The role of ex-rebel parties in building peace

By Clare Castillejo

■ Executive summary

Political parties can play an important part in shaping the direction of post-conflict peacebuilding, and parties that emerge from rebel movements have a particularly central role to play in this regard. While such groups are often uniquely placed to articulate the grievances that underlie the conflict and channel these into political processes, they are also able to remobilise for violence and undermine progress on peace.

This report discusses existing knowledge about the ways in which rebel groups transform into political parties and the factors that shape their contribution to peacebuilding. It then examines three cases of political parties that have emerged from rebel groups – the FMLN of El Salvador, UCPN (Maoist) of Nepal and SPLM of South Sudan. In each case it explores how the internal dynamics of the group and its relationship to society, the nature of the peace settlement, and the broader local and international context determine the group's engagement with democracy and peace processes. Finally, the report examines how international actors can support rebel-to-party transition and the integration of these parties into peace processes and political systems in ways that promote a sustainable and inclusive peace.

Political parties can play a central role in shaping, supporting or undermining peacebuilding. Parties that emerge from rebel movements have a particularly crucial part to play in this regard. Such groups are often uniquely placed to articulate the grievances that underlie the conflict and to bring ex-fighters into political processes. As Ishiyama and Batta (2011: 369) argue, ex-rebel parties can "provide channels for both interest articulation and political process engagement for former rebels, thus contributing to a sustainable peace, stability and democracy". Conversely, they are also uniquely placed to act as spoilers to peace by retaining the capacity to remobilise for violence.

Ex-rebel parties and peacebuilding

In order to play a positive role in peacebuilding, rebel groups must transform into democratic parties that can effectively represent citizens' interests. This transformation is not a linear or blueprint reform process, but an iterative one whereby rebels' engagement with peace processes and the nature and outcome of these processes influence their willingness to transform into a democratic party, while the extent of their transformation in turn shapes progress on peace.

De Zeeuw (2008: 1) argues that

> transforming an armed rebel movement into a political party, let alone a democratic political party, is arguably one of the hardest peacebuilding challenges ... [it] compels former rebel leaders to change their military struggles into political ones and to reorganize their war-focused military organizations into dialogue based political entities.

He suggests that this transformation requires the group to undertake both structural changes, including demilitarising and developing a party organisation capable of representing popular interests, competing in elections, and taking on governance responsibilities; and attitudinal changes, including democratising decision-making within the organisation, and adapting goals and strategies to gain popular support. A broad range of internal and external factors determine whether rebel groups successfully transition into democratic parties that contribute to peace.

The willingness and capacity of the rebel movement's leadership constitute a critical factor. It is helpful if those

who lead the movement through this transformation come from its political rather than military wing, because they are more likely to have the political experience and skills required to participate effectively in bargaining over the post-conflict political settlement, carry the group's members/fighters with them, and engage with the broader public. Organisational capacity is also critical, e.g. whether rebel groups have unified organisational structures and a military and political wing with some balance of power between the two. Moreover, Nissen and Schlichte (2006: 45) argue that if groups were previously political entities before taking up arms, "there is a high possibility that patterns of thinking and behaviour relevant to the political field will survive the logic of war and serve as a valuable basis for the (re)transformation process of the group". They also argue that rebel groups that have administered territory are more likely to have developed the organisational structures and governance capacity required for peaceful politics.

Ishiyama and Batta (2011) argue that parties emerging from rebel groups inevitably go through a period of internal contestation over changes to leadership, identity, goals and structure. The outcome of these struggles shapes the party's capacity to carry out key functions, including aggregating and articulating interests, integrating followers into the democratic process, and competing in elections. From these struggles must emerge both a shared and realistic vision of what the group seeks to achieve (beyond merely winning power) and the organisational structures necessary to take this forward. Without such a common vision parties are unlikely to remain politically relevant and risk being torn apart by personal power struggles. Developing this vision through internal contestation requires time and is perhaps best done in opposition. When rebel parties take power directly following a conflict, such internal struggles can be particularly damaging to the prospects for peace, because the stakes are far higher.

