

Political parties and peacebuilding

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■ Executive summary

International peacebuilding actors have so far been wary of engagement with political parties. However, there is growing recognition of the importance of working with local political systems, institutions and parties in the promotion of peace. It is therefore important that international actors strengthen their understanding of political parties in conflict-affected contexts and how such parties relate to conflict and peacebuilding, as well as examine how best to deepen engagement with them.

This report examines the nature of political parties in conflict-affected contexts and the challenges such parties face in becoming effective actors for peace. It analyses three cases – Sri Lanka, Nepal and Myanmar – where parties have played very different roles in relation to both the grievances and struggles that have fuelled conflict, and efforts to build and sustain peace. It then discusses how lessons from these cases can inform the work of international peacebuilding actors.

Finally, the report examines the track record of the international community in working with political parties in conflict-affected contexts. It argues that international actors must move beyond “blueprint” approaches to party support and instead develop more comprehensive and context-relevant responses to the specific challenges that such parties face.

There is growing awareness among international peacebuilding and statebuilding actors of the importance of engaging more effectively with political processes and structures in conflict-affected and post-conflict states. Although political parties are frequently at the centre of such processes and structures, international actors have generally been wary of working with them beyond limited capacity-building activities, seeing this as a sensitive and high-risk area.

Political parties can help build peace. However, they can also fuel antagonism, grievance and conflict. If international peacebuilding and statebuilding actors are serious about working more effectively with local politics, it is essential that they strengthen their understanding of political parties and the roles they play in relation to conflict and peacebuilding, as well as rethink how best to engage with them.

Political parties in conflict-affected and post-conflict contexts

Political parties can play an important role in brokering an end to conflict, mediating bargaining over the nature of the political settlement and shaping the post-conflict state. Indeed, parties are unique among political institutions in their potential to give political expression to grievances that may otherwise be expressed through violence and to aggregate and articulate the interests of citizens during both peace negotiations and transition processes, as well as more broadly in post-conflict political governance and statebuilding. However, in practice political parties frequently do not play such a positive role and in some contexts actively undermine peace. Such failure is due both to constraints imposed by the broader political and institutional context and to the internal weaknesses of parties themselves.

The context in which they function shapes the ability of political parties to act as peacebuilders. In many conflict zones, from Afghanistan to Colombia, parties and their members experience violence and harassment that limit their ability to play an active peacebuilding role. Moreover, political parties are often excluded from peace negotiations, which frequently only include armed actors, or are included in a very limited way. Beyond such direct barriers, the nature of political systems in conflict-affected contexts can also limit the effectiveness of parties as peacebuilders. Such systems are frequently characterised by hybrid regimes and limited democratic traditions, the fusion of state and ruling party, or high levels of party fragmentation that dissipates political energies in endless realignments. Such circumstances restrict the ability of parties to collaborate effectively around an inclusive peace agenda. More broadly, as Carothers (2006) points out, in such contexts the fragmented nature of society, low levels of trust and weak associational life undermine citizens' ability to come together – including through political parties – to express common interests.

However, it is also the severe internal weakness of political parties that prevents them from contributing to peacebuilding in many conflict-affected and post-conflict contexts.¹ Such parties tend to be institutionally thin; have limited organisational or political capacity, little presence beyond the capital, and limited membership; and are only active at election time. They often do not have coherent ideologies or policy agendas to which citizens can hold them to account, lack internal democracy, and are highly personalised around “charismatic leaders who monopolize power and do not tolerate dissent” (Kumar & De Zeeuw, 2008: 278). Moreover, the precarious financing of many parties in conflict-affected contexts limits their ability to reach out to citizens and makes them more likely to seek illicit funding sources. This institutional, policy and financial weakness limits parties' ability to deliver effectively on any of their functions and certainly reduces their potential as peacebuilders.

