Supporting Peaceful Political Transitions:
Key Conflict Trends and Lessons Learned for Promoting Peace

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Supporting Peaceful Political Transitions

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Cover Image: Protests in Conakry on July 28, 2022, after the military-led transitional authorities prevented supporters of the protest movement National Front for the Defense of the Constitution (FNDC), from gathering in the streets for a peaceful march. (Photo by CELLOU BINANI/AFP via Getty Images)

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Harnessing a window of opportunity, whether this signifies a shift in political will, an end to violent conflict or a democratic transition, is increasingly recognized by the U.S. government as key to ensuring democratic norms take hold in countries around the world. Political transitions offer a critical opportunity to expand political participation, enhance service delivery, build peace, and foster inclusion. Yet, although democratic structures and inclusive institutions are critical for sustainable peace, research shows that the process of democratization does not decrease the possibility of violence, but instead introduces new challenges and may even exacerbate conflict.1 During political transitions, the rules of the game are often rewritten. New actors, institutions, and political practices may become increasingly salient, while others quickly become obsolete.

Because of the rapidly changing pace of events and associated uncertainty about the nature of the coming political order—including the stability of the incumbent government as well as that of any opposition coalition2—there is an increased risk of conflict outbreak during a political transition. Competition over political power at a time of great uncertainty, weakened central authority, and destabilized relationships can heighten the possibility that political differences will escalate into violence.3 As actors in a conflict are setting new terms for “who gets what and who sits at the table,”4 there is an elevated risk that actors will resort to violence to enforce their claims because there is no authority to prevent them from doing so. Hardliners, armed groups, and military actors – especially in cases where the military has had a free hand in civilian affairs – often play a role in participating in violence during transitional moments in order to ensure an outcome most favorable to their interests.5

This can reproduce an exclusionary post-transition status quo or exacerbate existing tensions between different social groups, reproducing long-term patterns of conflict. Deep-seated socio-economic grievances and legacies of conflict can harden social identities, hampering the development of a national agenda that is responsive to a range of influential groups.6 Indeed, a violent and exclusionary post-transition status quo is possible even in the absence of a well-organized anti-democratic coalition, or spoilers who might have political or economic incentives to undermine any potential democracy and peace dividends that a transition could produce.

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Even during a potentially turbulent and conflict-prone political transition, domestic and international actors can support the emergence of a democratic and more peaceful society by taking the following actions to improve the quality of the post-transition political order:

1. **Manage public expectations.** Communicating to the general public that everyday circumstances may take time to change is a vital step for the success of a transition. Funding and assistance focused on supporting democratic development and governance should not be limited to the first few years after a transition.

2. **Leverage the transitional environment to codify inclusive political reforms.** When advocating for inclusive policies, it is important to mitigate backlash from elite and dominant groups. Thus, programs should aim to educate and inform stakeholders of the benefits of inclusive sociopolitical dynamics.

3. **Where applicable, engage former fighters demobilized from armed groups who can act as brokers and help re-establish trust in government following a peace deal.** This could entail working during the early negotiation phase to support efforts on the part of demobilizing rebels to re-establish trust in government.

4. **Consider and integrate existing sources of legitimacy into the political system.** The expansion of public services and responsive governance is critical to stabilizing violence, whether it be through increasing state capacity or establishing new partnerships with informal governance providers (including but not limited to non-state actors, traditional and religious authorities, and the private sector).

5. **Develop consensus-building platforms for civil society groups and influential actors to come together and engage in dialogue on how their intended goals for the transition overlap.** This is important, since transitions often comprise actors with competing agendas and complex relations. Balancing these interests is imperative to sustaining a stable political landscape.

6. **Build the skills of political parties and their party members to develop inter- and intra-party coalitions and strengthen coherent political agendas.** Given that some political parties are nascent or have not yet developed robust policy platforms in some transitional contexts, political party engagement could be useful to foster values of moderation and reconciliation. These values build trust among key security and civic actors.

7. **Strengthen the oversight role of civil society groups.** The political uncertainty associated with a political transition creates opportunities for malign actors to abuse their power, abuse human rights, or renege on complying with political mechanisms designed to safeguard democratic rights. To guard against this, it is vital to strengthen civil society and watchdog groups’ ability to track the progress of transitional institutions, human rights violations, abuses of power, and violence, as local watchdog organizations can be an effective tool to raise awareness of human rights and strengthen governance at the local level.

