POLICY DIRECTIONS

CITIES AND CONFLICT

Crisis
States
Research
Centre

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HIGHLIGHTS:

- Sovereign and civil wars are declining, but *civic conflicts* – encompassing various forms of violence in cities – are on the rise.

- Cities are often havens of relative security in civil war; but *it would be a mistake to take urban security for granted* when war has ended. Major population movements and socio-economic ruptures often lead to widespread conflict in cities *after* civil war.

- Due attention needs to be paid to the often-overlooked effects of sovereign and civil conflict – and post conflict reconstruction – on the local, as well as national state; often municipal state capacities are eroded with long-term implications for development.

- Fragile states will continue to rapidly urbanise, and unless issues such as urban employment, housing and basic services are addressed, civic conflict is likely.

- Social relations in cities are always *antagonistic*, but the question is how to translate this into generative civic *engagement* rather than violent civic *conflict*. Simply suppressing conflict can be counterproductive in the medium and long term.

- Cities are privileged arenas in which to push the boundaries of confrontational democratic politics. 'Do no harm' to the urban middle classes in development interventions, but also find meaningful ways to extend the political process to be more inclusive of the popular classes.

INTRODUCTION

The Cities and Fragile States programme contributes to understandings of state fragility through a focus on the local, urban scale. States do not just exist at the national level and cities are important sites of intensive state concentration. Along with being potential incubators of democratic innovation and economic growth, they are and have always been intrinsically linked to the processes of bureaucratisation and state-building. As the work of Charles Tilly (1992) showed, it was the negotiated relationships between sovereigns seeking to fight wars, and urban capitalists with the means to fund them, that resulted in consolidated national states in Europe. Cities and war, then, interacted to make states.

Our research shows the intersection of cities, states and war to be far more complex in the contemporary developing world. Cities have changed, states have changed, and armed conflict itself has changed. Nevertheless, getting to grips with contemporary state fragility in a rapidly urbanising developing world still requires an understanding of the way cities are related to contemporary violent conflicts. While urban areas are still often at the forefront of state-making, paradoxically they are increasingly also primary sites of state erosion and crisis across much of the developing world – a fact that is often obscured by the concentration of both wealth and state organisation in cities. Understanding this dual character of cities in relation to conflict and fragility is an essential part of any holistic approach to state-building.

Many cities in contemporary fragile states emerged as sites of colonial extraction, and urban elites and middle classes never possessed the autonomy from states that gave bargaining power to their equivalents in the European historical experience. Moreover, those holding state power in developing countries now often tend to access capital regionally or from abroad rather than domestically, and urban and rural fortunes are frequently interdependent. Consequently, while there have been many violent conflicts in post-colonial states since independence, they have not been routinely forged on the back of resources provided by urban capitalist elites. Furthermore, although the number of wars – both inter-state and civil – has clearly been declining during the second half of the twentieth century (Newman 2009), other forms of conflict are proliferating. These are mainly centred around cities and civic discontent and represent the biggest contemporary threat to human security worldwide.

THREE FORMS OF CONFLICT

Violence itself is often categorised as being political, social or economic in nature. In this project, however, we adopt a view that all violent conflict is intrinsically political, even where there is no attempt to take control of the state itself. We frame our discussion in relation to the three concepts of *antagonism, conflict*

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'Both inter-state war and civil war are in decline. Yet few would argue that the world is becoming a safer place. How can we make sense of this paradox?'

and *engagement*. *Antagonisms* are part and parcel of social order; inevitable aspects of development and change (Beall 2009). The important question is whether these are channelled destructively through *conflict* (which in the remainder of the paper can be taken to mean *violent* conflict) or in a more constructive way through generative forms of *engagement*. Conflict still characterises the majority of fragile states in one way or another; indeed it is arguably the most important indicator of their fragility. Our typology of conflict goes beyond the simple inter-state/civil war distinction while also eschewing the idea of distinguishing political and non-political forms. Instead we have categorised according to issues of space and scale, questions of sovereignty and patterns of organisation, with a particular focus on the role of cities.