According to Carothers (2006), the most negative consequence of weak political parties is the inadequate representations of citizens' interests. Arguably the most critical role that parties can potentially play in peacebuilding is to aggregate and represent the interests of different groups in bargaining processes between state and society over the nature of the post-conflict political settlement, both during peace negotiations (where parties can access or influence negotiations) and in post-conflict political life. However, according to Wild and Foresti (2010), it is in their role as connections between state and society that parties in such contexts are most clearly failing. Indeed, in many conflict-affected contexts parties operate primarily as vehicles for elites to win power and access resources or as front

organisations for armed groups, with little incentive to perform wider interest-aggregation and representation functions. According to Reilly et al. (2008: 4), this is because in post-conflict contexts “most parties do not emerge as mass based movements with strong aggregation and articulation functions ... [but] are the result of elite initiatives”.

Political parties in conflict-affected contexts are frequently embedded in complex networks of patronage and clientelism, operating as vehicles for elites to distribute rents through patronage networks in exchange for support. Such dynamics are particularly acute in countries with natural resource-based economies, such as Nigeria or South Sudan, and inevitably reduce incentives for parties to reach out to citizens with meaningful policy programmes or promote reforms to a system from which they benefit. Beyond clientelist networks, parties are also embedded in informal institutions such as traditional governance structures, religious institutions, or ethnic and kinship networks that also shape their incentive structures.

Politics in conflict-affected contexts tends to be characterised by deep polarisation and the way that parties relate to this is critical in terms of shaping prospects for peace. This is particularly true where conflict has been fuelled by identity-based grievances and antagonisms. Where parties focus on identity cleavages and the history of conflict, as in Bosnia or Sri Lanka, they can fuel hatred and promote extremist political agendas. However, where parties can develop inclusive agendas for addressing grievances and building peace, as in South Africa, this can be a basis for progress.

Identity-based parties play a particularly crucial role in such settings. These often have great legitimacy with their constituencies and can potentially help to ensure that the interests of minority groups are reflected in peace processes. However, the extent to which they are able to do this in a way that enhances peace depends on their ability to present a national vision or represent the interests of their communities in national institutions, as opposed to playing divisive identity politics. As in Nepal and Sri Lanka, such parties often struggle with the difficult balance between articulating a vision that is acceptable to the majority and can be a basis for progress, and expressing the genuine grievances and political aspirations of minority constituents. This challenge is made more difficult by the fact that in conflict-affected contexts “the civil values of trust, mutual understanding and willingness to discuss differences, which are essential for the development of multi-party democracies, are often deficient” (Kumar & De Zeeuw, 2008: 264).

³ It is worth noting that political parties in countries experiencing conflict and those in post-conflict contexts frequently experience similar types of internal weaknesses – which are indeed common to parties in many different types of fragile states. However, the opportunities and incentives for parties to take risks in reaching out across divides and building coalitions, or to seek to broaden their constituencies and strengthen their representative functions are likely to be greater where peace processes are under way or conflict has ended, especially where this has been accompanied by democratic reforms.

Political parties in post-war Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's 25-year civil war ended in 2009 with a military victory by the government over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which had been fighting for a separate state for the Tamil minority of the north and east. Following the end of the war the government led by President Rajapaksa and his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) refused to offer a political solution to address Tamil grievances or investigate the gross human rights violations committed in the final stages of the war. Instead it further alienated the Tamils through continued human rights abuses, an oppressive military presence in the north and east, a policy of Sinhalese chauvinist discourse. More broadly, the Rajapaksa government used the popularity it had gained by winning the war to systematically undermine democratic institutions, the rule of law and freedom of speech; create a powerful, authoritarian presidency; and engage in widespread corruption.

In 2015 a broad umbrella opposition coalition was created to challenge Rajapaksa, led by an ex-SLFP minister, Maithripala Sirisena. This unprecedented coalition campaigned on a platform of restoring democracy and curbing corruption, and – against all predictions – won both the January 2015 presidential election and the August 2015 parliamentary election. The end of the Rajapaksa era offers a new opportunity for Sri Lanka's political society to address the causes and legacy of war. The country's political parties will have a central role to play in this process, but it remains unclear whether they are up to the task.

Sri Lanka has a long history of democracy, while its political parties have significant organisational and political capacity, offer distinct ideological and policy agendas, and are reasonably capable of fulfilling aggregative and representative functions. However, they are highly personalised around leaders and deeply embedded in patronage networks, meaning that private interests often dominate. Moreover, Sri Lanka's parties – particularly minority parties – have always operated in a context of extreme political violence and insecurity, which has severely curtailed their actions. Therefore, while the country's political parties may have the capacity to effectively represent citizens' interests – including in relation to conflict resolution – they have not always had the incentives or space to do so.