Political actors aiming to create the right conditions for a democratic and stable post-transition order should consider adapting and applying these seven strategies to the appropriate political context. These strategies are by no means a one-size-fits all solution. It is vital to ensure reforms are locally relevant. Further, this is not an exhaustive list. However, transition actors can and should consider some of the steps above to improve their odds of building a stable and democratic future.
CONFLICT TRENDS DURING POLITICAL TRANSITIONS

Political transitions come in many forms, whether a decisive shift in the prevailing political will in a state’s leadership, an end to a violent conflict via a peace agreement, or a popular democratic revolution. Importantly, these transitions present a window of opportunity for significant political change. The U.S. government recognizes that these transitional moments can be harnessed to build more peaceful and democratic societies across the world. But democratic consolidation is often nonlinear, and a window of opportunity can close as quickly as it opens. For example, in Africa, a wave of coups—from Burkina Faso, to Sudan, to Mali—have underscored the need for an adaptive stance toward democracy support on the continent. Whether a coup is staged, a peace agreement is signed, or an authoritarian government is overthrown by pro-democracy revolutionaries, the U.S. should take stock of evidence-based strategies to navigate the new, fragile political situation and, in some cases, a surge in conflict and instability in the wake of a transitional moment that disrupts the existing political environment.

Terminology: Defining a Political Transition

Throughout this policy brief IRI will draw on examples of countries experiencing a political transition. IRI defines this as a shifting political environment within a state in which new institutions, norms, and stakeholders appear to play increasingly decisive roles, growing to shape a new form of political order. The term political transition has several meanings depending on its use and context. The United States Agency for International Development’s Office of Transition Initiatives defines it as a “window of opportunity — a decisive shift in the political landscape that creates an opening to support viable local political will.” In this sense, a political transition can be equated with a change in values, institutions, leadership, or government.

The second, narrower use of the term political transition is when it is used as a stand-in for democratic transition or a transition away from autocracy, or a regime transition. The concept of a (democratic) transition paradigm has been challenged for several decades for incorrectly assuming that states are either in a transitional phase, or that they are transitioning towards democracy, rather than another form of nondemocratic governance. This policy brief focuses on cases that fall within the case universe of both conceptualizations of the term “political transition.” These moments are both where the so-called rules of the game are being fundamentally altered in a manner that can create increased risk of conflict outbreak.

Conflict trends during political transitions vary greatly depending on sociopolitical context, which can include whether violence surges, conflict factors are exacerbated, or new opportunities for peace emerge. However, there are several cross-cutting factors that can lead to increased susceptibility to violence outbreaks during a transitional period.

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First, deeply embedded authoritarianism and high levels of political exclusion and violence significantly influence the trajectory of a transition.\textsuperscript{12}

Widespread violent conflict can create conditions where groups and structures like the police, judiciary, and legal institutions are not responsive to citizen’s needs.\textsuperscript{13} When a political system retains the vestiges of authoritarianism, former leaders, including elites and former ruling party members, maintain formidable political influence. Such actors are in a prime position to disrupt democratic consolidation and exploit the process of democratic development through fraud, intimidation, and sponsoring violence. The likelihood of violence is especially acute when autocratic regimes face mass popular movements trying to dislodge them.\textsuperscript{15}

Political elites regularly manipulate constitutions to evade term limits or other legal restrictions to prolong their rule.\textsuperscript{16} These circumventions make it difficult for opposition parties to challenge incumbents and can lead to political crises with the potential to turn violent. In Guinea, then-President Alpha Condé’s 2020 effort to amend the constitution to permit him to run for a third term was met with widespread popular protests, resulting in severe crackdowns by security forces.\textsuperscript{17}

Anti-coup protesters take cover as riot police try to disperse them with water cannon and tear gas during a demonstration against military rule in Sudan’s capital Khartoum on June 30, 2022. Photo by -/AFP via Getty Images.

