Ideological Moderation in Armed Groups Turned Political Parties

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HALCYOON

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This research brief series has been initiated through a collaboration between the Politics After War (PAW) research network, the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA), and the United Nations Department of Peace Operations, Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions: DDR Section (UNDPO/OROLSI/DDR) with the aim to provide research perspectives and scientific evidence on the intersection of DDR and politics with a particular emphasis on the transformative dynamics of armed groups and combatants.

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Introduction

During civil wars, many non-state armed groups articulate radical political ideas to justify why they are fighting. When these groups begin to participate in post-war politics, these ideas have a bearing on the quality and substance of peace. Typically, such ideas involve claims against the government in power, suggestions about the kind of reforms required, or proposals for the kind of state that might replace it. The motivations of secessionist movements such as the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) were primarily articulated in terms of a desire for a new independent state, with transformed citizenship and governance practices. Other groups such as the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoists (CPN-M) the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and El Salvador's Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) were guided by revolutionary principles and liberation ideologies that included demands for a radically reformed state. Movements such as the Taliban in Afghanistan have called for the establishment of an Islamic Kalifate based

on narrowly defined principles of Islam that exclude women from social, economic and political life. At the same time, in 2021 Taliban leaders proclaimed that they had 'moderated' or changed their position on some of their more radical ideological positions, reflecting their desire to obtain recognition and legitimacy at home and abroad.

The ideas and ideologies of armed groups have both instrumental and normative components: they not only function to attract recruits, maintain cohesion, and prevent defection during war but also paint a picture of a 'good society' and how it may be achieved. It is thus important to move beyond viewing ideology as primarily a tool that movements use for mobilization during the struggle phase and seriously examine their role in shaping post-war governance practices and legitimation strategies when these groups become political parties.

The revised Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS) module 2.20 on the Politics of DDR recognizes that for DDR processes to be effective, they should be designed and implemented with full consideration of the political landscape of the specific contexts concerned.[1] War-to-peace transitions occur in highly politically charged environments, with continuously shifting relationships, interests and power structures. Against this backdrop, former armed groups face the challenge of realigning the wartime ideas that once animated their armed struggles and making them relevant to new realities.

This raises an important set of questions. Do armed groups adapt and potentially moderate their ideologies as they become political parties? What does this mean for post-war politics? These questions are critical for understanding whether and how to support armed groups' transitioning to political parties, both in contexts where civil wars have ended through negotiated settlements and rebel groups become opposition or ruling parties and where rebel groups have entered politics on the basis of a military victory. Drawing on recent research on the influence of ideology on armed group behaviour, this research brief considers a number of different experiences of former armed groups as they adapt to peacetime politics in order to demonstrate that their decisions to moderate, reconfigure or abandon their radical ideologies are shaped by multiple and overlapping electoral, patrimonial and state-building logics.[2] It highlights three aspects as particularly important: (i) the assessment of ideological moderation, (ii) the impact of electoral participation on ideological or programmatic moderation, and (iii) the implications of these processes for the quality of peace and democracy in the medium and long term. In doing so, it points to a particular dilemma confronted by former armed groups: while some form of moderation is needed to overcome wartime cleavages and decrease tensions, former armed actors risk alienating their previous supporters if they are perceived as no longer representing their core grievances.

Signs of ideological moderation and implications for peace settlements

In the past three decades, we have seen a number of armed groups renounce violence, sign peace agreements with their adversaries, and transform into political parties. The creation and implementation of durable peace settlements requires the active co-operation of former conflict parties, and approximately one third (35.5%) of armed groups entering negotiated peace between 1975 and 2011 transformed into political parties.[3]

In order to reach a peace settlement, protagonists usually need to compromise on key points of difference. In this regard, it is often essential that non-state armed groups formally renounce some of their original goals as part of the peace settlements. In most cases, a prerequisite for the transition from armed movement to political party has included the formal relinquishing of the most radical demands that underpinned their initial mobilization: seces-

sion is replaced by regionalism, a revolutionary state structure is replaced by principles of democratic power-sharing and ethno-nationalist goals are replaced by an acceptance of ethnic pluralism.

It is, however, less clear if these are accompanied by real or heartfelt changes in leaders and members of such movements. While it is easy to identify behavioural changes such as demobilization of the armed wing and peaceful participation in electoral contests, it is more difficult to determine whether such shifts are accompanied by more deep-rooted ideological changes.