Given the long ethnic war and history of international involvement in failed peace initiatives, it is not surprising that political parties are deeply polarised in relation to both ethnic identities and the role of international actors in Sri Lanka. Of the two main parties, the SLFP has been most resistant to the political accommodation of Tamil demands, sceptical of peace initiatives and hostile to international involvement, a position that became more extreme under Rajapaksa. On the other hand, the other main party, the

United National Party, while still representing Sinhalese interests, initiated the 2002 peace process and international involvement in it. Beyond these two main parties there are also minority Tamil and Muslim parties, which have largely welcomed all peace initiatives and international involvement, as well as extremist Sinhalese nationalist parties that are openly anti-Tamil and reject all international involvement.

This polarisation has made it very difficult for Sri Lanka's political parties to work together for peace. Indeed, over the years various parties have deliberately fuelled antagonisms related to ethnic identity, conflict resolution and international engagement, often for their own political or private advantage. In particular, since the end of the war the SLFP's Sinhalese chauvinist and anti-international agenda not only maintained Rajapaksa's popularity, but was also a useful way to resist accountability for war crimes and justify authoritarian and illegal actions.

Given the deep history of distrust and outright violence among Sri Lanka's political parties, many observers were surprised that in 2015 nearly 40 parties and groups were able to come together to form "the united national front for good governance" and to maintain this collaboration to win the presidential and parliamentary elections. An unprecedentedly broad coalition government is now in place, including the two main parties, as well as other smaller parties. Key to the success of this coalition-building effort was the fact that the parties mobilised around the issue of good governance. This moved the political debate away from the divisive issues of ethnic identity and accountability for the war to areas where the interests of various parties and their respective constituencies were broadly aligned. Critically, concerns among the Colombo elite about attacks on democracy combined with a feeling among the wider Sinhalese population that "the post conflict economic gains were perceived to have accrued only to a limited number of people connected with the rulers" (Mancini & Rubagotti, 2015: 1).

The current coalition government represents an important opportunity to move towards a sustainable peace. However, given the deep divisions between communities and political parties, as well as the messy nature of Sri Lankan politics, the risks are high that the coalition government could break down or become paralysed. Indeed, the International Crisis Group (ICG, 2015a: 8) argues that "partisanship and party-first political dynamics ... will continue to complicate further reforms, particularly with regard to ethnic reconciliation and the legacy of the war".

Sri Lanka's new government has to make progress on two key areas that are central to a sustainable peace. The first area is rebuilding democracy and the rule of law, i.e. the platform on which the government was elected and where there is significant consensus among parties. Some important steps have already been taken in this regard, including reducing the powers of the president and

establishing oversight mechanisms. However, there is resistance from some parties because corrupt politicians are worried about facing criminal charges.

The second area includes the contentious issues of accountability for the war and a political solution for the Tamils. There have been some positive indications, with the new government announcing that it will establish transitional justice mechanisms and a constituent assembly to create a new constitution. If meaningfully implemented, both these measures could be vital to addressing Tamil grievances and aspirations and building a sustainable peace. However, progress will be difficult, given the deep divisions on these issues between parties and among the wider population; the resistance of political and military leaders to holding people accountable for war crimes; and the fact that all political parties contain extremist elements that push them away from compromise. Moreover, the issue of international involvement in justice processes will be particularly tricky: for the Tamils it is fundamental, while for many Sinhalese nationalists it is unacceptable.²

Tamil parties – notably the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) – will have a key role to play in any future peacebuilding process. This alliance brings together the main Tamil parties and, with the LTTE's disappearance, it is now recognised as the main representative of the Tamil people and has far greater freedom to operate. The TNA's challenge is to build a credible democratic political organisation that can effectively represent Tamil interests. According to the International Crisis Group (ICG, 2012: 7), this requires “reject[ing] the Tigers' legacy more clearly than it has, however hard this will be with many of its voters”.