The extent to which rebel groups transform into peaceful democratic parties depends on a variety of national and international factors. Central among these is the nature of the conflict settlement. If rebel groups are marginalised by the peace settlement or a winner-takes-all electoral system they have little incentive to transform and may undermine the peace settlement. However, as Ishiyama and Batta (2011) point out, ex-rebel parties that immediately gain power and access to state resources also have little incentive to transform. It is perhaps ex-rebel parties that enter the opposition in electoral systems that offer credible opportunities for them to win and that already have significant popular support that have the greatest incentives to embrace democratic, peaceful politics as a means to access power. The security; disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR); and monitoring provisions of the conflict settlement are also critical, as they must provide the security guarantees required for rebel groups to confidently give up their capacity for violence and join the political mainstream. More broadly, rebel-to-party transition is more likely to be successful and

contribute to peacebuilding if relatively stable and robust political institutions exist into which these groups can be integrated, and if capacity across the political system is reasonably high. Finally, as Soderberg-Kovacs (2007) points out, the regional and international context – including the legitimacy granted by the international community and the regional political and security conditions – also shape incentives for rebel-to-party transition and engagement with peace.

El Salvador: the FMLN

El Salvador's Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) is a successful example of rebel-to-party transition. The FMLN emerged in 1980 in a context of extreme inequality and repressive rule. It had broad popular support and diaspora financing, was an effective fighting force, and posed a significant challenge to the state. After 11 years of conflict, in 1992 the FMLN and Salvadorian government signed a peace accord and the FMLN began its transformation into a political party. It has since had significant success: by 2000 it was the largest party in the legislative assembly and won the presidency in 2009 and 2014.

According to Wade (2008), a range of national and international factors created the momentum to end the conflict and bring the FMLN into the political mainstream. The end of the cold war and international condemnation of abuses by the Salvadorian military prompted an end to U.S. military support. This, combined with new commitments to peace and democracy by Central American leaders, the example of a UN-supported peace process in Nicaragua, and a more conciliatory leadership in El Salvador's ruling party, created the opportunity for a UN-brokered peace process that established the FMLN as a legitimate political party. The nature of the peace settlement – in particular sweeping security sector reform – facilitated the FMLN's transformation by overcoming "the most significant impediment to political participation before the war … the use of repression by state forces" (Wade, 2008: 46).

The FMLN was well placed to enter democratic politics. Its leaders had previous experience of political organising in parties or unions, and strong political capacity and commitment to democracy. The FMLN also had widespread popular support that provided an incentive to enter electoral politics. Moreover, Nissen and Schlichte (2006) argue that the FMLN's clear structures and decision-making processes enabled the leadership to carry the group's members with it and reduce the risk of spoilers emerging. The FMLN undertook profound organisational restructuring to adapt to its role as a political party, including the democratisation of decision-making and expansion of its leadership committee (although some authoritarian tendencies remained). Critically, the FMLN deepened its engagement with the population (e.g. by opening party offices and holding local assemblies throughout the country) and developed a legislative programme, thereby strengthening its ability to represent citizens' interests.

Although this organisational transformation was primarily internally driven, the FMLN received funding from the Salvadorian diaspora, and financial and technical support from a variety of European foundations and institutions.

While the FMLN had some success in the first post-conflict elections, over the following decade its credibility was undermined by internal tensions. The five guerilla organisations that comprised the movement were riven by bitter feuds over ideology, party governance and political alliances. Wade (2008) describes how these divisions were between moderate groups that wanted a less radical policy agenda, greater internal democracy and engagement with other parties, and hardliners who wanted to maintain a revolutionary agenda and a centralist party structure, and did not want to compromise with others. These struggles continued to hamper the FMLN's electoral success and prevent it from effectively representing the interests of its non-elite support base until 2004, when it agreed to create tactical alliances with other parties and went on to win the 2009 and 2014 presidential elections.

