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Ripening Conflict in Civil Society Backchannels: The Malian Peace Process (1990–1997)

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The successful resolution of the internal conflict between the ethnic Tuareg and Arabs of northern Mali and the Malian government represents a rare case of successful conflict management of an internal violent conflict in Africa. The root cause of the conflict, the political marginalization of the North, was resolved by the 1992 National Pact (Storholt 2001). Analysis of the Malian case illustrates the value of civil society actors and other unofficial close-government actors as insider mediators in track-two negotiations during the pre-negotiation phase. Their value is measured in terms of their success to establish track-one negotiations between the official conflict parties with overlapping win-sets. This research paper argues that the insider mediation and advocacy of the Malian civil society and close-government actors, between rebel groups and the government, were the decisive factors for the successful ripening of the conflict. This argument is illustrated by showing how these actors pushed the conflict parties through backchannels to fruitful negotiations. They achieved this by 1.) decisively helping to build coherence in the negotiating positions in the pre-negotiation phase; 2.) shaping the perceptions of the conflict parties of a “Mutual Hurting Stalemate” (Zartman 1991, 307); and 3.) signaling the existence of “Mutually Enticing Opportunities” (Zartman 2008, 232). Thereby, they generated a feasible overlapping win-set (Putnam 1988, 438) and finally pushed both sides into the commitment to negotiations.

These results of this paper call the frequent perception into question that secret backchannel negotiations exclusively between the main conflict actors are essential for peace agreements (O’ Dochartaigh 2011; Adetula et al. 2018). In contrast, in states such as those of Sub-Saharan Africa, where the claim of the government and armed groups to represent citizens is only partially legitimized (Adetula et al. 2018), the engagement of unarmed civilian actors in the pre-negotiations may not make the negotiation situation more difficult (Chuffrin & Saunders 1993; Fisher 1997), but is in fact, essential. Civil insider mediators that are aware of the motives of various conflict parties can enable a conflict resolution, which would not have been possible without bottom-up mediation between the deadlocked conflict parties.

Conceptual Framework

A conflict is ripe for negotiations if the parties to the conflict perceive a “mutually hurting stalemate” (MHS) (Zartman 1991, 307). This means that both sides are in a stalemate where they can no longer achieve their goals at an acceptable cost through the unilateral use of force. In this situation, there is an incentive to engage in pre-negotiations. In pre-negotiations, the conflict parties examine the possibility of negotiations as a political option without secrecy and without obligation. In this critical phase, the sides try to move from conflicting perceptions to cooperative understandings and behaviors that consider a common solution possible. Pre-negotiation ends in formal negotiations when the parties to the conflict, in addition to the push factor MHS, are able to perceive sufficient “mutually enticing opportunities” (MEO), i.e., they can perceive a mutually beneficial common vision of the future (Zartman 2008).

In complex intrastate conflicts with a high number of conflict parties, it is of central importance that the pre-negotiations produce an agenda that brings on board a sufficient number of veto players (Cunningham 2013) to form a supportive coalition for a lasting peace solution (Zartman 1987, 292-4). Moreover, it is important that individual

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parties explore common positions in order to act as a united coalition vis-à-vis the government. In addition to the exploration of common ground, the parties to the conflict undertake small confidence tests and design mechanisms for monitoring confidence (Zartman & Berman 1982, 27-41) in order to test whether the risk of commitment to negotiations can be accepted.

Practice shows that conflicts can be actively ripened by a third mediator. This mediator convinces parties of the ripeness of the conflict and pushes them towards a peaceful solution by influencing their perceptions of an MHS and MEOs. In this context, individuals or civil groups from the society of the conflict country can serve as so-called “insider mediators”. Insider mediators are individuals or civil groups from the conflict regions who have a decisive advantage over outsider mediators in informal pre-negotiations because they possess in-depth situational knowledge and close relationships with the conflict parties (Mason 2010, 4). In conflict countries where formal official government representatives have little legitimacy, insider mediators can enjoy the vital trust and legitimacy of the conflict parties. In unofficial pre-negotiations, respected insider mediators can serve to facilitate common problem-solving (Paffenholz 2014), confidence-building and as a pressure force for the start of peace talks (Mason 2010, 1). While the investigation of unofficial track-two diplomacy in the pre-negotiation phase has so far mostly concentrated on selected elites as negotiators on a secret mission (Wanis- St.John & Kew 2008), civil society groups can actively perform essential mediation functions. In the absence of track-one negotiations, civil actors can keep unofficial communication channels free, open new dialogues in inter-communal processes, exert pressure on decision-makers and generate ideas (Pruitt 1994; Jewett 2019; McClintock & Nahimana 2008, 85). Civil society can be understood as a broad group of public-oriented structures that are not a formal part of state organization (religious groups, trade unions, NGOs, local communities, etc.) (Wanis-St.John 2008). As the main victims of violent intrastate conflicts, civil actors can credibly convince the conflict parties of the suffering and urgency of conflict resolution (Zanker 2014). They ripen the conflict by using their cultural and social embedding to shape the perceptions of the conflict parties of the timely need for conflict termination and enticing opportunities in possible negotiations (Jewett 2019).