Following the end of the war the TNA adopted a strategy of moderation and engagement and made a number of important concessions that angered sections of the Tamil population. However, its willingness to compromise was not reciprocated by the government, while the repressive political climate prevented it from openly criticising government policies. This left the TNA squeezed between an uncompromising and repressive government, a frustrated Tamil population, and some strongly nationalist sections of Tamil civil society and the diaspora. It struggled to effectively represent Tamil interests, and divisions in the alliance emerged. Following the parliamentary elections the TNA is now the largest opposition party (because the two main parties are part of the government coalition) and has been appointed as the official opposition – the first time a Tamil party has led the opposition in 30 years. This presents a unique opportunity to enter the political mainstream and engage with the Sinhalese political elite from a position of greater strength. However, expectations among the Tamil population are high and the TNA must deliver some improvements for Tamils in order to avoid internal splits and a return to a more hardline agenda.

The international community has had an uncomfortable history of engagement in Sri Lanka's conflict, from the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) (1987-90) to the Norwegian-brokered peace deal of 2002 and the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) (2002-08).³ While the Tamils largely look to the international community for assistance, Sinhalese nationalists reject international actors as supportive of Tamil separatism, and consecutive governments have obstructed the activities of international organisations. The sensitivity around international involvement leaves very limited space for engagement with political parties. However, with the opening provided by the new government – which appears less hostile towards Western countries – international actors could seek dialogue with parties regarding the need for transitional justice and a political solution, as well as offer lessons and best practices in this regard. The international community can also support the TNA to make the most of its role in opposition. However, it is critical that such engagement is carried out discreetly and sensitively, without fuelling divisions. Finally, with the opening up of civil space, international actors can support civil society to foster a less divisive political debate, hold parties to account and push the coalition government to make progress on peacebuilding.

Political parties and Nepal's peace process

Nepal's decade-long conflict ended in 2006 with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the government and Maoist rebels. There have since been significant achievements in peacebuilding. These include the Maoists' transformation into a political party and integration into mainstream politics; demobilisation processes that integrated Maoist soldiers into the national army; and – after years of deadlock in the Constituent Assembly (CA) – the promulgation of a new constitution. However, challenges remain, including the need to address the aspirations of ethnic groups that are unhappy with the new constitution and to provide transitional justice to deal with the legacy of war.

While it must be recognised that the failure of Nepal's high-caste, Kathmandu-based political class to address the needs of the broader population has been an underlying driver of conflict, in recent years Nepal's political parties have played both positive and negative roles in relation to the country's peace process. For example, in 2005-06 the main parties were able to unite to restore democracy and end the conflict. However, during the period of the two CAs (2008-12 and 2013-15) political parties became bogged down in wrangling and internal divisions, stalling the constitution-drafting process and preventing progress on peace. In 2015 the three main parties finally agreed a constitution, although they exclud-

² The government has indicated that transitional justice mechanisms will have some international involvement, but it is as yet unclear how much.

³ The IPKF was effectively driven out by the LTTE, while the Norwegian-brokered peace collapsed and the SLMM was forced to leave.

ed smaller parties from this process, leaving the latter angry and alienated. How effectively Nepal's parties can now contribute to a sustainable peace in the new context following the promulgation of the constitution and the October 2015 elections remains to be seen.

Nepal's political parties exhibit many weaknesses that are common in conflict-affected contexts. They employ patronage and use state resources to consolidate their power, are highly personalised and centralised, lack representation of marginalised groups, and have limited capacity or outreach beyond the capital and untransparent funding. Moreover, the unstable nature of Nepali politics and frequent changes of government keep parties focused on gaining power rather than performing aggregative and representative functions or developing and delivering on a policy agenda. Party fragmentation is a problem, with parties unable to manage the interests of a range of members and experiencing factionalism and splits. In particular, the three large national parties, the Nepali Congress (NC), Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist and Leninist) (CPN-UML), and ex-rebel Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) have all been riven by divisions over key political issues and have experienced constant dissent and leadership crises. Beyond the three large parties there are a number of smaller parties, including recently emerged parties that promote the interests of marginalised ethnic or identity groups.