The FMLN has made significant contributions to peace-building in El Salvador. Not only did it force the democratisation of political space and the demilitarisation of the state, but it also went on to provide a channel to articulate the interests of non-elite populations in local and national politics. However, while progress was made on political reform – the FMLN's main priority – socioeconomic grievances such as high inequality and unemployment remained unaddressed and constitute a serious barrier to deeper and more sustainable peace. According to Martin Alvarez (2010), this is because the peace deal involved the government agreeing to political and security reform in return for the FMLN accepting economic liberalisation. Since the end of the conflict the country has faced severe social tensions and rampant criminal violence. Since gaining the presidency the FMLN has taken some steps to address socioeconomic grievances, including investments in public services and public security, subsidies, and land reform. However, deeper change is required to create a more "peaceful" peace and it remains to be seen if the FMLN's second presidential term will deliver this.

Nepal: the UCPN (Maoist)

The transformation of the United Communist Party of Nepal (UCPN) (Maoist) from rebel group to political party has been largely successful and the organisation has certainly contributed to developing a more inclusive political settlement in Nepal. However, in recent years the party has been damaged by internal splits, while large sections of its original support base feel it has reneged on promises to them and instead joined the political establishment.

The Maoists emerged in the 1990s and launched a war against the state in 1996, with the aim of ending the monarchy and feudalism and addressing the marginalisation of large sections of Nepal's population. The group had significant popular support and its military successes ultimately created pressure for the removal of the authoritarian king, the restoration of democracy, a peace agreement in 2006 and the Maoists' entry into politics as the biggest winner in the 2008 elections. A long-drawn-out constitutional reform process resulted in a new constitution in 2015.

The relative success of the Maoists' transformation into a political party was due to a number of factors. Firstly, the rebel group had its roots in a political movement, had a clear ideology, and had strong and well-structured military and political wings. As it engaged in the peace process, it actively strengthened its political structures, reformed its civilian apparatus to be better adapted for government, and trained its cadres to undertake political mobilisation in anticipation of seeking power through elections. This organisational transformation was facilitated by the fact that the Maoist leadership comprised an educated elite with a history of political engagement and with the capacity, interest and pragmatic outlook required to lead this transition. Moreover, the Maoists had gained significant political and governance capacity at the local level through the administration of the large territories under their control.

The terms of Nepal's peace settlement were favourable to the Maoists' transformation into a party. It offered them a real opportunity to win seats and influence in the Constitutional Assembly (CA) and to thereby promote profound reform of the Nepali state through political rather than military means, as well as provided for a credible and internationally monitored DDR process. Moreover, popular support for the Maoists and their reform agenda provided an incentive for them to seek power through democratic politics. The international environment was also a largely supportive factor, with strong pressure from Nepal's donors and neighbours for a peace settlement, and a UN mission that provided oversight. However, in the initial years following the conflict Indian attempts to block the Maoists from achieving political power or integrating their cadres into the army threatened to undermine the peace process.

Since the end of the conflict the UCPN (Maoist) has experienced serious internal contestation over its identity, goals, policies and leadership, and ideological and personal fault lines have surfaced. Initially tensions were between radical and moderate elements. As the moderates increasingly dominated, the Maoists "gradually shifted their ideology toward one that embraces democratic values and norms" (Sunam & Goutam, 2013) and in 2012 the more radical elements of the party broke away. However, further tensions emerged over the Maoist leadership's support for the controversial 2015 constitution, which led much of its core support base to feel that the Maoists have not delivered the change they promised and instead have become part of the political mainstream focused on elite interests. This created a further rupture in the party, with one of its key leaders leaving to form a new party.

There is no doubt that the Maoists have contributed to building peace and democracy in Nepal, although much remains to be done. It was Maoist pressure that forced Nepal's political establishment to agree to a renegotiation of the political settlement, which has resulted in significant and largely progressive reform of the constitution. Moreover, the Maoists' entry into political life and the establishment of the CA provided political space for marginalised populations. Critically, however, neither the Maoists nor Nepal's other major parties have responded effectively to the rise of identity politics and to the concerns of some ethnic groups about the constitution. These tensions now pose the greatest threat to peace. Progress on peacebuilding will require efforts to accommodate the aspirations of ethnic communities, as well as a deeper restructuring of power and resources to address the marginalisation that caused the conflict. It is unclear what role the weakened Maoist party will play in this process or how relevant it will be in Nepal's post-constitution political landscape.

