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Security sector reform in South Africa: lessons for countries in transition

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The transition to democracy in South Africa represented the political, but not military, triumph of an armed liberation movement after decades of struggle. The transition was not smooth, however, as more than 15000 people were killed in political violence during the transition. An attempt to establish a multi-party peacekeeping force proved inept and was abandoned. This left the ANC reliant on the outgoing regime's security forces to maintain order during the transition. Following the transition, the new government had to define roles for the military and work toward ensuring that the police were made accountable not only to the central civil authority and parliament, but also to the communities they served.

South Africa has been a laboratory and, for some, a model for managing security during times of political transition. South Africa, however, did not carry out a systematic disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process, but pursued security sector reform over an extended period according to what was political possible. The South African transition was led by South Africans who had sufficient political legitimacy to proceed with patience, a reformist rather than revolutionary approach, and the willingness to place some trust in their political opponents for the negotiation and transition phases. It also involved pragmatism about how to pursue reforms that were both technical and political during the transition.

Introduction

The South African transition to democracy was a unique process. It was rooted in the country's particular history of over 300 years of colonialism and 50 years of formal racial domination under the apartheid system. It represented the political, but not military, triumph of an armed liberation movement, the African National Congress (ANC), but was achieved through a process of protracted negotiations and compromises – largely domestically driven. It cannot be characterised as a revolution, and although there was a low-level civil war, with around 15000 people killed in political violence during the negotiations period, the transition took place in the context of constitutional continuity. The late 20th and early 21st century can broadly be seen as a period of transitions:

- from war to peace (the end of civil wars and surrogate regional conflicts connected to Cold War superpower competition);
- from command-controlled, or centralised, economies to market-driven ones;
- and, most importantly, from authoritarian or one-party systems to ostensibly democratic multi-party polities.

Some countries underwent only one of these transitions while some experienced all three. Few of the transitions progressed in an orderly or linear fashion. Transitions often stalled, were sometimes reversed and were seldom fully completed, resulting in only partially democratic systems. Since they inevitably entailed a reconfiguration of power, they have all been associated with conflict. Although these conflicts were not necessarily violent, many involved violence to some degree. There is strong empirical evidence to support the 'democratic peace' theory that consolidated democracies do not go to war with each other. There is equally strong empirical evidence, however, that the democratisation process is strongly correlated with conflict and violence, though this theory is underdeveloped.

It is there that the generalities end: each transition, whether in Eastern or Central Europe, Central Asia, Africa or, most recently, in the Arab world, has unique characteristics and challenges and has entailed varying degrees of external intervention. It is thus difficult to extrapolate from the South African transition, and to draw lessons regarding security sector reform for other countries in transition. However, South Africa was one of the earliest, and arguably most successful, efforts at what is now known as security sector reform (SSR) in the context of democratic transitions. Though at the time of South Africa's transition, the process was called security 'transformation', rather than reform, and the concept of a single security sector or system was still in its infancy, some of the received global, or rather Western, wisdom on SSR has been drawn extensively from the South African experience (though this is not often acknowledged). This paper will examine the broad approach to SSR adopted in South Africa and then look at some of the challenges in specific sub-sectors, primarily defence, policing and intelligence.

The South African transition

South Africans decided in the first instance that they would drive the transition process themselves. None of the major parties wanted significant external intervention, though for differing reasons, and it was anyway unlikely that the international community would have been willing to deploy peacekeeping forces, given that the attention of Western powers was focused on the simultaneous conflagration in the former Yugoslavia. Maintaining stability during the transition was a priority for most of the parties who had entered into negotiations precisely because they wished to avoid a descent into a major civil war, which neither side calculated they could win. This was only partially achieved, as considerable political violence accompanied the process and there were powerful ‘spoilers’ – elements in the security services and political formations generally pursuing ethnic agendas – who resisted change and were more than willing to use violence to disrupt it. This disparate ‘third force’ very nearly unseated the process and it was seen as a miracle that country was able to pull itself back from the brink. The miracle, though, was really a result of adroit political footwork (agency), especially by Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress (ANC) which had over a period of more than 70 years achieved majority support in virtually all ethnic groups across the diverse country. It was the ability of Mandela and the ANC leadership to command inter-ethnic and cross-country support, aligning community-based and civil society organisations, powerful religious structures and trade unions owing allegiance to the ANC into a ‘mass democratic movement’ that provided the glue to hold the country together when it seemed that all was lost.

Another important factor in ensuring relative stability was that the ANC deliberately did not attempt to dissolve, disarm or demobilise the apartheid regime’s security services during the transition. The ANC realised that it would have to rely on them to maintain security (even though elements were actively engaged in destabilization) and it concentrated on reaching agreements with their political principals around issues of joint command and control and principles of conduct. This entailed making significant compromises, including guarantees of continued employment after the transition, that there would be no ‘Nuremburg-type’ prosecutions, and that all the armed formations attached to political formations would be integrated into new national security services provided that their political principals joined the negotiations process.