Nepal's political parties played a central role in brokering an end to the conflict and establishing a path to peace-building. In response to the king disbanding parliament and holding illegitimate local elections, in 2006 the seven largest parties and the Maoists came together in a nationwide strike that forced the king to return power to parliament. The new democratic government stripped the king of his powers, began peace talks and signed the CPA. The parties and the Maoists then formed an interim government that held CA elections in 2008. Given the weakness and fractiousness of Nepal's political system, it is remarkable that its parties were able to maintain collaboration during this period, as well as to work with the Maoists at whose hands they had suffered significant violence. Notably, it was an attack on democracy rather than the conflict that provided the primary impetus for the parties to come together. Nepal's mainstream parties have their roots in the 1990 democracy movement, in which ageing party leaders were personally involved. The risk to this hard-won democracy at the hands of the king combined with frustration at the spiralling conflict to create impetus for collaboration. As the UN Special Representative to Nepal noted at the time, "The Nepali political actors have shown an extraordinary capacity to maintain dialogue and work through their differences, but trust among them is fragile" (Martin, 2008).

For seven years the CA failed to draft a constitution. This was due primarily to deep disagreements within and between the parties over the nature of the Nepali state. The marginalisation of certain ethnic, caste and regional populations was a root cause of conflict, and during peace negotiations the parties had all agreed that a more inclusive and federal state was required. However, they profoundly disagreed over the nature of this federal model. While ethnic federalism was central to the Maoists' agenda, the NC, UML and some smaller right-wing parties rejected this model, which threatened to undermine the power of the privileged caste and ethnic identity groups who dominate Nepal's traditional parties. To add to the complexity, new parties emerged representing marginalised ethnic groups, such as the Madhesi, which demanded an ethnic federalism to meet their aspirations for autonomy and took increasingly polarised positions. At its heart the struggle over federalism was one between parties representing those disadvantaged by the old political settlement and parties representing those privileged by it.

Identity has now become the central axis for political mobilisation in Nepal, because "the conflict [provided] marginalized populations – particularly Dalits ... women, the landless and ethnic and indigenous people – with a wider political space to articulate their grievances" (Sunam & Goutam, 2013). Following the end of the conflict, many of these identity groups and their demands were brought into formal politics through inclusion in the CA. However, at the grassroots level multiple identity-based movements have emerged. While the rise of identity politics has given a voice to marginalised groups, the failure of Nepal's main political parties to articulate and negotiate these identity-based agendas has resulted in rising levels of extremism, ethnic tension and violence. Managing Nepal's identity politics will require the main political parties to listen and respond to identity-based demands and the leaders of identity-based groups to seek compromise.

The political context has been dramatically altered by the September 2015 constitution. Following the May 2015 earthquake Nepal's political parties faced increasing pressure to reach a deal and the leadership of the three large parties developed and pushed through the new constitution with little consultation. In response, over 30 small parties resigned from the CA, angry at this exclusionary process. While the fact that the three large parties finally overcame their differences and came up with a relatively progressive and inclusive constitution⁴ does potentially move the peacebuilding process forward, the fact that this was at the expense of commitments to inclusion that originated from the peace process is problematic.

There is currently deep anger among a number of marginalised ethnic groups who feel that their aspirations were not taken into account and that the new constitution

⁴ For example, the constitution provides quotas for some groups, including women, indigenous communities and Dalits, within constitutional bodies. It also recognises the rights of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.

reflects the interests of the traditional elites.⁵ As Jha (2015) comments, “On one side were hill castes which dominated the ruling parties, and on the other were marginalised social groups which felt excluded from the constitutional process”. Many feel that the Maoists in particular let them down by joining with traditional political elites and reneging on key promises about federalism. A Madhesi-Tharu mass movement in Nepal’s southern plains has been holding ongoing protests since August calling for substantial amendments to the constitution and a revision of the newly created federal boundaries. However, Kathmandu’s political leaders appear reluctant to seriously address these concerns and continue to underestimate “the scale and intensity of disagreement and the complexity of the often-competing grievances and claims” (ICG, 2015b). Meanwhile, protests and the security forces’ response to them are growing increasingly violent, with 49 people killed in protests since August, creating a deepening political crisis.

