply a result of poor contextual analysis; it is also the consequence of political calculations in donor countries, and institutional imperatives in implementing or policymaking organizations. Even more fundamentally, it points to assumptions built into social science which tend to analyse political changes using the lens of (relatively) gradual institutional change.

(ii) Instability and turbulence are the norm in violent political markets.

Political markets are complex and disorderly, characterized by near-constant change. In a general sense we can distinguish between two different types of changes in these systems. The first is routine fluctuation within a disordered system: this we can call 'turbulence'. What this means is that political markets are extremely unpredictable over short periods of time, even while they retain a recognizable structure over time.[6]

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instance, a peace agreement which is widely lauded by international policymakers may have

model of how we think change takes place; the logic of change, on the other hand, refers to how change actually take place. These are the social, political or economic drivers of changes in a political system. A logic of change encompasses both structural factors and individual agency. 'Structure' refers to the relatively enduring (though not unchanging) circumstances within which actors operate – for example the economic or political system in a country. Agency, on the other hand, can be understood as actors' capacities to act upon situations – for example, top-down elite politics, or bottom-up citizens action.[13]

2. What drives change in political markets?

There are usually several logics at work simultaneously driving change in a violent political marketplace. These logics combine both structure and agency. Among them are the logics on which the Conflict Research Programme focuses – the political marketplace, pervasive violence; identity politics; and civicness. Each is described in turn:

o   *The political marketplace:* The turbulent dynamics of weakly-regulated capitalist markets, which result (inter alia) in the commodification or marketization of politics.

   The political marketplace logic of change is straightforward. Changes in the political economy can lead to structural shifts in the sources and quantities of political finance, the price of politics, control over the means of violence, or the organization of the marketplace. This may be manifested in the shift from an autocratic form of government (functional kleptocracy), to a political system characterized by two or more coalitions which compete with each other for political power but collude to exclude other political challengers (an oligopoly). Less commonly, we might even see a fractious political system with many small groups vying for relative power, but without any having the ability to dominate the entire political system (free competition). Within these structures, political entrepreneurs can use their individual skills to exploit market opportunities to gain or consolidate power, or even alter the rules for playing the market.

   There are both 'on-ramps' whereby institutionalized political systems become political

rebellions have fed into and even strengthened the appeal of identity politics constructed around a history of grievances.

Even though the state may not exercise a monopoly over violence, the notion that it should and

relate to entities other than the state, such as local manifestations of public authority, which tend to be continually in flux and where formal institutions are subordinate to transactional politics, but nonetheless where 'norm institutions' (societal codes of conduct and rules) form the basis for efforts to generate 'law from below.'[16] Such efforts can be seen as a more humane way of invoking tradition and drawing boundaries, with the aim of establishing an equitable social contract for the community thus defined.

An agential theory of civicness relates primarily to activism, in the sense of human rights activists, individuals or groups, working to protect and promote rights in the face of an autocratic state. It can also (in an under-explored manner) relate to efforts to generate social order from disorder, in such a way that rights are respected.

In several of our case study countries there have been non-violent civic uprisings, protesting against corruption, autocracy, violations of human rights, and failure to end wars. Most of the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions failed to achieve their goals in part because their leaders assumed that overthrowing a dictator would lead automatically to democracy, rather than appreciating that dismantling a centralized kleptocracy was likely to lead to either a violent rivalry among oligopolists or a free market in violence. More recent uprisings and protests, such as Sudan (2019) and Iraq (ongoing) appear to have learned from these previous failings.

There are other logics at work also, which should be mentioned in passing, all of which contribute to the complicated dynamics of the political marketplace and pervasive violence:

o Economic disruption driven by the power of capitalist markets, including the boom and bust of revenue from commodity exports and related employment in those sectors, and the impacts of price fluctuations in essential imports such as food and fuel.

o Technological change, especially (currently) in the arena of information technology, which allows (among other things) for disruptive democratic mobilization and for intrusive surveillance by security agencies. Just as critically, technological change has also driven changes in production patterns, reinforced the subordinate position of some countries in the global capitalist system, and had significant impact on the world of work, impacting labour movements and working class political mobilization.

o The intensification of environmental and climatic variation with a greater frequency of extreme and calamitous hazards (including the structural disorderliness of the Anthropocene) and the burden-shifting impacts of the adjustments made by more powerful actors to those hazards (such as large-scale land acquisition in poor African countries by wealthy investors).

o The unpredictable intersection of all of the above, which can result in the 'freak wave' phenomenon where multiple factors combine in a non-linear way and result in unanticipated calamities.

When formulating theories of change, external actors need to begin by understanding the political system in question and the political logics driving change in it. Critically, they need to be mindful of their role in and the limits of their powers to influence these broader processes of change.

3. Intervening in Violent Political Markets

The starting point for activists or external actors trying to promote peace, a political settlement or post-conflict reconstruction in these political systems is an analytical one: understanding the system for what it actually is, not what they would like it to be. This requires an assessment of the factors driving change in the political system (beyond formal institutions), an explicit weighing of the likely political

violence, will be considered a problem needing a ceasefire, while other kinds of violence, such as intimate

economies of the violent political marketplace.

The alternative theory of change accepts that many important things lie outside the scope of this theory of change: global capitalism, mounting xenophobia, the disorders of the Anthropocene. These global problems should be addressed, but they cannot be remedied by the policy instruments designed for the problems of subaltern open political systems in Africa and the Middle East. Accepting this limitation, the theory of change focuses on achievable goals ('small wins') and on preparing civic coalitions for more ambitious gains.