In longtime autocracies such as Sudan, IRI research has found that alliances of pro-democracy political parties are inherently unstable because of misaligned incentives that impede collaboration and trust, often stemming from historical animosities. These dynamics impede interparty coordination. In cases where pro-democratic movements are poorly coordinated, this lack of coordination can tip the balance in favor of anti-democratic forces and can empower repressive security state apparatuses, making it easy for security services and police to violently target individual protestors or groups with impunity.

**Second, systematic disenfranchisement and real or perceived discrimination contribute to an increased risk of violence.**

Across the world, marginalization and deep societal divisions are among the most pressing drivers of conflict. During a political transition, these cleavages are even more vulnerable to politicization and escalation into violent conflict, especially if they are exploited by political actors or other elites. For example, in Sudan, the historical political fragmentation has made it difficult to promote harmony and issue-based platforms, with many leaders seeking to represent the views of a particular group and lacking the will to disrupt the status quo. In such cases, ethnic, national, religious, class, or racial divisions may be exacerbated when existing power configurations and means of political competition are disrupted by a transition.

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**IRI Research in Sudan**

**Context:** Following months of protests over economic conditions, Sudan’s longtime dictator Omar al-Bashir was overthrown in a popular revolution in April 2020. A transitional military-civilian government ruled in Khartoum until the military overthrew the government in an October 2021 coup d’état. These events took place in the context of the signature of the Juba Peace Agreement in October 2020, when the transitional government and several armed groups across Sudan agreed to transitional justice, disarmament, and integration of armed movements into the formal security sector, power sharing with the rebel groups, and several economic guarantees.

**Data Sources:** IRI interviewed eight individuals, including members of activist and protest movements (the resistance committees), members of the previous national government, political parties, ethnic and religious minorities, former military commanders, and members of armed movements that were signatories to the peace agreement.

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Further, IRI analyzed publicly available statements and interviews of 17 others, including negotiators, members of the government, senior members of the armed forces, religious leaders, rebel leaders, and political party elites now in opposition.

Third, a lack of women's representation during a transition—and during peace processes in particular—inhibits its effectiveness, thus increasing the risk of conflict relapse.

Evidence shows that a peace agreement is 20 percent more likely to last more than two years and 35 percent more likely to last for 15 years if women are involved in the peace talks as mediators, negotiators, witnesses, or signatories.21 Up to 50 percent of peace agreements break down in five years or sooner, demonstrating the risks of elite bargains that fail to adequately engage a broad range of groups.22 In Colombia, women stakeholders helped set the agenda of the 2016 peace agreement between the government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – FARC); negotiators wrote language into the peace agreement to safeguard the human rights of women.23 In Mali, women played a vital role in peacebuilding efforts by mediating among the Fulani, Dafing, and Dogon communities.24 The technical partner that supported these mediation efforts in Mali engaged actors from across spectrum of the different communities from the region concerned, including armed actors and local elites, as well as women and youth representative. The mediators credited this strategy of inclusion—along with the importance of obtaining the trust and support of the local authorities throughout the process—as the key to their efforts’ success.

Fourth, increased opportunity for political competition and new avenues to redress grievances creates incentives for extreme political conduct, which can sometimes turn violent.25

During a transition, rapidly evolving circumstances can be manipulated by political entrepreneurs eager to eliminate competition and rival leaders. Polarized political agendas and predatory actors can derail a transition as key stakeholders struggle to cope with foundational issues.

Equally, several key stakeholders may attempt to return to a version of the pre-transition status quo, or they may reject the premise that a transition is taking place in the first place. The degree to which key political players attempt to undermine the democratic and peacebuilding goals of transition reformers impacts the speed with which these reforms can be achieved.26 In Guinea, the military junta that seized power in the 2021 coup against President Condé signaled its openness to seeking justice for massacres that dated back to 2008-2009. Guinea set up a special court to examine the potential economic and financial crimes that took place under Condé’s leadership. Initially, observers welcomed these moves. However, IRI research revealed that political actors, human rights defenders, and protest leaders quickly soured on the military junta, suspecting it of having a hidden agenda and of using its power as a means to intimidate and repress potential political rivals.