International actors have engaged with Nepal’s political parties in a variety of ways. According to Wild and Subedi (2010), these include brokering and political engagement, supporting policy dialogue around constitutional and peace processes, involving parties in activities to support greater social inclusion, and providing technical assistance to political parties. Following the promulgation of the constitution and the election of a new parliament, international actors should now focus on promoting a much needed transformation in Nepal’s party culture, for example by supporting the development of young leaders; promoting political party reform, internal democracy and decentralisation; fostering citizen demands for issue-based politics; and supporting accountability and oversight mechanisms. On the critical issue of inclusion, international actors can support marginalised populations to exercise their voice through civil and political society and encourage mainstream parties to be more inclusive and address identity-based concerns.

The risks of providing support to Nepal’s parties remain high, given the levels of instability, corruption and partisanship. Moreover, Wild and Subedi (2010) caution that international actors have limited influence among Nepal’s parties. However, given that political parties will take the lead in developing Nepal’s new political settlement and building peace, working with them must be a priority, despite the challenges this poses.

Political parties, democracy and peace in Myanmar

Myanmar is in the midst of a democratic transition and a tentative peace process aimed at ending over 60 years of conflict. Since reforms began in 2011, political space has opened and political parties have played a more prominent

(although still limited) role in national life. The landslide victory of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in the November 2015 elections, taking 79% of elected seats, offers an opportunity to deepen the transition, increase political freedoms, and strengthen democratic institutions and processes. However, such progress is far from assured. The military retains 25% of parliamentary seats and key ministerial posts, and will resist attempts to limit its power. Critically, 75% of support in parliament is required to amend the constitution (a step that is critical for both democratic transition and building a sustainable peace), but the NLD only has a 59% majority.

Myanmar’s party system is notable for its high level of fragmentation: more than 90 parties contested the 2015 elections. According to Kempel et al. (2015), these parties are divided into three major forces. Firstly, there is the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which lost power in the 2015 elections, and the National Unity Party (NUP), both of which are national parties, closely connected to the military and dominated by the majority Bamar ethnicity. Secondly, there is the NLD, which also has a nationwide presence and is dominated by the Bamar community, and which swept to power on its strong pro-democracy credentials. Thirdly, there is a large number of smaller ethnic parties that have a regional presence and focus on promoting internal self-determination and minority rights. These parties have significant credibility among ethnic communities, but failed to make the gains predicted for them in the 2015 election. In addition, there are a number of small Bamar parties.

The military’s domination of Myanmar’s political life has inevitably been the primary factor preventing parties from channelling citizens’ interests into political decision-making. However, Myanmar’s parties also have serious internal weaknesses that hamper their aggregative and representative functions. Apart from the USDP and NUP, they lack effective structures and organisational capacity, and are financially weak. They have little presence at the local level and limited engagement with citizens and civil society. Myanmar’s parties also tend to be personalised, hierarchical, exclusive and dominated by an elderly male elite. Moreover, while parties campaign on broad principles such as “democracy”, “the rule of law” or “federalism”, they largely lack detailed policy agendas.

Following the 2015 election the landscape for Myanmar’s political parties has shifted. If democratic reforms now deepen – as appears likely – parties may play a more central role in shaping political transformation and peace processes. However, in order to make an effective contribution they will need to overcome the fragmentation and divisions that beset the party system. According to Kempel et al. (2015: 12), Myanmar has “a political culture dogged by absence of trust following colonial rule and almost sixty

⁵ This disquiet has been especially intense in the Terai – Nepal’s long southern lowland strip bordering India – where recent years have seen tensions between lowlanders and highlanders who have migrated there over recent decades. In particular, both the Madhesi people of the plains and the Tharu people of the north-west want provinces that reflect the location of their ethnic populations.

years of one-party and army rule”. There is deep antagonism among parties, notably between the NLD and USDP, as well as those that contested or boycotted the rigged 2010 elections. While the NLD may have swept parliament, the political interests represented by the USDP/NUP and the ethnic parties have not disappeared. The NLD must work to build bridges between parties, reduce antagonisms, and develop a common agenda for reform and peacebuilding. This will be difficult, given personal and ideological differences and the lack of clear policies around which to build collaboration.