Sovereign conflict refers to situations where international actors are directly and explicitly involved in warfare. Despite its decline, its destructiveness in both the long and short term can be immense, as Iraq and Afghanistan amply testify. Cities, and capital cities in particular, are seen as significant territory in sovereign conflicts; securing the city is an overriding priority, which also means that forms of insurgency are increasingly concentrated in cities, as those seeking to resist invading powers turn to asymmetric forms of warfare such as urban terrorism to maximise casualties on the invading side. In processes of reconstruction after sovereign wars, international actors also pour into cities, which can concentrate decision-making about the needs of urban-dwellers in the hands of international and national actors rather than local ones. As the cases of Kabul in Afghanistan (**Esser 2009**) and Dili in East Timor (**Moxham 2008**) illustrate, this kind of international involvement can have negative consequences for the city and ultimately lead to further outbreaks of conflict, both locally and more broadly.

Civil conflict refers to violent conflict between two or more organised groups within sovereign boundaries (though there may be outside intervention), one or more of which represents (or claims to represent) part of the state itself, who are fighting for control of some part of state institutions and/or territory. Historically this has often taken root in rural areas where rebel military organisation can more easily evade state reach, meaning that even though cities are often the 'prize' to be won as confirmation of victory (**Landau-Wells 2008**) they often remain spaces of relative security even as rural refugees flock in to escape the conflict. This was evident in the civil wars of Northern Uganda (**Branch 2008**), Nicaragua (**Rodgers 2008**), Kashmir (**Venkatachalam 2007**) and the South Bolivar region of Colombia (**Vargas 2009**). It was also true of several of Afghanistan's cities during the 1980s, even while civil war raged outside (**Giustozzi 2009**), and remains true to a certain extent of Quetta in the violent 'AfPak' border zone today (**Gazdar et al 2010**). The last two examples also demonstrate cities' key role in war economies, which often provides motivation to keep them secure. Under these circumstances cities can become relatively autonomous, turning away from what is left of the state and seeking protection instead from rebel groups, as the case of Goma, Eastern DRC testifies (**Vlassenroot & Buescher 2009**).

Civic conflict refers to a broad array of conflicts, all of which tend to take place in cities. These include gang warfare, violent crime, terrorism, religious and sectarian riots, and spontaneous riots or violent protest over perceived state failures. These may spill beyond city boundaries but are associated with one or more of the distinctly urban qualities of density, heterogeneity, compressed inequality, and the location of government. Civil conflict can span urban as well as rural areas, but differs in that it is an instrumental endeavour to take control of the state or supplant some of its functions; civic conflict, by contrast is ultimately a reactive expression of grievances vis-à-vis the state or other urban actors. It is not the fact that cities are inherently alienating spaces that leads to civic conflict, but the way in which power is structured in spaces with dense concentrations of people (Rodgers 2010). For example our study of Ahmedabad, Western India (**Chandhoke 2009**) demonstrates how the civic riots of 2002 were not just an expression of conflict between two social groups, but were clearly linked to the fact that Hindu ethno-religious identity had become connected to a particular, exclusive state-making project in the state of Gujarat, as became starkly manifest in its capital city. Thus while cities are certainly always antagonistic, whether this results in violent conflict is fundamentally a question of politics, exercised at different levels but impacting on cities.

CONFLICT TRANSITIONS

Civic conflict is undoubtedly on the rise, probably in absolute terms and certainly in relative terms. This is linked to trends in other forms of conflict: for example, civil wars – which have tended to *drive* urbanisation – are on the decline, and in their wake variants of civic conflict are increasingly emerging as *responses* to that urbanisation (see Box 1). Understanding this may help us make sense of the fact that cities have been islands of stability and security in many conflicts, yet are also associated with some of the bloodiest violence of the contemporary era. Certainly, each year around three times more people die as a result of 'interpersonal violence' (a category corresponding fairly closely to civic conflict) than inter-state or civil war; and the figure is rising (**Fox and Hoelscher 2010**).

BOX 1: THE SHIFT FROM CIVIL TO CIVIC CONFLICTS

In 2006, the streets of Dili, the capital of East Timor, exploded into civic conflict some years after the end of the civil conflict that brought its independence, and despite the massive presence of UN peacekeepers. This was arguably because the 'post-conflict' reconstruction process failed to take into account the effects of rapid urbanisation during and after the war, as our work has shown (**Moxham 2008**). Similar concerns are raised in our research on Northern Uganda, which suggests that 'if Gulu town is to become destabilised internally or if its population is to become a destabilising influence in the region, this would only occur, perhaps counter-intuitively, *after* the war ends' (**Branch 2009: 2**). More generally, CSRC work shows that the impacts of economic sanctions, unbalanced peace processes and heavily politicised policing in the wake of civil wars can heighten the potential for civic conflict to erupt in the 'post-conflict' moment (**Keen 2009; Davis 2007**).