In the following analysis of the pre-negotiation phase (1990-1992) of the Mali Peace Process (1990-1997), the great value of civilian and close-government insider mediators in informal backchannel negotiations for the successful initiation of official peace negotiations will be demonstrated. The analysis shows how actors of civil society and close-government actors moved the conflict parties to fruitful negotiations using informal channels. It is argued that civil and close-government actors have been successful insider mediators by 1.) decisively contributing to the joint position-finding of veto players vis-à-vis the government, 2.) significantly influencing the perceptions of both conflict parties of an MHS, and 3.) shaping the mutual perceptions of realistic MEOs. As a result, the insider mediators played a decisive role in the ripening of the conflict, the creation of overlapping win-sets, and ultimately the pushing of both sides into a commitment to negotiations. The analytical three-part division is loose and can overlap, but serves for better illustration. The analysis highlights that outsider mediators also contributed significantly to the creation of a realistic agenda in the pre-negotiation phase and thus made peace negotiations possible. In this light, insider and outsider mediation can be seen as complementary approaches (Mason 2010, 17).

Case Analysis

In order to highlight the contextuality of the suitability of civil society actors as insider mediators, the characteristics of Malian society are briefly discussed. Malian society is characterized by strong social and economic ties between families and ethnic groups. There is a tradition of joint problem-solving at the community level under the leadership of religious and other leaders (Storholt 2001, 338). Even during the conflict, public opinion in the South mostly supported the North’s efforts towards ending political marginalization by the military regime of Moussa Traore. In addition to a shared sense of justice between the North and the South, the Malian population’s desire for economic development grew louder in the early 1990s. The decisive factor was the national perception that development was only possible through a high degree of integration of all regions of the country (*ibid.*). Therefore, there was a civilian population with a strong desire for peace, which was excellently suited as an insider mediator. In other cases, such as the civil war in Burundi, civil society could not function as an insider mediator to the same extent, as the society was deeply divided in the ethno-political conflict (McClintock & Nahimana 2008).

In line with the Malian culture of intercommunal problem-solving, individuals and organizations from civil society tried

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to establish a dialogue between the local leaders from the beginning of the conflict (Maiga 1996). Through informal channels, these actors essentially organized the rapprochement of different rebel groups. The women among soldiers in the armed groups played an important role in this process (O'Reilly et al. 2015, 30). As an integral part of daily events, they were particularly well placed to establish informal communication channels across power relations and thus to create dialogue and trust between hostile rebel groups and the government side (Storholt 2001, 338). By demanding respect for the family from their husbands, brothers and fathers and, accordingly, pressing privately for peaceful conflict resolution, they were instrumental in forming an inclusive coalition of veto players vis-à-vis the government united in their agenda (ibid., 339). This made a possible future negotiation process more manageable and promising.

The military dictatorship of Mousa Traore perceived a hurting stalemate as early as 1990 and was ready to find a political solution with the minorities in the north. Militarily, the rebel forces were superior, but isolated by desert areas. The Malian military had become war-weary through continuous losses (Keita 1998, 16). Problematically, the government had no control over the conflict between the rebel groups and the Malian army. The Malian army was internally divided into a democratic and an authoritarian camp, which preferred a political solution on the one hand and a continuation of the war on the other (Storholt 2001, 335). On the one hand, this massively undermined the rebels' trust in the government as a collective actor and, on the other, it prevented the signaling of a hurting stalemate. After the overthrow of the government in 1991 was largely made possible by the disobedience of the civilian population, a democratic government was installed in which a major norm convergence between the government and the rebel groups arose (New York Times 1991; Lode 1997, 414). From this moment, the new government credibly signaled a hurting stalemate, as concessions to the north such as the participation of Tuareg and Arabs in the Malian army were no longer seen as a threat to the government's power base.

In order to fulfill the condition of an MHS, the rebel side had to be actively convinced by local leaders that further attacks would no longer benefit their position. Central rebel groups such as the People's Movement of Azawad (MPA) or the Popular Front for Liberation of Azawad (FPLA) were unofficially convinced of an MHS by General Sire Traore, an insider mediator close to the government (Storholt 2001, 338). In a backchannel meeting with central rebel leaders in Nouakchott in August 1991, the unofficial government representative expressed first concessions and recognition of the mistakes of the previous government (ibid., 337). This allowed essential trust and mutual understanding to be built up and a possible way out to be signaled.