The greatest surprise of the 2015 election was the failure of ethnic minority parties. Given that ethnic minorities make up 40% of Myanmar’s population and that many have deep grievances and strong aspirations for autonomy, their lack of political representation in parliament is problematic. The great fragmentation of the ethnic parties contributed to their failure at the polls, with the ethnic vote split among many small, competing parties. However, despite the new parliament being Bamar dominated, ethnic politics will continue to be central to Myanmar’s political life. As the International Crisis Group (ICG, 2015c: 15) points out “at this early stage in the transition and given the long marginalization of ethnic minority communities, identity politics still holds sway”. National parties, including the NLD, have so far failed to demonstrate their commitment or ability to promote the interests of ethnic groups. The NLD will need to reach out to defeated ethnic parties and their communities and find ways to address identity-based aspirations and grievances to prevent the election result from deepening existing identity-based cleavages.

Beyond ethnicity, religion is a sensitive issue in Myanmar and the response of the country’s political parties to rising Buddhist chauvinism and anti-Muslim sentiment has been disappointing. While the USDP actively fuelled this agenda in an attempt to gain popularity, the NLD failed to speak out against Buddhist chauvinism or in support of Muslim minorities, to the disappointment of many Muslim NLD supporters. No party fielded Muslim candidates and the current parliament is the first ever without Muslim MPs. Moreover, many Muslims who were denied identity documents, as well as the persecuted Rohingya Muslim community, were unable to vote. It is to be hoped that the NLD will now end its silence, act to defend Muslims’ rights and seek to foster an inclusive national vision that offers an alternative to Buddhist chauvinism.

A priority for all parties must be to help develop the nascent peace processes. In October 2015 the government signed a “nationwide ceasefire agreement” with eight ethnic armed groups, which is intended to pave the way for political dialogue. However, a larger number of armed groups remain outside the ceasefire, including some of the largest ones. While the ceasefire is an important first step,

the peace process is currently both partial and exclusive, and a wider range of armed actors and civilian voices must be drawn in. Problematically, neither ethnic minority parties nor ethnic minority civil society has been included in the peace talks, preventing them from representing the interests of their communities in these negotiations and meaning that ethnic armed groups act as the sole spokespeople for their communities.⁶ Until now the two tracks of transformation in Myanmar – peacebuilding and political reform – have been largely disconnected. It is important that these are brought together, expanded to include a broader range of actors and used to create a common agenda for national reconciliation. It remains unclear what space an NLD government will have to make this happen.

International actors can help Myanmar’s political parties rise to the challenges that face them. While historically there has been very limited space for international actors in Myanmar, since 2011 they have begun supporting parties, primarily providing assistance with capacity-building. While respecting the fact that Myanmar’s transition and peace processes are home grown, international actors can encourage the country’s political and military leaders to broaden the peace process to include political parties and civil society, as well as offer lessons from elsewhere on inclusive peace processes and linking democratic transitions and peacebuilding. International actors can help facilitate cross-party consensus-building around peace and democracy agendas, as well as support parties to engage with civil society and citizens and channel their voices into political processes. Finally, international actors could support ethnic parties to build more united and effective platforms from which to engage with power holders, promote the interests of their communities and contest future elections.⁷

Lessons for international actors

An examination of existing knowledge about political parties in conflict-affected contexts and of these three cases highlights some important lessons for international actors engaged in peacebuilding.

International actors have a weak record on working with political parties in conflict-affected contexts. Reilly et al. (2008: 3) argue that “the peacebuilding community has mostly neglected the vital role of political parties, which can play either a constructive or a regressive role in democratic development and peacebuilding”. This neglect is partly because engagement with parties is difficult and risky, given limited entry points and the fact that parties are political organisations with partisan interests and a reputation for corruption. Moreover, where international actors do engage, they frequently lack an in-depth understanding of local political contexts. As a result they “work with political parties in isolation, using blueprint approaches that assume that the weaknesses of political parties can

⁶ According to Kempel et al. (2015), relations between ethnic armed groups and ethnic political parties are limited.

