

# A Theory of Change for Violent Political Marketplaces

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## Overview

In political systems that we identify as 'violent political marketplaces', policy priorities for democracy activists and external actors include ending armed conflict, building governance institutions in a post-conflict setting, reforming the security sector, and promoting democracy and/or justice. *How can policymakers and activists formulate evidence-based theories of change to help guide them in the pursuit of these goals?* This question is the focus of this memorandum.

The obvious point is that these goals are extremely difficult to achieve in the context of violent political marketplaces. These are countries that have been known as 'fragile states' but could also (and more accurately) be described as open political systems on the margins of global capitalism. Not all fragile states are political marketplaces; we use the term to refer specifically to countries/contexts where politics is transactional and structured according to the laws of supply and demand rather than regulated by formal institutions (more on this below). Moreover, these political systems are often very violent. Examples include Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and arguably Syria and Iraq.

We argue that theories of change in these contexts need to focus on the logic of transactional politics rather than on formal institutions. Further, they need to account for constant turbulence and its counterpart unpredictability, while remaining aware of how external interventions are an integral part of the dynamics of these systems. Following from this – we conclude that three broad types of interventions are possible: (a) tactically engineering short term outcomes to reduce violence; (b) a top-down reconfiguration of the political system; and (c) preparing the ground so that domestic actors can take advantage of eventual opportunities for democratic transformation. These interventions each come with their own risks, operate across variable time-scales, and may be combined; in all cases, however, they need to be tailored to the particularities of the political system in question.

This memo has 3 substantive sections:

- (a) The first section outlines the relevance of this question for policymakers and defines some of the terms used in this memo. It also explains why it is so difficult to formulate a theory of change in violent political markets.
- (b) The second section touches on the actual drivers of change in these political systems. Formulating a sound theory of change rests on accurate analysis of *why* and *how* change actually takes place.
- (c) The third section outlines a framework for policymakers/activists wanting to formulate theories of change to guide interventions in political markets.

# 1. Background: What is a theory of change? Why does it matter? And why are they so difficult to formulate in violent political markets?

A theory of change is an analytical framework (a) explaining how social, political, and economic change occurs over time, and (b) for understanding the impact of an intervention within a specific social context.<sup>1</sup>

Articulating a lucid theory of change can explain why and how we think certain actions and strategies will produce desired change or achieve specific policy outcomes. It can also reveal (a) *how* policy tools and programmes intersect with the actual processes of change in a given society, and (b) *why* we think certain chosen strategies and actions are likely to be more effective than others. Cheyanne Church and Mark Rogers explain this as follows:

Theories of change help planners and evaluators stay aware of the assumptions behind their choices, verify that the activities and objectives are logically aligned, and identify opportunities for integrated programming to spark synergies and leverage greater results. Types of change refer to specific changes expressed in the actual program design and/or evaluation, either as goals, objectives, or indicators. Common examples include changes in behavior, practice, process, status, etc. Both the theory of change and the types of changes sought should be evident in a well-designed program.<sup>2</sup>

There are three reasons for why it is so challenging to formulate a sound theory of change in violent political marketplaces:

- (i) **There is no dominant institutionalized state in violent political marketplaces; politics (and public authority) is transactional, exclusionary, and violent.**

Political marketplaces are often described in current parlance as ‘fragile’ or ‘conflict-affected’ societies.<sup>3</sup> They are characterized by (a) the dominance of transactional politics over formal institutions and relatedly, exclusionary elite-focused politics with significant barriers to entry for non-elites, (b) widespread violence of different kinds, operating at different levels of society (including as a political bargaining tool), (c) a subordinate position in the world economic order,<sup>4</sup> and (d) vulnerability to external shocks (economic, political, environmental) giving rise to (e) system turbulence, taking the form of persistent unpredictability in the short-term functioning of politics. In these political systems there is no dominant institutional state, and public authority (formal and informal governance institutions or mechanisms that exist beyond the immediate family)<sup>5</sup> is organized according to several, sometimes contradictory, political logics, including those of monetized transactional politics, pervasive violence, instrumentalization of identity, and

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Elliot, Ian Fairweather, Wendy Olsen and Maria Pampaka, 2016. *A Dictionary of Social Science Research Methods*. Oxford: OUP.

<sup>2</sup> Cheyanne Church and Mark M. Rogers, 2006. *Designing for Results: Integrating monitoring and evaluation in conflict transformation programs*. Washington DC: Search for Common Ground. P. 13.  
<https://www.sfcg.org/Documents/manualpart1.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Not all fragile states are political markets, and not all political markets are categorized as ‘fragile’ under the dominant methods for assessing state fragility. Additionally, indicators for state fragility (for example as used by the Fund for Peace Fragile States Index) don’t actually *predict* state fragility at all, but simply reproduce data for past failings. In other words, these indicators only measure the likelihood that past causes of state failure may recur.