DEFINING IDEOLOGICAL MODERATION

Ideological moderation is here understood as a change in the armed group's vision, goals and identity towards endorsing more pluralistic and less exclusionary policies and goals. Moderation can then be seen as the abandonment or revision of radical goals that (i) enable opposition movements to accommodate themselves to competitive politics and (ii) move them away from exclusionist or illiberal positions. Importantly, what constitutes moderation will be specific to the type of rebel group. For instance, ethno-nationalist movements that moderate will not abandon their core identity but may assume a deliberate shift towards accepting (or even promoting) the existence of a multi-ethnic state.

One clear, observable sign of moderation are changes in the outwardly stated goals of the armed group. These can often be witnessed by analysing the political manifestos, programmes, or political speeches over time. In conflicts over self-determination, for example, given the international reluctance to grant statehood, non-state armed groups are often required to shift from an insistence on secession to an acceptance of some form of regionalism.[4] These adaptations are seen as critical for negotiated settlements to be reached. Peace negotiations, then, tend to accommodate separatists by offering provisions for regional power sharing and a form of territorial autonomy instead.

For example, such provisions for autonomy combined with shifts in laws on political parties to allow for regional political parties and rebel group political inclusion were the basis of the Helsinki agreement between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Indonesian government in 2005, as well as of the Bangsamoro Agreement between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the Philippine government in 2014. In both these instances, demands for secession were replaced by an endorsement of regionalism.[5]

Similarly, where non-state armed groups mobilize around goals of establishing a new kind of revolutionary state, the compromises reached often focus on some form of political inclusion at the centre or the strengthening of democratic governance. Examples in this category include the the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoists (CPN-M), the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation (FMLN) Front in El Salvador, where armed groups signed peace settlements that promised power-sharing.

Does organizational change lead to radicalization or moderation?

Research shows that organizational factors play an important role in pushing groups towards moderation or radicalization. Yet the effect of factionalism – the emergence of sub-groups within a group or parties within a party – on ideological change is ambivalent, and the concerted and consistent efforts of international actors can play a crucial role in bolstering factions with more moderate and pluralist positions.

Studies of internal diversity and organizational change in groups as diverse as GAM in Indonesia and the Conseil National Pour la Défense de la Démocratie – Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie (CNDD-FDD) in Burundi highlight how the types of factions and the nature of political visions that these sub-groups promote determine whether or not factionalism will lead to radicalization or moderation.

Organizational change is often a natural consequence of growth, and different sub-groups within the same rebel organization can benefit (or lose) from increased recruitment and domestic popularity and the consequent shifts in internal power dynamics. In the process, potential spoilers may be either weakened and side-lined, or sufficiently neutralized and incorporated into the movement.

For example, the case of GAM in Indonesia highlights how moderation can occur as a result of internal shifts in the dominant faction of a rebel group. Here, organizational diversification and the ensuing internal debate led to the strengthening of the civilian wing of the organization. This, in turn, increased the voices that proposed more-moderate state visions inside the movement – regionalism over secessionism – which led to a strategic shift and sufficient consensus among the leadership ahead of the Helsinki negotiations. Ideological moderation within GAM shows how factionalism and shifts in a groups internal power dynamics, together with international support for moderates and increased sincere scrutiny ahead of and during peace processes, can encourage movements to espouse more amendable and accommodating positions. The presence and strength of these moderate voices are important not only for negotiations but also for the establishment of political parties that mobilize around a peacebuilding agenda that also endorses democracy as a goal.

In other cases, factionalism has instead resulted in internal radicalization. For example, in Burundi, organizational diversity within the CNDD-FDD did not translate into inclusive, transparent and liberal practices after it became the ruling party. Its reliance on a coercive and increasingly authoritarian type of state-building has been attributed to internal power politics within the CNDD-FDD, where those holding views that were compatible with liberal forms of state-building were repeatedly side-lined. The overly simplistic framing of the CNDD-FDD as problematic and illiberal then resulted in international actors failing to pay sufficient attention, and in turn lend support, to the growing group of moderate elements within the party. International involvement instead primarily focused on supporting the activities of civil society and opposition groups, at the expense of leveraging the changing tendencies within both the opposition and the ruling parties. Importantly, a range of diverse, and at times conflicting, views coexisted within the international community – from a more rigid adherence to principles of democracy and constitutionalism on the one hand, to a more

THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL ACTORS IN THE TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY IN ACEH

In Aceh, international actors supported the GAM faction that held more progressive views, a factor that contributed to the transition from armed to non-armed politics.