23 Dudouet and Schadel. “New Evidence: To Build Peace, Include Women from the Start.”
In Sudan, widespread distrust of the country’s political elite has slowed the full implementation of the peace agreement and the transition has been undercut by stalemates and inadequate representation of relevant stakeholders. This challenge in Sudan’s ongoing transition is the result of complex and adversarial political dynamics among parties, the military, armed groups, and resistance committees (the latter of whom are the hyperlocal youth-led informal networks that have been central to organizing political protests across Sudan since late 2019). Divided and exclusionary political parties and the military’s oppressive tactics contribute to resentment of the country’s leaders.

**The Role of Informal Governance Actors and Armed Groups in Political Transitions**

Informal governance actors and armed groups pose significant dilemmas during transitions. The failure to integrate these groups fully into the political realm can threaten a transition and undermine efforts to peacefully resolve conflict. In such circumstances, complex political arrangements must provide a solution to fundamental questions such as: how to reconcile elite interests with a commitment to inclusion and human rights and how democratic actors can work with informal political structures (such as traditional or religious groups) that support peace.\(^\text{27}\)

Transitions sometimes offer an opportunity to disarm, demobilize, and integrate armed actors into civilian society. However, in cases where these armed actors governed territory, it is especially vital to have a real solution to the question of “what comes next after rebel governance?” Failing to answer this question can result in a vacuum in informal governance and politics at the local level that new groups and political entrepreneurs will be swift to fill.

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**Armed Groups**

Recent IRI research in Colombia’s Cauca Department has shown how the implementation of the peace agreement led to a breakdown of the social order in conflict-affected areas. This transition disrupted the existing informal non-state governance systems provided by groups like the FARC in many of the region’s rural communities, which the state did not immediately fill.\(^\text{28}\) Criminal groups, illegal armed groups, and groups involved in the drug trade filled this gap, starting a new phase of violence in the region in which civilians and indigenous leaders have been the primary victims.

The failure to integrate demobilized armed groups in Colombia has posed two long-term challenges for post-conflict peacebuilding. First, post-conflict score-settling threatens to undermine prospects for broader peace. Former armed FARC soldiers have been the victims of several high-profile killings, suggesting some actors are taking advantage of the peace agreement to exact revenge on their former rivals. This creates the risk that FARC members who did not demobilize under the terms of the 2016 peace deal will be less likely to accept future peace negotiations if they suspect they will be victims of post-conflict score-settling.\(^\text{29}\) Second, when former rebels attempt to regroup as members of political parties, they often encounter hurdles in moving their command hierarchy from insurgent army to established political party.

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\(^{27}\) Bell, “Governance and Law.”

\(^{28}\) In Colombia’s Cauca Department the state failed to fill this governance gap following the peace agreement. However, research suggests that there are political dynamics exist in conflict zones during negotiations between rebel forces and the government that may cause the government’s legitimacy to rise in zones occupied and governed by rebel groups. See: Breslawski, Jori. “Can Rebels Bolster Trust in the Government? Evidence from the Philippines,” Journal of Conflict Resolution, 2022. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/00220027221123319?journalCode=jcrb.

In Colombia, the International Crisis Group noted how Comunes (Commons), the political party that succeeded the FARC, “has struggled to unite the disparate interests that had been camouflaged inside a military hierarchy.”

In August 2022, several dozen former FARC deputies resigned from Comunes. The cause of the mass resignation was over internal disagreements over party management. The collapse of viable non-armed political contestation by demobilized fighters who make up the Comunes party poses a challenge for ongoing peace efforts. This is because other armed groups, with whom the government may want to engage in peace talks in the context of the 2022 Paz Total (Total Peace) agenda, may be skeptical of their future political prospects if they demobilize. Overall, this could make the prospects of resolving lingering conflict issues a challenge.
Context: In 2016, the government of Colombia and the FARC rebels signed a historic peace agreement. This marked an important step in ending Colombia’s decades long civil war, which claimed the lives of over 400,000 people since the 1960s. The implementation of the agreement was lackluster from 2018 through mid-2022, but the 2022 election results provided the agreement with renewed political momentum. In Colombia’s southwestern department of Cauca, violence rose dramatically in 2020 and the region became a hotspot by 2022. Illegal armed groups fighting on behalf of economic interests, including cocaine production and export, are a major threat to security. Since August 2022, the newly-elected government of Colombia started pursuing an agenda of “Paz Total”, seeking to negotiate with other armed groups including paramilitaries, members of the FARC who refused to demobilize in 2016, as well as the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army – ELN).