<sup>4</sup> We use the term ‘subaltern’ in this memo to describe the subordinate position of these political systems in the global economic and political order. In principle, a dominant state such as the U.S. or U.K. could also become a political market, but that falls outside our scope of concern.

<sup>5</sup> These could include, for instance, clans and notions of kinship, chiefs and customary leaders, aid agencies, police, military personnel, peacekeepers, business enterprises, worker associations, religious beliefs and organisations, civil society groups, vigilantes, local healers, militia commanders, civil servants, locally elected councils, members of parliament, extending all the way up to the head of state.

civiness.

The **'political marketplace'** refers to a system of governance where monetized transactional politics have become systematic. In these systems, politics is run on the basis of personal transactions and political loyalties and services are sold to the highest bidder according to the laws of supply and demand. The role of formal 'institutions' or the 'rule of law' is secondary. For example, a ruler bargains with members of the political elite over how much he needs to pay them—in cash, or in access to other lucrative resources (such as state contracts, mining leases, etc.)—in return for their support, while the elite can exert pressure on the ruler using their ability to mobilize votes, turn out crowds, or inflict damaging violence.

Formal institutions or rules may exist in these contexts, but they rarely constrain the actual conduct of politics. Instead, formal institutions are often used by elites to mediate relationships with external actors. This may occur through the introduction of reforms which enhance external legitimacy and support—usually in the form of strategic rents and aid resources intended for state-building. For example, 'security sector reform' aimed at establishing functional national armies and security forces may be a preferred method for attracting funds in the form of salaries and equipment. These funds are routinely diverted through the creation of ghost soldiers on militia payrolls, while the weapons and equipment are used against democracy activists and political opponents or traded to others for cash or other favours. The continuing weakness and corruption of the security services then serves as an excuse to request more aid, in a cycle that may be repeated many times to siphon resources from overly credulous and/or badly coordinated donors.

These systems of governance are most commonly visible in political systems which are particularly vulnerable to the turmoil that afflicts weaker players in the global capitalist system, and/or to large inflows of political money—which is provided by external actors to secure strategic loyalties or to support counterinsurgency or counter-terrorism. The specifics may vary, but some configuration of these conditions exist in all political markets.

Take the example of Somalia, which is a paradigmatic case of a very open violent political marketplace. In general, Somalia's economy remains extremely vulnerable to climate disasters, outbreaks of disease among livestock, and fluctuations in global food prices. This is because Somalia imports a large amount of its food, and essentially only exports primary goods—agricultural produce and livestock. Years of war have left it with a well-developed private sector (especially in mobile money, remittance handling, and telecoms), but one which is dominated by cartels. Its governance institutions are dysfunctional. Fiscal and financial authorities, in particular, are weak and extremely corrupt; as a result, it suffers disproportionately from the effects of tax evasion, and the theft of state assets. Politics is highly transactional, but sources of political finance and control of violence are distributed across society; the Somali Federal Government is only one of the players in this market. Within this broader (and precarious) economic context, what resources can a leader (avaricious, or otherwise) draw on to consolidate power? In the modern era, and especially in the context of the global war on terror, counter-terrorism rent channelled through the central government has provided a new generation of Somali leaders with the means to pursue power. This is not new: Siyad Barre used geostrategic rents during the Cold War to stay in power in a similar way.

The marketization of politics overlaps with, but is analytically distinct from, endemic corruption. In the contexts of the political marketplace, money is essential for the conduct of everyday politics as well as being used for personal enrichment. A political market is distinct from historically familiar forms of patrimonialism and clientage in that the relationships between patron and client are impermanent, contextual and governed by the laws of supply and demand.

**'Pervasive violence'** refers to a situation in which the state's 'monopoly on legitimate violence' does not exist. In reality, of course, no state has an absolute monopoly on violence, but in political markets, the control of the means of violence are often highly decentralized across society, with militia, rebels, vigilantes, and criminal gangs existing alongside and simultaneously competing and collaborating with state forces, that are themselves comprised of units with their own separate loyalties. Consequently, society is affected by both organized violence (including violence structured along ideology and/or identity, the mechanisms of autocratic repression, and organized crime) and societal violence (violent crime, sexual and gender-based violence). Violence cannot be explained using a single analytical

framework – it usually has multiple causes. It can be both ordering or disordering; some violence that is immediately destructive can lay the foundations for a new social order, but other episodes or acts of violence may generate only disorder. For instance, the consolidation of a rebel group through violence may create a new (relatively stable) political unit, while a strategy of targeted assassinations of armed group leaders may lead to splintering of armed units and make political consolidation impossible in the medium term.