Much also depended on maintaining stability in the surrounding region, though in this regard South Africa was too powerful to be threatened by any of its neighbours. Fortunately, the regional wars in Angola, Namibia and Mozambique were winding down as a result of the end of the Cold War, as most of them had strong elements of surrogacy. Indeed, it was no accident that the South African transition coincided with end of the Cold War as the conflict over apartheid was closely linked to the global contest. It could be argued that the battle for South Africa had already been fought, and its outcome determined, in Angola, Namibia, Mozambique and earlier in Zimbabwe, sparing South Africa itself from the extremes of devastation visited on its neighbours.

The ANC's strategy was to wait until it secured political power through elections before it attempted to dismantle the apartheid security apparatus, though it did feel it necessary to pursue some reforms during the negotiations period. Primarily, these involved reforms to public order policing so as to 'level the playing field' and make it possible for open political mobilisation without leading to undue conflict. A National Peace Accord, signed by most of the major political players in 1991, not only committed all parties to rules of political conduct and the self-policing of political demonstrations, but also entailed the reform of the South African Police through demilitarisation. Other demands that were successfully pressed by the ANC included the release of political prisoners and the withdrawal of military forces from black urban areas. The ANC never succeeded, however, in ending the nefarious activities of the 'third force', which included provocations ranging from political assassinations to the mass murder of black commuters on trains. Another failure was an attempt to establish a multi-party National Peacekeeping Force, which proved operationally inept and was swiftly abandoned, leaving the ANC reliant on the outgoing regime's security forces to maintain order.

Although it seemed scarcely possible at times, incremental steps progressively led to the establishment of a Transitional Executive Authority and the holding of national elections in April 1994 which delivered the ANC a landslide victory. Right until the end, spoilers were attempting to derail the process through setting off car bombs and other provocations, but the national mood was such that the elections themselves passed completely peacefully despite considerable organisational chaos and last-minute political horse-trading to accommodate late-comers to the peace settlement. The security services themselves, with the exception of the shadowy third force elements, were exemplary in their conduct and made an important contribution to delivering the elections. While democracy is a process, it can also be an event, none more so than the national elections which seemed to be a catharsis for many South Africans after the long years of violent conflict.

One of the compromises the ANC made was to establish a government of national unity, but it was in a sufficiently secure political space to allow the government to turn seriously to the challenges of SSR. The broad approach to this – and this was long before the concept of SSR had been 'invented' by the international community – was underpinned by two ideas: 'wider', or broadened, security and human security. These are set out pithily in the 1996 White Paper on Defence which was one of the first security policy documents adopted by the post-apartheid parliament:

In the new South Africa national security is no longer viewed as a predominantly military and police problem. It has been broadened to incorporate political, economic, social and environmental matters. At the heart of this new approach is a paramount concern with the security of people. Security is an all-encompassing condition in which individual citizens live in freedom, peace and safety; participate fully in the process of governance; enjoy the protection of fundamental rights; have access to resources and basic necessities of life; and inhabit an environment which is not detrimental to their health and well-being.

Within this paradigm, the principles now germane to SSR – democratic or ‘good’ governance, collaborative regional security, the rule of law, international humanitarian law, civil supremacy over the security forces and transparency and accountability – could be rolled out, although not without difficulty and not always with success.

Unlike in most post-conflict situations, South Africans did not carry out a systematic disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process to deal with the proliferation of armed combatants. Instead, in the interests of stability, it was decided that command and control would be maintained through keeping all the armed formations intact and then integrating them once the political solution had been found. Disarmament was delayed, although it was supposed to happen quickly for ‘non-statutory’ forces, but as command remained intact, armed incidents were rare. Integration symbolically took place at midnight on the day before the national elections (when the new national flag was hoisted). A few of the most execrable units and individuals in terms of human rights were lustrated, but very few. Remarkably, integration was achieved without a shot being fired: although there were some mutinous moments, they were successfully dissolved. Of course, this resulted in an over-sized armed forces and gross rank inflation due to the need to accommodate the politico-military leaders of the various parties, and right-sizing was left to natural attrition, which was far from an optimal or rational solution. Even more problematically, when formal integration took place, many were excluded on an individual basis because they did not meet age, fitness and educational criteria and this unduly affected the liberation movement cadres. An ill-advised quick-fix solution was found in the form of cash hand-outs for those demobilising.