Interviewees: IRI interviewed 25 men and women in Cauca, including civil society representatives, local government officials, as well as ethnic, youth, political, and social leaders. These individuals reflect the department’s high degree of ethnic diversity; five interviewees identified as Indigenous and three as Afro-Colombian.

Traditional and customary leaders

Integrating armed groups is only one of the governance obstacles that emerge in a transitional context. Traditional, customary or religious leaders oftentimes play a prominent role in responding to community needs and managing disputes. These actors are critical to consider when defining transition outcomes and building on existing sources of legitimacy. Sudan faces significant challenges in ensuring that a reformed governance system adequately represents the country’s system of traditional authorities, the Native Administration. Oftentimes, local authorities play an influential role in dispute resolution and peacebuilding, yet are frequently excluded from transitional processes, which leads to resentment on the part of the Native Administration. Inadequately incorporating them into the political realm after the transition could exacerbate grievances among these actors as well as hamper the ability of the Native Administration to effectively resolve disputes, thus aggravating the risk that tribal conflicts escalate.

32 Traditional and customary authorities is a generic term used to refer to an array of political and cultural institutions that provide formal and informal governance. These authorities typically predate the advent of the modern state, and they legitimate themselves on due to longstanding traditions, lineage, or custom. These authorities are highly location and context dependent and the roles they play in different societies are equally broad. Traditional authorities can include religious leaders, clan leaders, traditional chiefs, patriarchs, community elders, royalty, aristocracies, nobility, and other leaders. For the canonical definition, see Weber, Max. “Politics as a Vocation.” From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, edited by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. Routledge, 1948, pp. 77-128. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203759240.

33 The Native Administration was instituted by the British colonial authorities as a system that decentralized governance in each sub-region to Sudanese customary authorities, mainly consisting of Sheikhs, Omdas, and chiefs, who often resolve disputes and liaise with local, international, and government actors.
These issues further underscore the importance of engaging relevant subnational stakeholders in transitional processes. This avoids exacerbating divides between centers of political power and more peripheral or marginal communities or regions. It also improves the likelihood that outcomes benefit a range of stakeholders, instead of just the elites.

Similarly, in Guinea, the country’s ethnic diversity and the traditional authorities who engage in intercommunal conflict mitigation are a source of strength, as these leaders consider themselves arbiters between citizens, activists, and the military-led transitional government.

Context: Since independence in 1958, Guinea has never peacefully transferred power from one democratically elected government to another. In 2019-2020, President Condé prepared to run for an unconstitutional third term, triggering widespread protests which were often met with violence. Nevertheless, after manipulating the constitution via a referendum, Condé won a third term in October 2020 in elections that were deemed neither free nor fair by the international community. Less than a year later, he was overthrown in a military coup, led by Colonel Mamady Doumbouya. The coup was initially welcomed by many of those protesting Condé’s third term. The military-led transitional government did not commit to a timeline for the transition until May 2021, extending the transitional period for another 36 months. Since then, the transitional government has restricted civil liberties, forbidden protests, and arbitrarily arrested political activists.

Interviewees: IRI conducted 35 in-depth interviews with men and women knowledgeable of political transitions in Guinea, including political party leaders, members of protest movements, women’s groups, representatives of victims’ organizations, and traditional and religious elites. The interviews primarily took place in Guinea’s capital, Conakry, as well as in Kindia, Labé, Mamou, and Faranah.

Integrating traditional and customary authorities into governance arrangements can be a key strategy to advance a long-term peace agenda in political transitions. Coordinating with traditional governance authorities can enhance the effectiveness of the state’s provision of public goods and services, reducing popular grievances to mobilize against it. In addition, coordinating with traditional authorities lowers the risk that those traditional authorities will attempt to compete politically with the state or seek to undermine it via political violence.