Finally, it is worth noting that many of these systems are also characterized by exclusionary identity politics—which is used by political leaders as an alternate or complementary logic for organizing politics and violence.

What ought to be clear from this brief description of political marketplaces is that interventions which focus on formal institutions are often mismatched to the problems confronting these political systems and therefore are likely to have little impact. Yet, it is the norm for most theories of change, especially in the context of external interventions in peacebuilding, security sector reform, etc. to work through formal institutions. This is not simply a result of poor contextual analysis; it is also the consequence of political calculations in donor countries, and institutional imperatives in implementing or policymaking organizations. Even more fundamentally, it points to assumptions built into social science which tend to analyse political changes using the lens of (relatively) gradual institutional change.

**(ii) Instability and turbulence are the norm in violent political markets.**

Political markets are complex and disorderly, characterized by near-constant change. In a general sense we can distinguish between two different types of changes in these systems. The first is routine fluctuation within a disordered system: this we can call ‘turbulence’. What this means is that political markets are extremely unpredictable over short periods of time, even while they retain a recognizable structure over time.<sup>6</sup> The second type of change is more substantive reconfiguration of political, economic and social forces that alters the trajectory of a system. The distinction between the two isn’t always clear-cut: minor adjustments in a turbulent system, or small wins/small losses, can set the stage for major changes.

There are two major implications of this:

1. First, turbulence has different impacts depending on context. An economically and politically powerful society can manage these complexities and prosper. However, relatively poor societies or ‘fragile states’ on the margins of the global political and economic order, which are subject to forces over which they have no control, face persistent uncertainty. This means that the slow processes of consolidating authority and stabilizing a political economy, which are the staple of state-formation in the histories of Europe and North America, rarely occur and it is very difficult for political actors to build enduring relationships. This is because the parties will always have high incentives to violate and renegotiate these agreements—equally, they will expect their counterparts to behave similarly and not hold to the terms of the agreement when circumstances change. A good example comes from the extraordinary fragmentation of and opportunistic bargaining (and conflict) among opposition groups in Syria in response to foreign funding of opposition forces, as well as a changing war-economy.<sup>7</sup>
2. Second, persistent turbulence and unpredictability makes it analytically difficult for external actors to distinguish between everyday changes driven by transactional politics, and other more fundamental changes which result in changes to the structure of the political system. For

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<sup>6</sup> Alex de Waal, 2017. “Theorizing (Dis)order: Exploratory Remarks.” *Reinventing Peace*, March 14. <https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2017/03/14/theorizing-disorder-exploratory-remarks/>.

<sup>7</sup> Anne Marie Baylouny and Creighton A. Mullins, 2018. “Cash is King: Financial Sponsorship and Changing Priorities in the Syrian Civil War.” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 41, no.12: 990-1010. See also Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic and Rim Turkmani, 2018. “War Economy, Governance and Security in Syria’s Opposition Controlled Areas.” *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 7, no.1: 1-17. Note that there were notable differences in the behaviour of armed groups in different areas, but the broader point holds.

instance, a peace agreement which is widely lauded by international policymakers may have nothing to do with a new political settlement or an elite pact. It may, in fact, disguise the 'actual' political bargain which (a) begins to take shape prior to the formal peace deal and (b) is then manifested in prevarication and continual renegotiation by parties during the implementation of the peace deal. An analysis and a theory of change centered around the terms of the formal peace deal might miss, or not give adequate importance to the continuities in the political system which straddle the periods before and after the deal.

For example, the externally-mediated Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) was significantly out-of-step with the 'real' political dynamics in South Sudan, when it was signed in 2015. Rather than reflecting the elite compact, it created the façade of a cooperative arrangement behind which the armed belligerents continued to consolidate their positions through tactical manoeuvres. The deal collapsed in the face of violence between the armed groups in July 2016.<sup>8</sup>

**(iii) External programmatic interventions form part of the dynamics of political markets.**

An important function of a theory of change is that it allows policymakers to identify possible unanticipated outcomes of interventions, and consequently ensure that they 'do no harm'. This is particularly salient and difficult in political markets where external interventions always affect the relative distributions of resources and control over violence and where the power of the external policymaker is mismatched to the other factors driving change. Two examples can help illustrate this.