During the initial months following the peace agreement, the process of transforming the rebel organization into a single political party proved much more conflictual than had been anticipated. Two factions emerged: the first was the old guard, comprised of segments of the traditional leadership whose primary goal was to preserve the organizational continuity of the rebel organization and whose ideological foundation was focused on symbolic identity politics; the second was a new guard consisting primarily of moderates who had pushed for more-progressive elements in the agreement and had support from pro-democracy civil society activists. This second faction sought to build a party that could secure a future vision for a democratic and inclusive Aceh.

In such an environment, the strategic engagement with and support for the moderate new guard by the Aceh Monitoring Mission (AMM) and other donors contributed to ensuring that this faction was able to control the direction of the reintegration and peacebuilding process, at least in its initial phases. However, what was missing was the more strategic support for building the political party. While the AMM and the European Union Election Observation Mission were mandated to support and oversee the organization of elections, they were not mandated to provide support for the formation of political parties. Although some democracy training was provided through local NGOs, this support was rather limited, and the party would have benefited from earlier engagement and support specifically concerning party building.

pragmatic positions on the other – which led to a lack of coherence among international actors that undermined their capacity to effectively champion liberal ideas.[6]

The Burundi example highlights the negative consequences of disjointed and even contradictory international approaches to continued violence and militarism in the post-war period. Both cases underscore the importance of international actors recognizing the complex positions, alliances and motivations within these groups during and after the conflict and identifying and working together with factions with whom they share common goals in order to anchor the most accommodating and moderate ideas within such groups.

Does electoral participation result in moderation?

At times, electoral participation can account for the moderation of former rebel parties. One strand of research argues that the very need to attract voter support and remain popular in the political space induces a self-moderating effect. As groups shift their main site of political contestation from one arena (battlefield) to another (parliament), they may strategically moderate their goals to remain relevant in the new reality.[7]

Participation in elections, however, cannot always and necessarily be taken as an indication of ideological moderation. In both Lebanon and Palestine, as well as in Northern Ireland, rebel groups developed political wings in order to participate in national and regional elections. In these cases, electoral participation had little to do with renouncing violence but was pursued concomitantly with the use of violence to extend political power beyond the battlefield through the use of democratic mechanisms.[8] It is therefore critical that international engagements seeking to promote democracy do not lose sight of other logics and interests that are at play when armed groups decide to compete in elections.

Furthermore, while electoral contests may play a role, other factors may also prompt these groups to deradicalize. Notably, as this brief has highlighted, the nature of the power-sharing arrangement, as well as the internal dynamics of the parties – such as the degree of support for the newly agreed settlement – are important factors that explain the nature of these groups' ideological and programmatic adaptation.

Dilemmas of ideological moderation and adaptation

The degree to which former armed groups moderate their ideology and programmatic priorities has profound effects on the quality of peace and democracy after war. Given that many armed groups' ideological visions are marked by exclusive forms of statehood, the extent to which former rebel parties adopt more inclusive and less divisive profiles is likely to impact positively on peacebuilding. However, such moderation policies may be strategically detrimental to parties if they risk losing their voter base. This was the case with the Serb Democratic Party (SDS) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example. Following the Dayton Peace Accords, the SDS underwent a significant rebranding of the party's public profile, abandoning much of the most exclusionary language of ethnic differentiation. The international apparatus mandated to oversee the peacebuilding process was equally invested in the aim to ensure ethnic deradicalization: The Office of the High Representative (OHR) had the power to ban and remove radical politicians from standing for office. Their work also included monitoring party manifestos. However, over time, the SDS faced increasing competition from new political parties that were now using more ethnically salient language to compete for Serb voters, which has led to an intensification and re-radicalization of ethnic politics in the country.[9] Ultimately, even though the former armed party had deradicalized, other parties had not.