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34 However, calling “patience and dialogue” creates the perception that the traditional and religious authorities are siding with the military-led government in Guinea which – at the time these interviews took place – had not established a clear timeline for how long a military government would remain in power before it would hand power over to a civilian administration. This is because calls for patience were not perceived differently from calls for an indefinite period of military rule.
Evidence from sub-Saharan Africa suggests that when national constitutions recognize traditional authorities and include them in government institutions, there is a lower risk of civil war outbreak. Including traditional authorities in government institutions could be through seats on local councils or representation in the national administration. An important caveat, however, is that this finding does not hold in cases where the state symbolically recognizes traditional governance but does not define any function for traditional authorities. Nor does it hold when the state recognizes traditional authorities and carves out a separate governance realm for them outside of the formal public administration, as this could provide opportunities for the political competition between state and traditional authorities.35

Delineating areas of governance to traditional authorities also creates the risk that the formal state authorities will use the existence of traditional authorities as an excuse to devote fewer resources and provide inadequate social services to communities. These state institutions may very well assume that the traditional authorities will fill any gaps or deficiencies. While the customary authorities may be able to provide short-term peacebuilding solutions, relying on such a hyperlocal set of institutions can result in uneven service delivery and inequity. Ultimately, this could create more conflict grievances in the long run. This underscores the importance of integrating customary and traditional authorities with state institutions.36

Fortunately, when traditional authorities are successfully integrated into the apparatus of the state, they can and often do produce governance outcomes that result in greater accountability and better service. For example, in Mexico in 1995, the government of Oaxaca State enacted a constitutional reform that granted autonomy to Indigenous communities and validated their practice of choosing local leaders that bypassed traditional multiparty elections, a practice known as usos y costumbres (traditions and customs). In many ways, the granting of autonomy to indigenous communities preempted the social and political conflicts that erupted during the Zapatista uprising in the neighboring state of Chiapas the year prior.37

On balance, research has shown that communities governed by usos y costumbres benefit from better provision of essential local public goods. This is because in poor indigenous villages, political parties are a source of elite capture whereas in usos y costumbres villages, citizens are more engaged and involved in collective decision making. The effect of this is to restrain elites from capturing resources. The case of Oaxaca offers an important lesson in cases where electoral competition is more prone to result in the distribution of essential public goods along partisan lines.38

37 The Zapatista uprising was a rural rebellion in the Mexican state of Chiapas that took place in response to fears among the state’s large indigenous community that they would lose their ancestral lands, as well as anger at the marginalization of indigenous peoples. Over several days, indigenous communities attacked and captured several centers of public administration in many Chiapas towns before they were driven out by the Mexican security services; a ceasefire was called days later. In 1995 an Accord between the Zapatistas and the government was signed that devolved power to autonomous regions in Chiapas.
USEFUL STRATEGIES AND LESSONS LEARNED ON SUPPORTING TRANSITIONS

Although political transitions generally take place during a limited window of time, the hard work of ensuring that peace, political settlements, and governance reforms take hold is a long-term and complex endeavor. Providing support to local partners, whether through diplomacy or foreign assistance, is a vital part of strengthening governance. This can help prevent a relapse into violence. To avoid pitfalls and ease conflict flashpoints, several key lessons and strategies provide insight into how to navigate complex political transitions and support peaceful democratic openings.

1. **Manage public expectations.** Transitions sometimes stall or encounter barriers. The results of political reform may not immediately impact citizens’ quality of life. Yet, even as a democratic transition is drawn out, support among citizens for democracy measures actually increases several years after a democratic opening. This underscores that funding and assistance must not be limited to the first few years after a transition. It can be used to continue to build bottom-up demand for political reform and to address long-term challenges, even after the early excitement wanes. In fact, it may be most useful to proceed cautiously, especially in fragile environments, attempting incremental change rather than a wholesale transformation of institutions and politics. Public forums and dialogue can invite citizen input on the most urgent issues and priorities. Additionally, perceptions of fairness are critical to a smooth transition and may even encourage the public to grant some latitude for mistakes or delays.

2. **Leverage moments of political transition to codify inclusive reforms.** It is important to address backlash from elite and dominant groups when supporting transition actors who are advocating for inclusive policies. Communications about policy changes should educate and inform stakeholders and the public of the benefits of expanding political participation to include women and ethnic, religious, sexual, and racial minorities. Promoting the inclusion of these groups in the transitional decision-making process should be paired with capacity-building training as well as sensitization campaigns to support inclusion. Programming should challenge norms and support training that empowers women. It should also educate them on how to engage politically in an atmosphere of uncertainty. Integrating indigenous assemblies and other bodies into post-transition political structures should be done in a way to minimize the risk of elite capture and maximize public participation.