Global trends in conflict therefore seem to point inescapably towards urban manifestations. Even where civil conflicts do still emerge, or spiral out of and into civic ones, they are likely to be increasingly urban in character as the contemporary examples of Iraq and Afghanistan testify. In countries that have previously experienced major civil war and are averse to the idea of another prolonged, rural insurgency, the expression of grievances is likely to manifest on city streets. As a Ugandan politician noted in relation to recent riots in Kampala, people 'don't want a war but they want something else they are unable to explain'; something that starts 'from the city' (Goodfellow, n.d.).

CIVIC CONFLICT AND THE URBAN POLITICAL PROCESS

In the context of this relative rise in civic conflict, how urban antagonisms are manipulated, channelled, deferred or suppressed has important impacts on both the incidence of violent conflict and prospects for long-term development. A CSRC case study of Colombian cities illustrates how particular urban political configurations can bring radical reductions in civic conflict in some contexts but not others (Guttierez et al 2009). Institutional changes that provided new spaces for political debate in Bogotá and Medellín allowed for a coalition of the elite and urban middle class to form, in turn leading to recognition of their shared interests in an improved security environment and the decision to support substantial increases in public goods provision. The policies of this coalition ultimately led to dramatic reductions in homicides in what had been two of the most dangerous cities in the world until the mid-1990s.

The key point about the transformation of these cities is that at a critical juncture a balance of power emerged that incentivised action to reduce civic conflict rather than generate it. Without the institutionalised forms of civic engagement that allowed this to happen, factional politics prevail and diverse social groups cannot easily come together in a developmental coalition. This was the case for example in Ahmedabad in Western India, which our research shows to be historically weak in terms of civil society, trade unionism and cross-ethnic political exchange, and therefore prone to the manipulation of urban antagonisms into violent conflict by political organisations that draw their support from division rather than from agendas for change through engagement.

The Colombian case demonstrates the crucial importance of flexible mechanisms for dynamic engagement that allow a wider range of actors than previously to come together, recognising new configurations of shared interests and producing developmental outcomes. While the elite-middle class coalition that emerged in Bogotá and Medellín was actually rather exclusive of the urban poor, it still benefited them. However, this may not be the case everywhere. Indeed, to avert civic conflict in other settings may require extending such processes beyond the middle class. Events in Bangkok clearly illustrate this, insofar as it was the exclusion of the poor from a pact between the monarchist elite and the urban middle class (Glassman 2010) that led to the protest that spiralled into civic conflict in May 2010. The experience of the Colombian cities may therefore not be easily replicable; without the high homicide rates that threatened all classes in those cities, a developmental elite-middle class coalition may not have emerged.

'Cities are critical to our understanding of the dynamics of contemporary violent conflict and processes of state fragility, and offer key policy entry points for strengthening fragile states.'

In Managua for example, the middle class and elite have managed to spatially isolate themselves from crime, and this has prevented the emergence of pro-poor solutions (Rodgers 2007).

THE POTENTIAL DANGERS OF DEFERRED AND SUPPRESSED CONFLICT

Where civil conflict has created 'conflict fatigue' among the population, post-war governments often benefit from broad support and a general aversion to politics. Under such circumstances, societal antagonisms can be 'deferred' or actively suppressed for a period of time. However, when governments begin to fail on some of their promises, the combination of frustrated expectations and unexpressed grievances can explode into civic conflict, as recent fatal riots in Maputo illustrate (Sumich 2010). The case of Rwanda, where political debate is tightly circumscribed, poses similar if not more severe dangers given its history. While the suppression of competitive politics was widely considered to be necessary for a period after the genocide, the spate of grenade attacks in Kigali in the first half of 2010 raises serious questions about where continued suppression could lead.