In Somalia, after the collapse of the Siyad Barre regime in 1991, aid contracts became the largest source of business. Two overlapping groups – warlords and business-persons – played a key role in the manipulation of aid, and used the capital accumulated at that time to start businesses which have since become among the largest in Somalia.<sup>9</sup> These businesses have also played a critical role in shaping Somalia's political system by providing funds to politicians, starting private security groups, and (for the most part) opposing the formation of a strong centralized state. This is not to argue that food aid is directly or solely responsible for Somalia's current predicament but merely to say that humanitarian intervention forms an inseparable part of Somalia's political system.

In southern Sudan/South Sudan, on the other hand, politics have been shaped by both peace processes (such as the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005) and the anticipated structure of future peace processes as well as their attendant security sector reform arrangements. Armed groups are formed in response to and legitimized by peace processes, which also influence how these groups negotiate, align and merge with each other.<sup>10</sup> Finally, peace processes have also been partially responsible for structuring conflict along ethno-territorial lines.<sup>11</sup> Similar dynamics have been observed in the Democratic Republic of Congo.<sup>12</sup> The point here is that external interventions change the political systems where they are introduced, as well as the incentives of actors in those political systems. Theories of change for external interventions need to explicitly account for these shifts, even though it is difficult to do so – because of the impact of many external actors intervening at the same time, usually with minimal coordination.

A theory of change is, of course, distinct from a political logic of change. A theory of change is an analytical

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<sup>8</sup> Alan Boswell, Nanaho Yamanaka, Aditya Sarkar, and Alex de Waal, 2019. "The Security Arena in South Sudan: A Political Marketplace Study." December. London: London School of Economics and Political Science and Medford, MA: World Peace Foundation.

<sup>9</sup> Susanne Jaspars, Guhad M. Adan and Nisar Majid, 2019. *Food and power in Somalia: business as usual? A scoping study on the political economy of food following shifts in food assistance and in governance*. London: Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science.

<sup>10</sup> Boswell, Yamanaka, Sarkar, and de Waal, 2019. "The Security Arena in South Sudan."

<sup>11</sup> Though there are other reasons for the ethno-territorial manifestation of conflict in South Sudan, including the tactics of counter-insurgency which were employed by the government in Khartoum.

<sup>12</sup> Judith Verweijen, 2016. "Stable Instability: Political settlements and armed groups in the Congo." London, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute.

model of how we think change takes place; the logic of change, on the other hand, refers to how change actually take place. These are the social, political or economic drivers of changes in a political system. A logic of change encompasses both structural factors and individual agency. 'Structure' refers to the relatively enduring (though not unchanging) circumstances within which actors operate – for example the economic or political system in a country. Agency, on the other hand, can be understood as actors' capacities to act upon situations – for example, top-down elite politics, or bottom-up citizens action.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. What drives change in political markets?

There are usually several logics at work simultaneously driving change in a violent political marketplace. These logics combine both structure and agency. Among them are the logics on which the Conflict Research Programme focuses – the political marketplace, pervasive violence; identity politics; and civiness. Each is described in turn:

- **The political marketplace:** The turbulent dynamics of weakly-regulated capitalist markets, which result (inter alia) in the commodification or marketization of politics.

The political marketplace logic of change is straightforward. Changes in the political economy can lead to structural shifts in the sources and quantities of political finance, the price of politics, control over the means of violence, or the organization of the marketplace. This may be manifested in the shift from an autocratic form of government (functional kleptocracy), to a political system characterized by two or more coalitions which compete with each other for political power but collude to exclude other political challengers (an oligopoly). Less commonly, we might even see a fractious political system with many small groups vying for relative power, but without any having the ability to dominate the entire political system (free competition). Within these structures, political entrepreneurs can use their individual skills to exploit market opportunities to gain or consolidate power, or even alter the rules for playing the market.

There are both 'on-ramps' whereby institutionalized political systems become political marketplaces and 'off-ramps' in which the opposite can happen. Under current conditions, there are more 'on-ramps' than 'off-ramps', but nonetheless a political marketplace system can transition into something else through coercion, consolidation of power by an individual or a group with the capacity to buyout others, agreement among its most powerful actors, or collapse.

- **Pervasive violence:** The diversity of forms of violence (political, criminal, interpersonal), that occur when there is no institutionalized state with command over legitimate violence. It also refers to the arbitrariness of violence, as an instrument that may take command of its user.