Many former rebel parties are acutely aware of these strategic trade-offs. In the case of the Revolutionary United Front Party (RUFP), a former rebel party in

Sierra Leone, the party has been unwilling to engage in ideological moderation, however real or rhetorical, in fear that this may alienate ex-combatants and the very constituency that supported the group during the war. While this may have contributed to its poor performance at the ballot box, the strong upholding of its wartime ideology and symbols is not without its reasons. Electoral loss has been a calculated sacrifice in return for maintaining wartime networks. Indeed, it is through such networks that the RUFP has been able to successfully negotiate post-war concessions with the country's two main political parties and leverage a platform for a comeback.[10] This example is a reminder of the basic premises of party politics in many countries undergoing war-to-peace transitions. In particular, it demonstrates that factors other than electoral logics – such as considerations of patronage brokerage – influence the group's decisions vis-à-vis moderation in ways that undermine or bypass international expectations of multi-party democracy.

The case of Sierra Leone is telling of the dilemma that rebel groups face as they decide whether and how to embark on ideological moderation. It also points to the role that donors can play to support moderation, beyond a relatively narrow support for the party at the negotiation table. Given that the RUFP was one of the main actors responsible for implementing the accords and held the potential to contribute to societal transformation, investing more time and resources in its reformation in a political party could potentially have significantly contributed to strengthening the organization's role as indirect peacebuilders.

Conclusions and Implications

This research brief has shown that armed groups turned political parties engage in efforts to rebrand themselves as they navigate the post-war political environment. Ideologies play out in different ways in different contexts, and a complex mix of electoral, patrimonial and state-building logics shapes their decisions and outcomes. Earlier research has elaborated on material factors, such as the role of the type of war ending (i.e., military victory vs negotiated settlement), the duration of the war, and the political economy of the armed groups. This brief has complemented that understanding of the workings of post-war politics by underscoring the importance of ideologies and visions in influencing how the parties adapt and their ability to shape peacebuilding. It has also demonstrated how different ideas and differing degrees of adherence to hard-line ideologies interact with other factors both internal and external to the organizations in ways that open up or restrict opportunities for international engagement at different moments.

As the brief has highlighted, it is important to remember that many armed groups invest significant energy, time and other resources into ending wars and transitioning to electoral democracy. In fact, as part of their post-war legitimation and mobilization strategy, former rebel parties often refer back to the peace negotiations themselves and frame the resulting agreements as being 'their' achievements, positioning themselves as their defenders. Reconfiguring and implementing a peacetime ideology are costly and daunting tasks, particularly in war-to-peace transitions that are characterized by great uncertainty and indeterminacy. Recognizing that diverse views exist both among domestic and international actors and being open to identifying and working with allies in unexpected places across the international-domestic dichotomy can significantly enhance the prospects for peace and democracy.

This brief closes with several key lessons learned from past experiences, followed by findings that can inform future engagements with armed groups transitioning into political parties.

- **The importance of ideological moderation:** Whether or not groups moderate has significant consequences in both making and building peace.

Renouncing or reformulating their most radical ideological elements – such as the meaning of 'sovereignty' – may be critical, and even a prerequisite, for peace settlements. Similarly, the direction and sincerity of ideological adaptation inform the long-term quality of peace and democracy.

- **The multifaceted meanings of elections**: Electoral participation can lead to ideological change in favour of sustainable peace and democracy, but it does not necessarily do so. Other factors, such as the opportunity structure emanating from the provisions of peace agreements, as well as patrimonial and state-building logics that are separate from these processes, can interact and shape groups' ideological trajectories and governance practices in either direction. As with the case of Bosnia, long-term logics of electoral politics may shift the balance away from rebel parties towards new, radical parties that might remobilize wartime cleavages.

- **Opportunities from fragmentation:** Rebel group fragmentation, contrary to popular assumption, can also lead to moderation. Depending on the type of sub-groups that emerge and their views on core issues, such internal diversification can give rise to more complex political organizations that breaks with strict, conventional military hierarchies and a narrowly defined political community. As in the case of GAM in Indonesia, this can strengthen non-militant components of the group and lead to an generally more amenable ideological outlook that offers a way out of zero-sum thinking.

