



The continuities of conflict in peacetime

Based on Crisis States Programme Working Paper no.37: David Keen, 'Demobilising Guatemala'. This is intended to provide a summary of the principal findings, and an indication of the implications these may have for debates over policy.

War is often seen as a conflict between competing 'sides' where the aim is to win. However, the aims in a war may be quite diverse and may include, for example, the acquisition of wealth and the suppression of democratic forces – aims which may be better served by prolonging the war than by winning it. Rather than assuming a sharp break between war and peace, it may be more productive to suppose that conflict is ever-present, that conflict is shaped at a variety of levels by various groups who create and manipulate it for various reasons, and that conflict in peacetime is in many ways a modification of conflict in wartime. Keen's paper explores the implications of such continuity in the context of Guatemala, and in particular the faltering process of demobilisation. Beginning with an examination of the vested interests of armed groups, the paper goes on to look at the role that shame has played in the peacetime actions of the counter-insurgency structures, ending by commenting on how new global 'wars' represent new opportunities to reframe local conflicts.

- **War cannot be assumed away**

Wars such as that of Guatemala were profoundly shaped by the Cold War. Peace became possible in part because of the thawing of the Cold War, and has generally been understood as the implementation of a variety of commonly accepted principles (democratisation, liberalisation, modernisation) summarised as 'the Washington Consensus'. The apparent end of ideological war did not bring an end to many of the structures that grew up in the war, though it has left many of those involved without a clear sense of ideology or purpose. Nor has peace banished the extreme inequalities, poverty and exploitation that played such a large role in generating conflict.

- **Counterinsurgency structures and elite interests are an obstacle to implementing peace accords**

Such an obstacle needs to be taken into account in advance, rather than noted retrospectively as a reason why things did not work out as hoped and planned. Some of these factors and obstacles are known and understood by some of the key actors (e.g. elements of the US government and UN); but for the most part it seems that policy proceeds as if these factors were not important, in part through ignorance but perhaps more because it is advantageous to proceed as if they were not important. A neo-liberal agenda makes it very difficult for international donors either to address grievances underpinning the war, or to reform and rebuild the state in such a way that it could challenge the insidious alliance between criminal elements and the still-present counterinsurgency structures, notably by providing an efficient, civilian-based system for enforcing the law.

- **The continuing vested interests of the army define peacetime realities**

Although counter-insurgency might have been presented as anti-Communist, in fact it was also used for the intimidation and suppression of pro-democracy, union and human rights groups. However, such repression proved counterproductive, tending to increase the strength of the guerrilla movement. The suspicion that winning the war was not necessarily an overriding objective is heightened by allegations that the army preferred picking on civilians to confronting armed rebels. The counterinsurgency saw the military evolve its own institutional interests (including significant economic projects). When the brutality of the counterinsurgency led to a proliferation of rebels, a second phase was launched, involving control of movements and creation of 'strategic hamlets' where 'developmental' resources could be concentrated. This brought additional economic benefits to the military. The war also saw the development of a close relationship between elements of the army and organised crime. Such goals have persisted following the end of war.

- **The weakness of the police strengthens the military**

The weakness of law enforcement is a key problem, with the weakness of the police and civil intelligence making it very difficult to provide credible alternatives to a largely unreformed military. In such circumstances, the military can continue to legitimise itself through the 'war on crime' and the 'war on drugs'. Meanwhile, elements of the security apparatus (including elements of the police) are deeply implicated in organised crime and drugs. Like the counterinsurgency (and the distinction sometimes blurs), police action often fails to target the expressed enemy, but succeeds in intimidating a much wider group.

- **Reactionary influence of private sector**

The continuing power of a conservative private sector also tends to reduce opportunities for constructing a viable, accountable state, or to move beyond over-reliance on counterinsurgency structures. The private sector tends to be ambivalent in relation to the peace process. On the one hand, many elements of the private sector seem to have been instrumental in pushing for peace; on the other, elements of the private sector have at least three reasons for seeking to undermine a fragile peace: i) some elements of the private sector continue to rely on profoundly exploitative economic relationships and with this comes a continued interest in the suppression of democratic forces; ii) there are elements of the private sector which are closely entwined with a burgeoning criminal economy, which requires a degree of disorder in order to prosper; iii) the private sector as a whole usually has resisted the increase in taxation necessary for the implementation of the significant welfare provisions demanded by the peace settlement.

- **Human rights become defined in a conditional way**

Recognition of an individual's human rights can be seen as conditional, in peacetime as well as wartime. Recognition of rights tends to be conditional on an individual avoiding the label of 'rebel' or 'subversive' or 'delinquent'. This fundamentally undermines the whole concept of human rights, which are intended to apply to all humans. The presumed guilt of certain groups is intimately connected with continued abuses against them.

- **Close connection established between military and organised crime**

Four connections between the military and organised crime are prominent: i) soldiers may tolerate crime because they are taking a cut; ii) the prevalence of crime provides legitimacy for continued high levels of military spending, given the weakness of law enforcement; iii) retired generals and ex-soldiers play an important role in organised crime, and often expect to be protected by the authorities; iv) underfunded governmental attempts to combat crime seem to help clandestine intelligence organisations to solidify relationships with organised crime.

- **Sense of betrayal felt by army**

While the private sector and US has historically invited the army into violence, recently they have increasingly taken an opposite position, condemning those engaged in violence. Within the army, the sense of betrayal is strong, as is the loss of a clear identity and sense of purpose. This helps explain deviation into criminal activities and the apparent symbiosis with organised crime (at once a financial opportunity, and a new, legitimising source of 'threat').

- **Distribution of shame influencing peacetime conflict**

Peace brings with it attempts at reapportioning blame for the war, leading to adverse decisions taken against the military. This seems to have fed into a backlash. Apportioning blame carries the threat not only of legal sanctions but of feelings of shame. As abuses escalate, the task of warding off shame becomes more pressing. This may be done through violence. For the most part, guilt and shame have not been acknowledged by the perpetrators of violence in Guatemala. Challenging dehumanising definitions, in relation to the victims of violence, would undermine perceptions of many within the security apparatus that they are involved in a continuing and legitimate 'war'. At the same time, the way imposing shame can feed into violence needs further exploration.

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