Violence has no singular logic of change; it shapes politics and society, and actors often respond to circumstances violently. In particular, it is extremely difficult to understand the implications and consequences of violence at the moment of its perpetration. These are usually interpreted in retrospect – in other words, the meaning of violence is usually only generated through its consequences. Organized violence (mobilization for war and war-fighting) can serve multiple purposes – it can be a force for state-building, a way in which elites can exert control over economic assets, affect the consolidation of identity units such as nations, tribes, clans or sects, or be a force for simple destruction. Violence can even be 'democratic' in the sense that it can be used to resist a coercive power or even to overthrow such a power.

Limited violence can be a mechanism of signaling or bargaining according to known rules. In South Sudan, for instance, it was commonplace for commanders and provincial leaders to lay claim to state resources through limited but conspicuous mutinies and rebellions.<sup>14</sup> Of course, the strategic use of violence can take on a different significance as the context changes – these

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<sup>13</sup> Roger Sibeon, 1999. "Agency, Structure, and Social Chance as Cross-Disciplinary Concepts." *Politics* 19, no.3: 139-144.

<sup>14</sup> Alex de Waal, 2014. "When Kleptocracy becomes Insolvent: Brute Causes of the Civil War in South Sudan." *African Affairs* 113/452: 347-369.

rebellions have fed into and even strengthened the appeal of identity politics constructed around a history of grievances.

Even though the state may not exercise a monopoly over violence, the notion that it should and the imaginary that it once did and might do so in future, also influence politics and violence. In many political marketplace countries, there is a national army, but it is not good at fighting wars. Examples include DRC, Iraq, Sudan and Syria. Its functions are different: a repository for the idea of 'stateness'; a vehicle for weapons procurement (which usually also provides political funding through the ubiquitous corruption in the arms trade); and a protection for a ruling elite against the threats posed by war-fighting paramilitaries and national security/intelligence agencies.

- **Exclusionary identity politics:** Defensive and reactionary political responses to the stresses and anxieties of the era, typically involving a mix of invented nostalgia and creating a hostile environment for outsiders. This is a distinct logic from the political marketplace: in some places political markets consolidate exclusionary identity units, in other places they dissolve them, and in others they have no impact or mixed effects. External interventions may end up reinforcing identity divisions, especially when they assume that such units are the constituent elements of society and such divisions are the primary drivers of conflict. The U.S. construction of Iraq's political system on sectarian lines is a classic example of such a policy error.

Structural theories abound for the historical shaping of ethnic, sectarian and national identity groups, their invented lineages and traditions, how they maintain their boundaries, define the terms of membership, and how sovereign agency is attributed to groups and their leaders. Agency-based accounts focus on how political leaders can invent and instrumentalize identity narratives and units to gain power, consolidate power, and undermine opposition (especially opposition based on civic, democratic principles). Such accounts should also take into account the rewards of identity politics for constituents: identity formation can also be driven from below. In turn, identity formation can serve important functions for states and other institutions, including generating solidarity and consolidating social norms.

Most forms of identity politics aspire to solidify boundaries, keep external forces at bay, and invoke an (invented) past to generate a current/future constituency. In previous eras, identity formation was inter-twined with state formation, in a synergistic process of creating order. In contemporary subaltern open political systems, the state can no longer sing its part in this duet, and identity politics may thereby be reduced to invoking an invented past (nostalgia) and building defensive boundaries around an imagined community in tactical service of power-seeking, without the redeeming element of consolidating a civic state. Identity politics may become even more attractive for individuals in the profoundly uncertain circumstances which characterise a political marketplace.

- **Civiness:** A form of social and political behaviour (and a political position) characterized by deliberative action to protect and promote values such as shared humanity, human rights, equality and peace. This takes different forms in the context of an institutionalized state and a political marketplace.

A structural theory of how civiness arises and is effective could be that the 'better angels of our nature'<sup>15</sup> are unleashed and empowered by political order, law, education, and communication—the orderings of the Enlightenment. However, Enlightenment modernity is notoriously double-edged: civiness is possible only in the context of an organized polity or public authority that imposes discipline on how people act and think. It is no accident that the preferred form of civic polity is the modern state, and cognates of civiness, such as citizenship, require statehood. But the state is usually the most egregious offender in terms of violations of rights. Consequently—in history, political philosophy, and law—frameworks for human rights are founded on the relationship between citizen and state. More challenging is to develop concepts of civiness that

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Steven Pinker, 2011. *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence has Declined*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

relate to entities other than the state, such as local manifestations of public authority, which tend to be continually in flux and where formal institutions are subordinate to transactional politics, but nonetheless where 'norm institutions' (societal codes of conduct and rules) form the basis for efforts to generate 'law from below.'<sup>16</sup> Such efforts can be seen as a more humane way of invoking tradition and drawing boundaries, with the aim of establishing an equitable social contract for the community thus defined.