Cities are pivotal sites of middle class growth and consolidation vis-à-vis the state – vital processes in development (Birdsall 2007) but also antagonistic ones – and they are also spaces where the presence or absence of the state features prominently in the daily lives of all citizens. As such they should be places where antagonism is channelled into politics and the boundaries of political debate and participation are pushed. In cases such as Kigali this should certainly be done gradually and tentatively; but even in these circumstances cities should be thought of as incubators of the political aspects of development as well as engines of economic growth. Fostering urban political processes with an emphasis on drawing out civic demands in relation to issues of housing, service delivery and employment relations offers the potential to nurture political identities that will redraw the lines of antagonism away from issues of ethnicity, race and religion, which rarely lead to generative outcomes, notwithstanding the importance of addressing horizontal inequalities (Stewart 2002).

CITIES, STATES AND CONFLICT

We consider state fragility to be impacted on by three key processes of state erosion, consolidation and transformation. The latter two processes can be thought of as linked to resilience and development respectively. Civil and sovereign conflicts are not only major setbacks to state-building at the national level, they can also erode state capacity at the city level. For example they can render those 'secure' cities that are struggling to cope with surrounding conflict more dependent on financial transfers from the centre,

at the expense of developing their own taxation mechanisms (**Venkatachalam 2007**), or they can result in international actors intervening to 'over-determine' urban decision-making 'above the heads' of local state institutions (**Esser 2009**). **Civic** conflicts impact on state erosion particularly at the local level, with our case studies of Ahmedabad (**Chandhoke 2009**) and Karachi (**Budhani et al 2010**) demonstrating how non-state violence can be seen as increasingly legitimate, ultimately undermining local state authority and consolidation.

There are different ways of managing the antagonisms that accompany the inevitable process of urbanisation, with each having different implications for state consolidation and transformation. We juxtapose two broad ways in which these antagonisms are often managed – *manipulation into conflict and deferral/suppression* – with a normatively preferable and occasionally evident third: *generative engagement*. The first, manipulation into conflict, leads to violent civic outcomes and state erosion, as noted above. The second, which might take the form of active suppression or more consensual 'deferral', sometimes arises when the exhaustion due to experience of a previous civil war allows governments more leeway than usual. Although this may stave off violent conflict for a certain period, there is a danger under these conditions that the state might undergo some transformation through ambitious agendas for change but may not adequately consolidate, creating new tensions that derive from long-standing grievances. Eventually these cannot be contained, resulting in civic violence.

To minimise violent civic conflict in both the long and short term while also allowing for states to both consolidate and transform, there is an urgent need for institutionalised forms of political organisation and interaction that structure the interests of socio-economic groups vis-à-vis states, forcing political solutions to emerge out of debate and institutionalised bargaining. The cases of Bogotá and Medellín, and also Durban (**Beall and Ngonyama 2009**), illustrate the possibility cities offer for developmental coalition-formation in the face of conflict, despite their limitations. These institutional bargaining processes place new demands on the state and therefore create a need for strong and active states that are capable of responding accordingly. Thus in an ideal scenario state-making, socio-economic bargains and the reduction of civic conflict are all mutually supportive processes. To achieve this we propose that the real challenge is changing the logic of politics from one which is either about violent conflict or relatively inclusive but unproductive and informal rent-sharing, to one which treads a difficult middle path: essentially a reinvigoration of creative political contestation, which is most likely to emerge in cities.

In cities in fragile states, populations ultimately do not demand enough of the state. This is because the mechanisms are not in place for them to do so, stunted civil societies have not generated a culture of rights, and demands instead are focused on individual patrons. Ultimately, states can only achieve developmental transformation if their citizens are given and claim the institutional space to engage and make demands on the state itself: and it is those most proximal to the state – urban dwellers – who have the greatest prospects of forming the necessary coalitions to allow this to happen.

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All CSRC papers referenced in this brief are accessible by hyperlink or on **www.crisisstates.com/publications/publications.htm**

THE CRISIS STATES RESEARCH CENTRE

The Crisis States Research Centre (CSRC) is a leading centre of interdisciplinary research into processes of war, state collapse and reconstruction in fragile states. By identifying the ways in which war and conflict affect the future possibilities for state building, by distilling the lessons learnt from past experiences of state reconstruction and by analysing the impact of key international interventions, Centre research seeks to build academic knowledge, contribute to the development of theory, and inform current and future policy making.

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