South Sudan: the SPLM

The Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) has spectacularly failed to transform into a democratic party or contribute to peace in South Sudan. Instead, the party fused with the state and has been corrupt, ineffective and repressive, while its internal power struggles have plunged the country back into violent conflict. The Sudan People's Liberation Army fought a 22-year war against the Sudanese government, which ended with a peace agreement in 2005 and South Sudan's independence in 2011. Following independence, the SPLM took power and used the country's oil revenues for personal enrichment and patronage, while failing to deliver the fruits of peace and independence to the population. In 2012 a power struggle between President Salva Kiir and his former vice-president, Riek Machar, spiralled into renewed conflict, with each mobilising his ethnic bases, resulting in tens of thousands of dead and injured, and huge numbers of displaced. Neighbouring countries are currently supporting peace negotiations through the regional body, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD).

The SPLM's failure as a party is related to its internal organisation and to the local and international context. The group's political structures have always been very weakly developed compared to its military structures and it is highly authoritarian, with its leaders John Garang and then Salva Kiir maintaining complete control of decision-making. Although Garang did strengthen the group's political structures following the end of the conflict, Young (2008: 169) argues this was "a cover to identify himself as a political leader and to distance himself from the military role that continued to be the main basis of his power". Both during and following the conflict the movement made little effort to build a political constituency among the population.

Critically, the SPLM did not have a clear ideological agenda. It initially presented itself as a revolutionary Marxist group in order to obtain military support from neighbouring Ethiopia and Eastern Bloc backers. Following the end of the cold war it focused on self-determination for South Sudan, gaining support from Western actors. The glue that held the SPLM together was the goal of South Sudanese independence, and once this was achieved the party had no common vision, no effective political structures through which to build such a vision and no incentives for its all-powerful leadership to do so. Intense personal power struggles surfaced and the party fractured – thereby fracturing the military, with which the party remained closely linked, and triggering conflict. As Sørbø (2014: 2) argues,

> The SPLM was never a cohesive movement and suffered from long-standing political disputes. During the war for South Sudan's independence from Sudan differences were to some extent suppressed in order to achieve a united front against the common enemy … but alliances like the one between Kiir and Machar were always vulnerable.

The local context in South Sudan was also not conducive to the SPLM developing into a democratic and peaceful party, particularly the severe power imbalance between the SPLM and other elements of state and society. Because South Sudan was a new state, there was no strongly established political system into which the SPLM was required to integrate, nor any substantial political opposition. Likewise, there are few state or civil society institutions (e.g. judiciary, parliament, NGOs or media) with the capacity to provide oversight of the SPLM or check its power. Once in government the SPLM's power and resources came from its cooptation of extractive rents, so it did not need to build popular support or legitimacy. Hence, SPLM leaders were free to engage in widespread corruption and patronage, and there were no incentives for the party to represent citizens' interests, deliver public goods or undertake any reforms. Added to this is the fact that South Sudan has little tradition of horizontal political mobilisation and "a long history of elites using the militarization of ethnic identities … for their own personal political gain" (Fleischner, 2014: 12).

International factors have also contributed to the SPLM's failure. De Waal (2015) argues that the SPLM's Western backers unrealistically "held out the hope that this guerrilla movement would shed its record of corruption and human rights violations, and transform into a model of good governance". Certainly, donors to South Sudan – who provided extensive technical and logistical support to the SPLM following the end of the conflict – did not push sufficiently for internal reform of the movement or broader political reforms. Nor, despite extensive investment, did donors stimulate the provision of basic public goods, such as road infrastructure, that could have provided some kind of peace dividend. Since the return to conflict the IGAD countries have failed to exert sufficient pressure (e.g. through visa and travel bans) on South Sudan's warring

leaders to force them to engage in real peacemaking. Furthermore, states providing backing to Kiir, including Uganda and China, must recognise that supporting one corrupt faction of the SPLM against a breakaway faction will not bring a sustainable peace and that deep reform is required.