An agential theory of civiness relates primarily to activism, in the sense of human rights activists, individuals or groups, working to protect and promote rights in the face of an autocratic state. It can also (in an under-explored manner) relate to efforts to generate social order from disorder, in such a way that rights are respected.

In several of our case study countries there have been non-violent civic uprisings, protesting against corruption, autocracy, violations of human rights, and failure to end wars. Most of the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions failed to achieve their goals in part because their leaders assumed that overthrowing a dictator would lead automatically to democracy, rather than appreciating that dismantling a centralized kleptocracy was likely to lead to either a violent rivalry among oligopolists or a free market in violence. More recent uprisings and protests, such as Sudan (2019) and Iraq (ongoing) appear to have learned from these previous failings.

There are other logics at work also, which should be mentioned in passing, all of which contribute to the complicated dynamics of the political marketplace and pervasive violence:

- Economic disruption driven by the power of capitalist markets, including the boom and bust of revenue from commodity exports and related employment in those sectors, and the impacts of price fluctuations in essential imports such as food and fuel.
- Technological change, especially (currently) in the arena of information technology, which allows (among other things) for disruptive democratic mobilization and for intrusive surveillance by security agencies. Just as critically, technological change has also driven changes in production patterns, reinforced the subordinate position of some countries in the global capitalist system, and had significant impact on the world of work, impacting labour movements and working class political mobilization.
- The intensification of environmental and climatic variation with a greater frequency of extreme and calamitous hazards (including the structural disorderliness of the Anthropocene) and the burden-shifting impacts of the adjustments made by more powerful actors to those hazards (such as large-scale land acquisition in poor African countries by wealthy investors).
- The unpredictable intersection of all of the above, which can result in the 'freak wave' phenomenon where multiple factors combine in a non-linear way and result in unanticipated calamities.

When formulating theories of change, external actors need to begin by understanding the political system in question and the political logics driving change in it. Critically, they need to be mindful of their role in and the limits of their powers to influence these broader processes of change.

### 3. Intervening in Violent Political Markets

The starting point for activists or external actors trying to promote peace, a political settlement or post-conflict reconstruction in these political systems is an analytical one: understanding the system for what it actually is, not what they would like it to be. This requires an assessment of the factors driving change in the political system (beyond formal institutions), an explicit weighing of the likely political consequences of each form of intervention, and finally, both an acknowledgement of, and a willingness to respond flexibly to unpredictable changes. After the analytical exercise, they will need to choose

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<sup>16</sup> Christian Lund, 2006. "Twilight Institutions: Public authority and local politics in Africa." *Development and Change*, 37.4, 685-705; Rachel Ibreck, 2018. *South Sudan's Injustice System: Law and activism at the frontline*. London: Zed.



between at least three broad types of approaches (which may be combined, and operate simultaneously):

1. Tactically engineering short-term outcomes;
2. Stabilizing from above through changes to the political economy;
3. Preparing the ground for democratic transformation from below.

This section examines how these options may be possible for peacemaking, interpreted expansively to include forging a viable political settlement among elites and supporting post-conflict reconstruction.

**(i) A tactical calculus in the political marketplace/control over violence.**

The classic mediator's strategy begins with identifying the principal belligerents and seeking agreement between/among them, using incentives and pressure to make peace more attractive. The belligerents' calculation is usually based on an astute assessment of their options within the political marketplace and their options for controlling violence. The mediator (and external supporters of the mediation) also have their assessment of material interests and deploy sanctions and other tools of pressure, while incentivizing agreement through offers of official recognition, post-conflict assistance, and removing negative measures such as sanctions.

It is tempting for mediators to try to 'play' the political marketplace with more precise sticks and different varieties of carrots. This is unlikely to be successful as the national actors are invariably better-informed and more adept than the externals. Further, mediators can exercise more precise control of the carrots/sticks when major external actors have convergent strategies and similar goals, but completely impossible when they do not – as is the case in most of the greater Middle East today. Instead, mediators may be better served by aiming to achieve relatively limited goals. The relevant question here is: given the logics of change in political markets what short term tactical bargains between conflict actors could help control levels of outright violence in the political system? In 2003, for instance, a two-year interim government was formed under the aegis of the mediated peace agreement in Liberia. Almost all government positions were distributed among the different fighting factions with the expectation that even if large scale corruption were to take place over the two-year period, many of those who were part of the interim government would not be able to participate in future elections under the terms of the peace deal. While this did not operate in isolation – and a large UN mission, the departure of Charles Taylor for Nigeria and simple conflict fatigue may each have played a role – violence did largely stop.