3. **Engage demobilizing armed groups to act as brokers and help re-establish trust in government following a peace deal.** Evidence from the Philippines suggests that rebel groups that have governed territory and provided public goods to citizens can serve as brokers between the state and the people formerly under their control. This kind of cooperation – which takes place as rebels and the government negotiate – helps rebuild trust in the state by improving the legitimacy of the state.

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42 Ibid.
44 Magaloni et. al. “Public Good Provision and Traditional Governance in Indigenous Communities in Oaxaca, Mexico; Mustasilita, Katarina, “Including chiefs, maintaining peace?”
Similarly, increased trust in the state may serve to limit the risk of defections to rival armed groups not involved in the negotiations who may serve as potential spoilers. In circumstances where rebels have a high degree of legitimacy among the populations that they govern, governments and parties negotiating and implementing a peace deal should leverage these delicate political dynamics to their own benefit. In practice, this would entail working during the negotiation phase to support efforts on the part of demobilizing rebels to re-establish trust in government. During the implementation phase of a peace agreement, governments should capitalize on any newly won trust and attempt to deliver quick wins to local populations to solidify nascent confidence in state institutions. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to dealing with armed groups. Rather, approaches should be tailored to each group. There are several factors to consider, including: the degree to which the group applies its governance model universally or discriminatorily; whether the group treats civilians as participants in governance or as subjects; the extent to which it uses persuasion or coercion to govern; whether it provides or maintains public goods; the group’s degree of bureaucratization; and whether or not the group’s structure is hierarchical or distributed.

Integrate a range of governance actors into the political system and avoid undermining existing sources of legitimacy. This will help ensure that new political policies and structures are built on local traditions that promote peace and tolerance. Expanding public services and creating more responsive governance are critical solutions to stabilizing violence. This can be done through increasing state capacity, or through establishing new partnerships with informal governance providers. For example, even after the peace accord was ratified in Colombia, reasserting state presence in conflict-affected contexts remains a challenge, which creates an opening for other informal political and governance actors. Recognizing that non-state actors are perceived to have legitimacy in some areas (or on some issues) where the state does not is a critical step that international and local actors must take to develop realistic policy solutions to the thorny challenges of governance following a political transition. In Colombia, this may involve recognizing that groups with a degree of local legitimacy can offer guidance on viable economic alternatives to coca and other illegal crops. Similarly, the inclusion of traditional authorities from the Native Administration in Sudan is key to strengthening local governance and addressing the center-periphery divide that may exist between centers of political power and communities that are excluded for reasons of geographic remoteness or on the basis of their identity. In such contexts, forms of hybrid governance may be explored. Quantitative evidence from 44 countries in sub-Saharan Africa suggests that a constitutionally explicit recognition of traditional authorities that provides them a role in public administration – also known as “institutional hybridity” – reduces the potential for new conflict by 60 percent. Additionally, given that trust in institutions is often fractured in fragile states undergoing political transitions, this should be paired with community engagement that addresses citizen concerns. The experience of Oaxaca in the 1990s suggests that incorporating non-party political structures into the system of public administration can yield boons in public service provision as well as possibly staving-off social and political turmoil.

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45 Breslawski. “Can Rebels Bolster Trust in the Government?”
48 Mustasilta, Katarina. “Including chiefs, maintaining peace?”
49 Magaloni et. al. “Public Good Provision and Traditional Governance in Indigenous Communities in Oaxaca, Mexico.”
5 Balance the interests and agendas of different actors to develop consensus to sustain a stable political landscape. This is critical given that transitions often comprise of actors with competing agendas and complex relationships. Develop consensus-building platforms for civil society groups and influential actors to come together, engage in dialogue on how their intended goals for the transition and/or constitutional reform and transitional justice overlap, and discuss ways to express their views at a national level. Given that transitions are often characterized by high levels of polarization and tension, efforts should be made to build bridges and identify the best methods of engagement with groups that could act as potential spoilers. Many programmatic approaches target enthusiastic participants who already agree with one another without including the key personnel or actors whose participation is necessary to mobilize political will for reform. Excluding major actors can create instability, foster perceptions of marginalization, and even delegitimize the reform agenda. Dissidents or rebels often require assurance that their interests will be represented in a new political context. In such circumstances, leveraging neutral actors can moderate tensions among polarized groups. Specifically, this should include leaders who can bridge the national and subnational levels, connect disparate communities, garner public support, and ensure the transition reflects local needs. This gives different actors an opportunity to ease tensions in their communities before they come to national-level political discussions.