It is now critical that South Sudan's peace process should include dialogue with the wider population to ensure that their voices are heard and avoid simply carving up power among warring elites. The process must instead address the grievances that have fueled this conflict, including "a weak but centralised government, scarce resources, patronage politics, the legacy of war, and a lack of peace dividends" (Sørbø, 2014: 1). The SPLM has served the new state of South Sudan very badly. In the long term it is important to develop other strong and democratic parties and an effective civil society that can offer a more democratic and inclusive agenda.

International support

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 – and particularly so when working with ex-rebel parties, whose structures are in transition, whose members have recently been involved in violent struggle, and whose capacity for and commitment to democratic politics are unclear. Moreover, if international actors do engage with parties, they frequently lack an in-depth understanding of local contexts and adopt blueprint approaches, which are particularly inappropriate when dealing with ex-rebel parties.

Yet there are things that international actors can do. These include encouraging leaders to participate in the peace process and transform their organisation into a party; supporting DDR; providing training courses, capacity-building and logistical support to parties; and supporting engagement between parties and broader society. De Zeeuw (2008) argues that in the short term international actors should focus on building the political will, incentives and security conditions required for the transition from rebel group to party. In the medium term their focus should be on supporting parties to demilitarise their structures and adapt their goals to the post-conflict environment – in the way that the FMLN has so successfully done – while in the long term they should assist and support the development of well-structured and democratic parties. International peacebuilding actors must also address the role of international and regional factors and actors. For example, during Nepal's 2013 elections European donors collaborated in unprecedented ways with China and India to support peaceful elections, despite the split in the Maoist party.

The capacity and priorities of rebel groups' leadership are critical. According to Dudouet (2009), "In order to effectively manage the shift from running an armed insurgency to heading … an effective political party, insurgency leaders need to be willing to take bold initiatives, engage proactively and react swiftly to structural and geopolitical changes". A short-term priority for international actors could be to strengthen the political capacity of party leaders and seek to persuade them to transform their organisations and engage in peacebuilding (including through incentives in the form of legitimacy or political appointments provided in the peace settlement). Over the medium and longer term international actors could also try to reach out beyond the leadership to engage with more diverse and reform-minded elements of the party. However, where domestic political incentives do not exist for such transformation – as in South Sudan – international actors will have little sway.

It is critical that any international support for rebel-to-party transitions is based on a strong understanding of how such groups' willingness and ability to become democratic parties and contribute to peacebuilding are shaped by broader struggles over the political settlement (such as the balance of power between ethnicities and regions in Nepal); by the nature and strength of the political and party system; and by a range of other private, partisan or financial incentives (such as access to extractive rents in South Sudan). In particular, the nature of the peace agreement can encourage party transformation (as in Nepal and El Salvador, where it offered opportunities to gain power through elections), or discourage it (as in South Sudan, where power was effectively handed to the SPLM). For this reason, supporting the development of a peace settlement that establishes the right incentives for rebel groups to transform into democratic parties must be a priority for international actors during the initial stages of peacemaking. Once peace deals are done, international actors can continue to build incentives for broader political reform into their long-term engagement (including through development and trade relationships).

International engagement with ex-rebel parties must be set within broader support to reform the political system; develop a range of inclusive, responsive and policy-based parties; strengthen both state and non-state oversight and accountability mechanisms; and build greater trust and engagement between political actors and citizens. The need for such a systems approach is illustrated by the case of South Sudan. It should also be long term. As the cases of El Salvador and Nepal illustrate, the transformation from rebel movement to democratic and peaceful political party is a slow process involving numerous setbacks and intense internal contestation. Ultimately, rebel-to-party transformation and engagement with peacebuilding are highly complex and risky processes, and require politically smart and contextually relevant responses.

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