External actors should remain wary, however: they can readily be co-opted or manipulated, especially when donor agencies move into post-conflict reconstruction and state-building, and much larger resources are programmed. In a political marketplace, a formal institution of government may resemble its counterparts in institutionalized political systems ('isomorphic mimicry'<sup>17</sup>) but is in fact subordinate to the logic of the political marketplace. The integrity and rule-bound functioning of an institution is dependent entirely on its place within the political market: if those conditions change (for example if the powerful and honest politician or bureaucrat presiding over the institution is moved) then it will revert to operating on a transactional ('corrupt' or 'neo-patrimonial') basis.

International partner institutions (development agencies, intelligence and security agencies) usually function on the premise that their counterparts follow compatible rules. This presumption means that their assistance is conditioned on tactical and procedural factors (such as the capacity of the recipient to produce accounts and to meet performance criteria) rather than on a strategic assessment of how that institution is functioning in the political market. If the individual in charge of the institution is skillful, he or she will manage to co-opt international partnership for sufficiently long so as to consolidate power. The donor/partner institution only realizes too late that it has been party to a political game, with outcomes it

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<sup>17</sup> Greg Larson, Peter Biar Ajak and Lant Pritchett, 2013. "South Sudan's Capability Trap: Building a state with disruptive innovation." Harvard University Kennedy School of Government, Center for International Development Working Paper no 268, October.

neither anticipated nor desired.

A more ambitious version of the tactical calculus is building stronger and more peaceable relationships among the participants, shifting from mostly violent transactions to more stable (and somewhat peaceable) collaborations. Ian Johnstone applies relational contract theory to peace agreements, describing them as the establishment of common project by formerly hostile actors.<sup>18</sup> Critically, the parties to the agreement need to have an expectation that the arrangement will endure, and the arrangement itself needs to be structured such that it encompasses not only what the parties agreed to at the time of signing, but also uncertain future contingencies and the possibility that parties' expectations will evolve over time. For instance, a peace agreement may include (a) mechanisms which allow parties to co-exist despite fundamental disagreements, or without resolving the issues that led to conflict in the first place, (b) vaguely worded provisions which can act as a basis for future advocacy or action, and (c) the possibility for local issues to be settled outside the agreement or peace process at the national level.<sup>19</sup>

This is a more modest and achievable than formal institutionalization and does not require a structural reconfiguration as a precondition (though mediators and negotiators may hope that such a transition will follow). Within a turbulent political marketplace, actors have low expectations that relationships will become consistently trustworthy and non-violent. Johnstone makes the (admittedly loose) analogy of marriage as a relational contract versus a one-night stand as a discrete transaction. Expanding this analogy, 'peace' in the political marketplace (or political unsettlement) is likely to be akin to a chronically dysfunctional marriage characterized by poor communication, cheating, verbal abuse and both parties recurrently weighing the options of breaking up.

**(ii) Structural reconfiguration of the political market and control over coercion.**

A peace agreement that involves a share-out of resources is most readily done in circumstances of expanding resources and centralized or coordinated control over those resources. (An oil boom is an example of the former, a business consortium regulating political financing is an example of the latter.) The external policymaker can promote peace by trying to enable these facilitating conditions.

A peace process usually addresses organized violence first. To do so, it tries to sort a complex conflict into a manageable structure, which begins with determining what kinds of violence (by who, against whom) matters to the political authorities and the external intervenor—and by implication, what kinds of violence 'don't matter' (or don't matter so much) to those actors. The next step is a ceasefire, that specially recognizes organized armed groups that control territory and makes them the privileged interlocutors for the next stage. Everything else follows from this.

Peace processes in political marketplaces are typically recurrent/cyclical, so that violence is organized in anticipation of a future political resolution. The template for a peace process can thereby determine how the war is run. Therefore, in a dispute between pastoralist groups that pay blood-money it will be organized around lineage groups; whereas in a 'civil war' it will be organized according to groups with territorial constituencies.

In this process, leading to a political resolution or settlement, some political issues will be privileged over others. Typically, territorial autonomy or ethnic consociationalism will be privileged over democratic inclusion. Some groups will be privileged over others: territorially-based, hierarchical groups with external representation will be recognized, and smaller, irregular groups, such as those that use non-violence or those that are primarily criminal, will be excluded. Some kinds of violence, such as well-ordered territorial

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<sup>18</sup> Ian Johnstone, 2011. "Managing Consent in Contemporary Peacekeeping Operations." *International Peacekeeping*, 18.2, 168-182, pp. 172-3.

