

# What is left of the 'liberal peace'?

As casualties mount in Afghanistan and western efforts at liberal peacebuilding come under increasing fire, **Mark Hoffman** asks whether peace is worth pursuing.

In the aftermath of the Cold War there developed a widely shared conviction about how to address post-conflict situations. Drawing on initial successes in Namibia, South Africa, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Mozambique, the transformation of war torn societies through political and economic liberalisation became the norm.

Influenced by the immediate post-Cold War euphoria, captured in Francis Fukuyama's iconic book *The End of History and the Last Man*, the roots of this conviction were much deeper, stretching back to the core ideas of the Enlightenment itself. What came to be characterised as the 'liberal peace' argued that democracy and the market economy were intrinsically peaceful and mutually reinforcing.

By the mid-1990s this had coalesced into a package of interventions under the banner of 'liberal peacebuilding'. The core elements of this were a focus on democratisation and good governance, respect for the rule of law, the promotion and protection of human rights, the growth of civil society and the development of open market economies.

However, by the late 1990s, the presumed success of this package started to be called into doubt. In the challenging circumstances of Bosnia, Rwanda and East Timor amongst others, the results were uneven, bordering on disastrous. Perversely, in a number of cases, rather than fostering peace, the interventions by the international community led to a resurgence of political violence.

Liberal peacebuilding efforts were further tarnished by the Bush administration's intervention in Afghanistan and invasion of Iraq. Not only did the US-led coalitions make use of similar strategies – constitutional reforms, elections, reconstruction projects aimed at opening the economy to global dynamics – but they also cloaked themselves in the language of the liberal peace, bringing 'freedom and democracy' to the Iraqi and Afghan people. Whether fairly or not, liberal peacebuilding became conflated with the policies of a United States under the sway of the neo-cons.

So where did it all go wrong for the liberal peace? One school of thought argues that it was an elite driven, top-down, outside-in, technocratic and overly formulaic experiment in social engineering that lacked local legitimacy. The charge sheet reads along the following lines: it paid inadequate attention to the institutional conditions necessary for successful democratisation and market reform; didn't fully appreciate the tensions and contradictions within and between the various goals of peacebuilding; suffered from poor coordination; lacked the necessary resources; lacked the political will to stay the course; often operated on the basis of little or no detailed knowledge of local conditions.

This critical analysis doesn't question the underlying virtues of the liberal peace, but raises concerns about the manner in which it has been pursued in post-conflict societies. The main thrust is that the push towards economic and political liberalisation was pursued too rapidly for post-conflict societies to be able to manage. Rapid democratisation, including the holding of early elections, proved highly destabilising with the electoral processes exacerbating tensions. Similarly, the liberalisation of economies took place at a pace and extent that was well beyond the capacity of post-conflict economies to absorb. The solution, it is argued, is to concentrate first on building up institutional capacities and inculcate liberal values and practices over time.

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The difficulty with what became known as the 'institutionalisation before liberalisation' model is that it effectively countenances the use of illiberal, undemocratic practices to produce liberal democratic societies, an approach which has proved controversial in Bosnia.

A less optimistic variation on this theme is that the push for a liberal peace represents naivety and misunderstanding about the nature of politics in most post-conflict societies. Western institutions and practices of accountability are not easily transplanted to non-western political and legal cultures. The emphasis on individual rights, obligations and accountability doesn't sit easily within cultures that emphasise community and the family over the individual. But the core problem, notably in Africa, is that the modern state, which is a necessary precondition for the success of the liberal peace, does not really exist. Instead we find forms of neo-paternalism – personal rule, 'Big Man' politics, nepotism and clientelism.

This merges into a more radical, critical approach: the charge that the pursuit of a liberal peace is a cover for the political and economic interests of the West. Not only has liberal peacebuilding done more harm than good, it is in reality an exercise in power that seeks to subjugate the non-west by creating dependency through chronically weak states. The implication is that the difficulties encountered by the liberal peace are not simply technical problems. The problem is with the liberal conception of peace itself.

However, many of liberal peacebuilding's most trenchant critics offer little in the way of clear alternatives. Should we simply give up on the whole enterprise and, as Edward Luttwak famously argued, 'give war a chance'? The argument is that we should let states fail, let wars reach their natural conclusion and let the victors get on with an indigenous process of reconstruction. This, it is claimed, might not produce a liberal peace but it would at least produce a stability and order. And, with luck, it might even produce a magnanimous 'victor's peace'.

The opposite perspective argues that there is no credible alternative to the liberal peace. Defenders argue that critics have produced a lopsided, uneven account of its track record and presented an all-encompassing 'straw man' picture of liberalism. The recognition that liberal peacebuilding is difficult is not a basis for abandoning it.

As a first step it would mean a move away from the paternalistic, technocratic one-size-fits-all approach to peacebuilding. Shifting to a more bottom up, society building approach, there is a need to engage creatively and constructively with local dynamics without falling into the trap of 'romanticising the local' or entrenching existing structures of violence and/or inequality. A peace that is built on the ground needs to reflect the interests, needs and aspirations of local populations rather than those of the international peacebuilding community. If we start by asking what 'we' hope to achieve then we are starting with the wrong question.

This leads to a rethinking of the nature of peace itself. Rather than assuming that peace is a coherent project which can be readily transplanted from one society to another, there needs to be a recognition that the nature and meaning of peace should be heavily debated and constantly evolving.

Inspiration for such an orientation could be drawn from Amartya Sen's recent book on *The Idea of Justice*. Paralleling Sen's move away from 'transcendental institutional' accounts of justice, it would recognise that peace is multi-faceted, pluralistic and that when the competing conceptions of peace circulating within a society run up against each other, there is no absolutist account that provides a privileged perspective from which to judge one being better than the other. Instead there needs to be an ongoing, continuous process of collective reasoning that injects more perspectives, more voices that can actually be heard, into an understanding of how peace might best be conceived and enacted in a given context.

This, in turn, just might 'give peace a chance'. ■



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