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Obstacles to Security Sector Reform in New Democracies[1]

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The challenge of security sector reform in new democracies is fundamental for two reasons: military, police and intelligence organisations may be required to play a key role in protecting the new political dispensation and the rights of citizens, but they can also subvert those rights and undermine or destroy the democratic project. This essay focuses on obstacles to security sector reform. It draws principally on the process of transforming the armed forces in post-apartheid South Africa, a process that is widely regarded as a success. Given that success and given South Africa's relative political stability and economic strength for a developing country, the problems described below may be more severe in countries that are less stable and have fewer resources.

I focus on the obstacles because donors frequently underestimate the complexities and long-term nature of security sector reform in developing countries. They consequently tend to attribute a lack of reform to a failure of political will when other considerations may equally be at play.

The obstacles to security sector reform in emerging democracies are many and varied. They include a lack of vision, expertise and resources; an abiding tendency to view security in an authoritarian, militarist and secretive fashion; resistance to reform from politicians and/or security officers; manipulation by foreign powers and neighbouring states; and the on-going politicisation of the security services. The higher the level of instability and violence in the national or regional arenas, moreover, the less likely it is that reforms with an anti-militarist orientation will be introduced. These various problems can be grouped in the following overlapping categories.

The problem of complexity

Security Sector Reform in new democracies can be immensely complex: a large number of policies may have to be transformed; these policies may have to be changed more or less simultaneously rather than staggered sequentially; and the required changes are likely to be substantial given the undemocratic and militarist nature of security policy under authoritarian rule". In South Africa, for example, the "principles of defence in a democracy" that constituted the agenda for transforming the armed forces required a dramatic reorientation of defence posture, doctrine and operations; force design and structure; military training and education; the institutional culture and human resource policies of the armed forces; defence expenditure, procurement and exports; and civil-military relations.

The management of such a complex policy and institutional change would tax even the strongest of governments. It can be overwhelming to a new government that has no prior experience in running a state.

The problem of expertise

The problem of complexity is likely to be compounded by a lack of organisational, managerial, planning, financial and policy expertise in the new government. Leading a liberation movement or a guerrilla army is hardly comparable with running government departments and conventional security services.

Following the transition to democracy, political decision-makers in South Africa were unfamiliar with contemporary debates on security and defence and with the range of policy options that were open to them. They were daunted by the uncertain consequences of their choices. The more technical a policy and the more radical the required change, the greater was the difficulty in this regard. A tendency towards conservatism and a reliance on 'experts' from the former regime, including security officers, is natural in these circumstances. This tendency might be reinforced by politicians' awareness of the dangers that flow from misguided policies in the security realm.

South Africa pursued a number of strategies to address the problem of reliance on conservative experts from the former regime. Most importantly, it requested the Government of the United Kingdom to render advice to the South African Minister of Defence through the establishment of a British military advisory team in Pretoria. In addition, senior officers and civilian officials were sent on training and educational courses in various democratic countries; progressive academics and the International Committee of the Red Cross were asked to assist the Department of Defence in designing and facilitating courses on the Geneva conventions and 'military professionalism in a democracy' for all uniformed personnel; and the Minister also invited civil society experts to participate in the drafting of new policies and defence legislation.

Parliamentary committees in new democracies also typically lack expertise on security and defence issues, undermining their oversight and decision-making functions. For example, the parliamentary defence committee in South Africa accepted the logic of non-offensive defence as a matter of policy but it also accepted the recommendation by military officers for an offensive force design, mainly because the parliamentarians could not understand the technicalities of the force design options that were put to them. Similarly, the parliamentarians have struggled to grasp the technicalities of defence budgets.

The inexperience of parliamentary committees can lead to tension between parliamentarians and security officers. The officers might come to believe that the parliamentarians are ignorant and irresponsible, and the parliamentarians might feel that the officers are deliberately obfuscating matters in order to maintain the status quo. Adversarial relations between parliament and the security services impede the transformation process and can retard the democratic project.

The problem of capacity

Democratic governance is not limited to respect for basic rights, pluralism and the other basic features of democracy. It also entails efficiency and effectiveness in fulfilling the functions of the state. These qualities are missing in many developing countries, which lack the skills, expertise, infrastructure and resources to meet the welfare and the security needs of citizens. Without the requisite institutional capacity, the values and principles of democracy cannot be 'operationalised' and insecurity might consequently remain pervasive. In these circumstances, it is not unlikely that the state and sectors of civil society will seek to fill the security vacuum in a militarist fashion.

By way of example, many foreign politicians and analysts have expressed concerns about the continued deployment of the South African army in an internal policing role. The concerns relate principally to the politicisation of the armed forces and to the militarisation of law and order. These concerns are well known to a South African audience and are addressed in the 1996 White Paper on Defence. Nevertheless, the practical problem of an inefficient, corrupt and poorly trained police service, unable to cope with widespread violent crime, has necessitated military deployment.

The problems related to limited capacity can be illustrated by other examples: adherence to the rule of law presupposes the existence of a competent and fair judiciary, police service and criminal justice system; the expectation that police respect human rights is unrealistic if they have not been trained in techniques other than use of force; democratic civil-military relations rest not only on the disposition of the armed forces but also on the proficiency of departments of defence and parliamentary defence committees and the illegal trafficking in small arms will not be stemmed through policy and legislative measures if governments are unable to control their arsenals and borders. The building of capacity in these areas is necessarily a long-term and difficult endeavour.