<sup>19</sup> This has been referred to as the process of reaching a 'formalised political *unsettlement*' by Bell and Pospisil. See Christine Bell and Jan Pospisil, 2017. "Navigating inclusion in transitions from conflict: The formalised political *unsettlement*." *Journal of International Development* 29, no. 5: 576–593. For an application of this context in South Sudan see: Alex de Waal, Alan Boswell, David Deng, Rachel Ibreck, Matthew Benson and Jan Pospisil, 2019. *South Sudan: The politics of delay*. Conflict Research Programme Memo, December 3. <http://www.politicalsettlements.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Politics-of-Delay-South-Sudan-3Dec19.pdf>.

violence, will be considered a problem needing a ceasefire, while other kinds of violence, such as intimate partner violence, will not. A creative peace process will manage some of these rogue elements, using techniques of sequencing problems, ambiguities, etc., appropriate to the context.<sup>20</sup> There can be no mechanical formula for this – it depends on investing time and effort in understanding the specificities of the case at hand.

But any peace process entails a risk that the groups or issues that are excluded will reappear in a violent form, only this time defined as spoilers or criminals. It is a commonplace to observe that the conclusion of a peace agreement witnesses violence morphing into new forms. The exclusion of certain people or issues may become a cause for destabilization—violence that matters politically—which has the potential to disrupt the entire ordering, instead of being just a minor irritant.

### (iii) Opportunities for transformative/democratic change.

The logic of a civic revolution, and how it intersects with the political marketplace, pervasive violence and identity politics, goes beyond the scope of this paper. Nonetheless some observations are in order.

In every country, even amidst violent political conflict and turmoil, people organize to press for peace, democracy, law and justice. In some cases, large-scale urban non-violent protests are able to bring down repressive governments—indeed this is the only means of regime change with proven efficacy. The political marketplace framework helps explain the challenges faced by new democracies arising from such uprisings: these systems transition both from dictatorship to democracy, and from centralized kleptocracy to a deregulated political marketplace, and the dynamics of the latter can quickly overwhelm civic democracy. External actors are very poor at engineering such changes, but their interventions can be crucial in determining the success or failure of such civic revolutions.

In other cases, peace processes conducted among belligerents may include opportunities for marginal and civic groups to find a voice, organize and press their demands, and the text of an agreement may include 'hooks' such as provisions for truth commissions, national dialogue, human rights, elections, etc., around which future civic mobilization can be mobilized (see above). Note that if the starting point of a peace process is a ceasefire, then civic mobilization will be disadvantaged at the outset and consistently marginalized. If the starting point for such a process is democratization, civic forces will be on an equal footing to armed groups.

In a context of persistent conflict and repression, opportunities for promoting peace, democracy and justice will be few and hard to anticipate. When such opportunities arise will depend on conjunctural alignments of factors, most of which are beyond prediction, let alone control. A strategy for change should therefore be a combination of principle and systematic opportunism. The principled element is holding firm to the basic norm of non-violent political change. The tactical element is preparing for different eventualities, pursuing small wins, and having the capacity to seize the moment when it appears.

Intervening to support the successful outcome of a democratic transition requires, first and foremost, a sound political marketplace analysis of the forces of counter-revolution and the constraints on the consolidation of democratic political institutions. In a system that has been a political marketplace, this means recognizing that institutionalized politics can only prevail when it has prevailed over, or is supported by, political finance and factional organized violence. We should never assume that democratic enthusiasm and 'legitimate' institutions are more powerful than the logic of the political marketplace.

## 4. Conclusions

In the current age of disorder, according to the logic of the political marketplace, a 'fragile state' is better seen as a subaltern open political system. Linear, institutional theories of change do not work for interventions by external actors in such societies. They will not climb the ladder from 'fragility' to institutionalized statehood according to the templates of the World Bank and other orthodoxies, and linear, institutional theories of change risk feeding into and perpetuating the underlying political

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<sup>20</sup> Jan Pospisil, 2019. *Peace in Political Unsettlement: Beyond Solving Conflict*. London, Palgrave Macmillan.

economies of the violent political marketplace.

The alternative theory of change accepts that many important things lie outside the scope of this theory of change: global capitalism, mounting xenophobia, the disorders of the Anthropocene. These global problems should be addressed, but they cannot be remedied by the policy instruments designed for the problems of subaltern open political systems in Africa and the Middle East. Accepting this limitation, the theory of change focuses on achievable goals ('small wins') and on preparing civic coalitions for more ambitious gains.

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