⁷ Including by supporting these parties to build on existing initiatives, such as the Nationalities Brotherhood Federation that brings together 22 ethnic parties.

be treated in the same way in each country” (Wild & Foresti, 2010: 2). While such standardised technical assistance may have some value in supporting election processes, it is unlikely to help parties to effectively aggregate and represent citizens’ interests within peacebuilding processes or broader bargaining over the post-conflict political settlement.

Political parties can play a powerful role in advancing peace, as they have done at times in Nepal, or in blocking it, as the SLFP and smaller Sinhalese nationalist parties did in Sri Lanka. It is therefore vital that international actors strengthen engagement with them. However, such engagement must be based on an understanding of how parties’ willingness and ability to support peacebuilding are shaped by broader struggles over the political settlement (e.g. among elites or between identity-based groups); by the nature of the political and party system; and by a range of other private, partisan or financial incentives, such as the desire to avoid legal accountability for war crimes in Sri Lanka or to appease anti-Muslim sentiment at the polls in Myanmar. Taking into account this wider context, the Netherlands Institute of Multiparty Democracy (NIMD, 2015) argues that international actors should work at multiple levels to support the reform of the political system; the development of inclusive, responsive and policy-based parties; and greater trust between political actors and citizens and knowledge about democratic values and practices.

While such a broad approach is important, the above case studies indicate a number of areas where international engagement can be particularly useful. International actors can potentially assist parties to overcome the type of party fragmentation seen in Nepal and Myanmar by supporting smaller parties to build common agendas and platforms, and by encouraging larger parties to develop the internal democracy and dialogue required to prevent splits. International actors can also support political parties to demand inclusion in peace processes, as well as encourage governments and armed actors to accept such demands. Likewise, international actors can facilitate greater engagement between civil society and political parties, including by supporting dialogue initiatives and bringing together civil society and political actors around critical peacebuilding issues (such as constitutional reform), as well as by supporting civil society actors that seek to hold parties to account.⁸ It is critical that such support recognises the different challenges faced by different types of parties. As Ten Hoove and Pinto Scholtbach (2008) point out, while dominant ruling parties may need support to develop accountability, newly emerging parties frequently

lack capacity, and ex-rebel parties struggle with transforming military structures into democratic ones.

All three of these cases indicate that coalition-building among parties can be crucial in advancing peacebuilding. In Nepal the main parties came together to remove the king and end the conflict, while in Sri Lanka it took an unprecedented coalition to remove Rajapaksa from power and open some potential space to address the causes and legacies of war. Meanwhile, in Myanmar the failure of ethnic parties to form effective coalitions has left them excluded from parliament. In both Nepal and Sri Lanka, it was attacks on democracy rather than concerns over conflict that prompted the establishment of coalitions. This is perhaps unsurprising, because party interests largely converge in maintaining a democratic system in which they can play a central role, while divisions between parties over conflict-related issues tend to run deep. International actors should seek ways to support coalition-building among parties and to encourage such coalitions to move beyond protecting democracy to addressing more thorny conflict-related issues.

In Sri Lanka, Nepal and Myanmar, conflicts are driven primarily by identity-based exclusion and grievances. International actors can play an important role in encouraging parties to address these grievances, and support reforms to the political system that provide greater voice to marginalised communities. This can include, for example, capacity-building for civil society groups that represent marginalised populations and wish to represent themselves politically, or for identity-based parties or political groupings, as well as undertaking dialogue to encourage mainstream parties to be more inclusive and address identity-based grievances. However, it is critical that any such international engagement focuses on supporting both minority and mainstream political actors to move away from extreme positions and identify common ground.

International engagement with political parties and the politics of peacebuilding is highly sensitive and can face varying levels of resistance. For example, in Nepal, international actors have engaged to a significant level, although their influence remains limited; in Myanmar, there is a small but growing space for engagement; and in Sri Lanka, international involvement is a deeply controversial issue. It is important that international actors understand how their efforts to engage with political parties in conflict-affected contexts play into local political and power struggles. It is also vital that in these highly polarised and complex political contexts international actors seeking to understand and engage with political life tread very carefully.

⁸ As Jesnes (2014) points out, in transitional contexts such as Myanmar, relatively inexperienced political parties often have much to learn from civil society. International actors can facilitate and support this learning process.

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