6 Support political party development so they can run effective campaigns for public office, ideally with clear agendas that build inter- and intra-party coalitions centering on peace and pluralism. Given that political parties are sometimes not fully formed or have not yet developed robust policy platforms in some transitions, political party engagement could be useful in building capacity and confidence in government, specifically in creating party infrastructure, organizing campaigns, and competing for public office. Strengthening parties that renounce violence and commit to peace and inclusion could reinforce the peaceful foundations of a transition. Trainings on party development, campaigning, and preparing to govern also foster values of moderation and reconciliation. In cases where new political parties are emerging (perhaps comprised of former rebels), or in which parties have spent an extended period in opposition without any real hope of holding power, party structures are often weakly institutionalized, and party leaderships unaccustomed to governing or running political campaigns. For political parties comprised of former armed actors, contesting the first election is critical and such parties may need significant capacity-building to engage in nonviolent electoral politics. This is a key time for assistance programs to offer support for best practices building political party organizations and running effective campaigns for public office, since early post-transition electoral performance strongly affects a party’s future performance. Importantly, external organizations should only provide such support on the condition that political parties commit to plural democracy, renounce violence, and support conflict resolution. These preconditions improve the prospects for peace, the broader long-term political culture, and the party’s chances of continued political success in a new political context. Parties and groups that explicitly renounce violence – rather than merely committing to demobilize – are more likely to be politically successful (in terms of vote share and...
inclusion in future leadership), so international and domestic organizations should support efforts to help deradicalize rebels transitioning to peacetime political parties. This work could produce blowback from party cadres who might see it as a betrayal to work within a political framework they had once rejected, or to renounce violence even against those actors they had once lost comrades fighting against. However, it does not have to be so. External organizations can be helpful in supporting political discourse that reframes core ideological beliefs within a democratic framework, without rejecting these beliefs outright. Importantly, while rebel groups have sought legitimacy through nationalism, providing security, and other strategies, some post-rebel political parties have reframed their identity around peacebuilding, including a commitment to democratic pluralism and conflict resolution. The post-rebel Aceh Party in Indonesia is an example of how similar parties can downplay conflict cleavages without abandoning a sense of local identity.

**Strengthen the oversight role of civil society groups and other watchdog mechanisms.** Increasing the public’s understanding of new institutions and legal measures created during the transition can be an effective tool in raising awareness of human rights violations, abuses of power, and violence. It can also strengthen governance at the local level. For example, resistance committees in Sudan can play a vital role in influencing grassroots decisionmakers, but they must be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to support good governance and democratic processes. The traditional oversight or watchdog role of civil society groups is the foundation of a democratic and peaceful post-transition state. However, actors at all levels should be aware that the inclusion of civil society in government can sometimes come at the expense of their watchdog role if they are coopted by state; managing the independence of civil society and media from government is vital. Additionally, these civil society actors must have a clear mandate to develop and define peacebuilding and democratization agendas, through internal transparency and accountability mechanisms, so they can effectively build alliances and mobilize constituencies. The media is a forum in which those whose role should be that of impartial watchdog with the ability to investigate abuses of power can themselves become involved in the political competition for power. This can escalate tensions in fragile democracies or states emerging from a political transition. Any nascent press freedoms enabled by a political transition in a less-than-democratic system must not be trampled on or coopted by the government’s executive branch, who might try to use their office as a bully pulpit. Supporting a free and independent media may require parallel strategies, including supporting a transition to an independent judiciary. This is important because in undemocratic societies independent judiciaries are effective checks on executives who might engage in media harassment and repression. In this respect, independent judiciaries can serve as an important first line of defense for civil society and press oversight of a transition process.

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