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The problem of resistance to change

Members of the security services may oppose reforms for a host of ideological and political reasons. In addition, substantial organisational and policy transformation is inherently threatening and would give rise to resistance and conflict in most countries. This is especially the case in respect of conventional armed forces, which tend to be conservative given their primary function of defending the state.

In South Africa the process of transforming the armed forces has been hindered by what many political leaders regard as racism or a counter-revolutionary agenda on the part of officers who served the apartheid regime. Yet it is important to appreciate the extent to which resistance to change has stemmed from less sinister motives. Officers who served under apartheid were suddenly expected to implement new policies that were completely at odds with their training, education and experience over several decades. Government policy allowing the formation of trade unions in the armed forces, for example, was in conflict with their basic orientation as soldiers. Military opposition to that policy was based on the not unreasonable belief that trade unions would undermine discipline and the chain-of-command. Similarly, opposition by South African officers to a non-offensive defence posture derived not from aggressive intentions but from a professional inclination to protect the country without undue restriction.

Military resistance to trade unions, disarmament, non-offensive defence and other major reforms might be found in stable democracies as well as in emerging democracies. In the case of the latter, however, many new policies may represent wholly new paradigms. In South Africa such paradigms have included a regional approach based on common security and confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs); adherence to international humanitarian law; equal opportunity and affirmative action policies; recognition of soldiers' rights as citizens; and transparency, accountability and parliamentary oversight of the defence function. Precisely because these were new paradigms, representing a radical departure from previous thinking, resistance from military officers was inevitable.

In fragile new democracies where the political sector is weak and the security sector is strong, politicians might rely on the overt or tacit support of the security services to maintain their tenuous hold on power. They might avoid substantial reforms for fear of provoking a coup or lesser forms of resistance. For example, President Mandela appointed General Meiring, the chief of the apartheid army, to head the new defence force in the interest of stability and in order to ward off the possibility of a coup. The appointment retarded progress

towards transformation until Meiring was replaced by General Nyanda who had served in the ANC's liberation army.

The problem of insecurity

To a great extent, militarisation in developing countries is a product of structural conditions that constitute a crisis for human security and/or the stability of the state. These conditions include authoritarian rule; the exclusion of minorities from governance; socio-economic deprivation combined with inequity; and weak states that are unable to manage normal societal conflict in a stable and consensual fashion. These conditions give rise to a security vacuum that the state, civil society groups and individuals seek to fill through the use of violence, sometimes in an organised and sustained fashion and at other times in a spontaneous and sporadic manner. The prospect of disarmament in such circumstances is limited.

While the problem of authoritarianism may be largely resolved with the introduction of democracy, other structural problems in emerging democracies continue to pose obstacles to disarmament. If people are hungry and have negligible economic opportunity, then some of them may turn to crime and banditry as a means of subsistence. If the state is too weak to maintain law and order, then criminal activity may flourish and communities may end up privatising security. If the state lacks the capacity to resolve the normal political and social conflicts that characterise all societies, then at least some individuals and groups will settle their disputes through violence.

All of the above problems have occurred in South Africa, although in a less severe way than elsewhere. The state has been substantially demilitarised but civil society remains militarised, chiefly in the form of violent crime, private security and a proliferation of small arms, because gross poverty and inequity have not yet been ameliorated and because the police service is not yet able to perform its functions competently.

At the most fundamental level, demilitarisation depends on the resolution of these structural problems and the consolidation of democratic and stable governance. In mainstream disarmament circles, a positive causal relationship is posited between disarmament, development and security. In reality, the positive causal relationship is between democratic and viable governance, security and disarmament.

Conclusion

Because of the complexities outlined above, there are no 'quick fix' solutions to the problem of security sector reform in new democracies. The international community should avoid the assumption that Northern models can be replicated easily or, indeed, that these models are appropriate in every respect to societies elsewhere. Democratic principles that are taken for granted in the North are truly radical in societies emerging from authoritarian rule, and the organisational capacity that is taken for granted in the North may be entirely absent in developing countries. The difficulties and obstacles related to formulating and implementing new policy on security and defence are substantial. Success is unlikely to be attained if the reforms are not shaped and embraced by the new government, civil society and the security institutions themselves.

The agenda for democracy and disarmament, promoted by countries of the North, is undermined by the failure of these countries to adhere to their own values. For several decades they have supported dictators and rebel movements engaged in terrorism; they frequently seek to impose policies on developing states; they remain massively overarmed; they flout violations of arms embargoes imposed by the UN Security Council; and they export armaments in a highly irresponsible manner. The endless flow of arms from the North to the South is not the primary cause of civil wars but it enables the combatants to sustain hostilities and inflict massive damage on civilian populations. Reform of security policy is as much a challenge in the North as in the South.

About the Author

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He was Executive Director of the Centre for Conflict Resolution in Cape Town between 1992 and 2003. He served on the Cameron Commission of Inquiry into Arms Trade, established by President Mandela in 1994, and as a part-time advisor to the South African Minister of Defence between 1994 and 2001. He was the drafter of the White Paper on Defence for the Republic of South Africa, 1996, and participated in the drafting of other policies and laws relating to defence and security in South Africa.

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