The security legacy

The combat effectiveness and cost-efficiency of the new national defence force suffers from this legacy today. The phenomenon of disaffected, often self-styled, ‘war veterans’ who were given cash hand-outs to get them out of the system but have re-emerged as a political force now besets South Africa, as it had plagued Namibia and Zimbabwe. Although the new South African National Defence Force is demographically representative, anomalies persist at the most critical operational and training levels (colonels and NCOs), resulting in considerable tension. Rank inflation and a lack of exit strategies for aging soldiers pose serious challenges for combat readiness. Added to this is the usual problem affecting developing country militaries in that far too much has to be spent on personnel costs (the political costs of not spending it outweighs other factors) resulting in insufficient funds for operations and, especially, capital expenditure and procurement.

It is also argued that South Africa got it wrong in defining roles and functions for the military. One of the obvious problems of widening security is that it can lead to ‘securitisation’, a rather overblown expression of the old problem of militarisation. In other words, the security forces grab the opportunity to expand their mandate (and hence, they hope, their budgets and political clout). Decision-makers attempted to solve this problem by simultaneously widening the ambit of security but narrowing the tasks of the defence force. This resulted in a resort to the old-fashioned realist shibboleth that the primary role of the armed forces is protection

against external aggression and upholding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state. The generals successfully argued that this meant that they needed to be re-equipped with modern conventional weapons platforms, resulting in the acquisition, at a cost of about US\$5 billion, of naval corvettes, supersonic fighter jets and associated jet trainers, and submarines. Many argue that this is wasteful expenditure (and, needless to say, much corruption in the process) and that the South African defence force is now lumbered with a 'baroque arsenal' that is inappropriate for its actual tasks, which are African peacekeeping, border protection and support to the police.

Policing was a priority during the transition as it was seen as a major fault-line for the translation of political contestation into violence. Alongside demilitarisation, a community policing approach was adopted, much on the lines of the reforms carried out in the US after the 1960s race-riots (and later in Britain for similar reasons), in which it was argued that police were accountable not only to the central civil authority but also to the communities they served. Indeed, service was the key word and the force was renamed in this ilk. This was accompanied by a turn to 'social' approaches to combating crime and the crafting of a multi-departmental national crime prevention strategy, involving the police as much as local government and the state agencies responsible for what might be broadly thought of as human security. Accountability was further reinforced by the enhancement of oversight and monitoring, from parliamentary committees through to an independent complaints body. The experiment has been at best partially successful. With crime palpably not diminishing under conditions of political freedom – unsurprisingly since the collapse of authoritarian governance opens space for local and international criminal syndicates – government has increasingly fallen back on 'hard policing', with ministers making calls on police to 'shoot to kill'. The result has been an unfortunate increase in human rights abuses, and the police now kill more people every year than they did in the apartheid era – with little or no reduction in crime.

Intelligence is the poor stepsister in SSR and often the most difficult to crack in terms of governance and accountability, for reasons related in large part to its requirement for operational secrecy. It is also the security service most open to political abuse. Using 'best practice' models of intelligence governance drawn from countries like Canada and Australia (and certainly not Britain) the post-apartheid government took a number of steps to try to assert democratic oversight over the intelligence agencies. Military intelligence, which had become hegemonic in the last years of the apartheid era, was downgraded, an effort was made to separate intelligence gathering from analysis, and then from policy-making to reduce the political influence of the spies (not easily done). External and internal intelligence were separated functionally and efforts were made to improve accountability within the limits of confidentiality by establishing a parliamentary oversight committee and an inspector-general office. Legislation was introduced specifying, amongst other things, that the intelligence services should not be used to further the interests of any political party. It neglected to say that they should not be used to further the interests of factions of the dominant party, which many argue is now the case.

Conclusions

South Africa has been seen as a laboratory for SSR for countries in transition. Many of the experiments have been successful but some have not. Much of what took place preceded the creation of an international consensus on what constitutes successful SSR. Virtually all of it was home-grown and driven by South Africans themselves, although international best practice was incorporated where it was thought necessary. This focus on home-grown approaches is probably why South Africa has been more successful than most countries in the challenging task of reforming security in transition – what used to be called ‘changing the wheels while the car is moving’.

The South African transition was marked by a focus among the major players on maintaining stability and avoiding civil war. This focus eased the development of a pragmatic and relatively cooperative approach in managing the spoilers and violence associated with the transition. The ANC, despite what they had suffered in the previous decades, was able to proceed with a patient, reformist approach to the transfer of power and the reform of security institutions. Not all has gone smoothly. The decision to integrate armed groups into the military resulted in the persistence of an expensive and over-sized armed forces. Efforts to ensure that the police were made accountable to the communities they served have also been of limited success. But the South African struggle still stands as a remarkable example for how to minimize violence and manage security during a difficult political transition.

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