- **Proactive identification and sustained engagement by international actors:** Taking seriously the fact that many rebel groups are composed of individuals with different views – along the spectrum from hardliners to moderates – can go a long way. With this recognition as a starting point, international actors should be more intentional in their efforts to identify, work with and support factions that hold positions compatible with meaningful peace and democracy. Such support may come in the form of accompaniment, coaching, training or funding. In the case of the CNDD-FDD, failure to do so resulted in several missed opportunities to anchor liberal principles in Burundi's post-conflict trajectory. Such engagements are just as critical in the process of leading up to peace negotiations as they are after wars. In the case of Aceh, even minimal engagement with moderate factions proved important to securing these individuals' positions in the post-war political arena.

- **Enhanced coordination among international actors:** More-coordinated, strategic and reflective international support, underpinned by an in-depth understanding of both internal and external dynamics, is critical to contributing towards ideological moderation of former rebel parties. A unified context analysis by key international organizations and donor states engaged in the context may be a fruitful first step; such an analysis can be considered to function like a working document as the context develops over time. Regular coordination mechanisms among these actors at both the countrywide and headquarter/capital levels would also contribute to much-needed coherence among international actors.

Endnotes

[1] See International Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards, 2021. https://www.unddr.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/IDDRS-2.20-The-Politics-of-DDR.pdf.

[2] For an extensive analysis of the role of ideologies in post–civil war state-building, see Devon Curtis and Gyda Sindre. 2015. 'What happens to ideas and ideology in armed groups turned political parties.' Special Issue and Collection of Government and Opposition 54(3) and Online Collection https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/government-and-opposition/information/what-happens-to-ideas-and-ideology-in-armed-groups-turned-political-parties. See also Gyda Sindre. 2019. 'Adapting to peacetime politics: Rebranding and ideological change in former rebel parties.' Government and Opposition 54(3); Gyda Sindre. 2016. 'Internal party democracy in former rebel parties.' Party Politics, 22(4); Gyda Sindre.2019. 'From secessionism to regionalism: Intra-organizational change and ideological moderation within armed secessionist movements.' Political Geography 64 (May).

[3] Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs and Sofia Hatz. 2016. 'Rebel-to-party transformations in civil war peace processes 1975–2011.' Democratization 23(6).

[4] International support is a sine qua non in the quest for separate statehood, with countries such as East Timor and South Sudan being exceptions rather than the norm in their achievement of international support for independence.

[5] While governments often fear that opening up special autonomy provisions will enable pro-independence politicians to use the opportunity to push for independence from within the system, there is relatively little evidence of this outcome in post-civil war countries.

[6] Ntagahoraho Burihabwa and Devon E. Curtis. 2019. 'The limits of resistance ideologies: The CNDD-FDD and the legacies of governance in Burundi.' Government and Opposition Special Collection cited above. Ntagahoraho Burihabwa and Devon E. Curtis. 2021. 'Postwar statebuilding in Burundi: Ruling party elites and illiberal peace.' International Affairs 97(4).

[7] John Ishiyama and Michael Marshall. 2017. 'What explains former rebel party name changes after a civil conflict ends? External and internal factors and the transition to political competition.' Party Politic 23(4).

[8] Benedetta Berti. 2013. Armed Political Organizations: From Conflict to Integration. Party Politics. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

[9] Gyda Sindre. 2019, op. cit.

[10] Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs. 2021. 'The legacy of a revolution that never happened: The post-war politics of former rebel party RUFP in Sierra Leone.' Government and Opposition, 56(2), part of Special Collection cited above.

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The Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) is the Swedish government agency for peace, security and development. FBA has since 2005 supported research primarily through its international Research Working Groups. These are composed of well-merited scholars from universities and research institutes worldwide who conduct scientific research on issues related to FBA's areas of expertise.

The Politics After War (PAW) is a research network for collaborative activities and knowledge sharing among researchers interested in dynamics of party politics, political mobilisation, state-society relations and the state in post-civil war contexts.

The United Nations Department of Peace Operations, Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions: DDR Section (UNDPO/OROLSI/DDR) established in 2007, deploys peacekeepers who, as early peacebuilders, assist conflict-affected countries in re-establishing the rule of law and security institutions necessary to build and sustain peace. It includes five components: Police Division; Justice and Corrections Service; Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Section; Security Sector Reform Unit; and UN Mine Action Service.

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