Although the new democratic government had the political will to negotiate with the rebels, it required backchannel insider mediation by General Sire Traore and other third parties from civil society and neighboring countries to convince the rebels that entering into a constructive dialogue with the government is worth the risk. In a diagnostic phase, Sire Traore helped a grand coalition of rebel groups to frame their agenda as a struggle for fundamental social needs, and worked on building a climate of trust and a shared version of coping with these needs together (Storholt 2001, 337). Local NGOs such as Norwegian Church Aid facilitated secret communication between rebel groups, pleaded the urgency of peace negotiations, and helped to build trust through the mediation of a series of temporary ceasefires (Brenk & van de Veen 2005; Lode 1997, 409).

Complementary to the bottom-up insider mediation of civil society, a top-down third-party mediation by the French and Mauritanian diplomats Edgar Pisani and Baba Miske was initiated. Invited by the government as external mediators, the diplomats pursued a dual strategy. In secret talks during the pre-negotiations, they convinced the military dictatorship of Moussa Traore of the possibility of a political way out for the entire country without military intervention. At the same time, they prepared an analytical report of the problem situation in the north. This report served later as the basis for the 1992 National Pact Peace Agreement (Storholt 2001, 341). The mediators were able to break down the far-reaching demands of the rebel coalition, initially conceived as a test of the government's negotiating position, to a realistic level during backchannel meetings in the cities of Segou and Mopti (Klute & Trotha 2004, 116; Lode 1997, 414). The final demands included the abolition of political marginalization of the North, participation of Tuareg and Arabs in the army and an amnesty of war prisoners. On this formula, the new democratic government and the rebel coalition were able to develop a consensual understanding of the need for economic development, security and political integration of the population in the North, thus generating MEOs and an overlapping win-set.

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Nonetheless, it ultimately required the rebels' perception of a "once in a lifetime opportunity" to push the rebels into negotiations. This perception resulted from four factors:

- 1.) Pressure from the Algerian state on the Tuareg and Arabs of the North to form a coalition and enter negotiations (Pezard & Shurkin 2015, 14; Chauzal & van Damme 2015, 46).
- 2.) The failure of a first secret peace agreement (Tamanrasset Agreement 1991), which only provided for a ceasefire. The secrecy of the agreement for fear of rejection by the population of the South and the limited scope of its content led to its implementation failing. In contrast, the Malian population vehemently urged for an agreement that included the basic social and economic problems as well as the participation of the population. (*ibid.*, 13f.; Lode 1997, 414)
- 3.) The transformation of the military dictatorship into a democratic government with the help of civil society offered the rebels a new dialogue partner who possessed an essential degree of norm convergence, perceived their demands as largely justified, and thus made trust possible.
- 4.) The threat of internal divisions in the rebel coalition in 1991/1992 and the corresponding danger of spoilers threatened the rebels' negotiating position with the government. In order to encapsulate the rebels' military strength in advantageous negotiation results, official talks had to begin as soon as possible (Storholt 2001, 339).

These factors forced the rebels into official track-one negotiations with the government. The active shaping of the MHS and MEO perceptions of the government and rebel groups by unofficial insider mediators from civil society as well as external third-party mediators, finally paved the way for the signing of the National Pact Peace Agreement of April 1992. According to Ibrahim ag Youssouf, one of the central insider mediators in the Malian peace process, the active pressure of local society, the early joint exploration of negotiating advantages by rebels and insider mediators, as well as a government open to dialogue, were very effective in dealing with the rebels and their problems of political marginalization (Mason 2010, 10).

Conclusion

In this paper, the case of the pre-negotiation phase of the Malian peace process 1990–1992 was used to demonstrate the potentially decisive importance of insider mediators from civil society and the environment of the conflict parties for an active ripening of a conflict through informal channels. In the case of Mali civil society and especially the women of the rebels assisted in the formation of a coalition and the coherence of the rebels' negotiating agenda by using culturally embedded problem-solving channels. Second, civil society and the key insider mediator Gen. Sire Traore decisively shaped the perception of both groups of an MHS. Third, insider mediators such as Gen. Sire Traore, civil third parties and NGOs like the Norwegian Church Aid successfully cooperated with the French and Mauritanian diplomats Pisani and Miske to establish the perception of MEOs between the conflict parties, i.e. the possibility of a common future.

The Malian example highlights that insider mediators from the conflict society can facilitate peaceful conflict resolution through informal channels, which would not have been possible without bottom-up mediation between the deadlocked conflict parties. In pre-negotiations, insider mediators are in a strong position due to their contacts and their regional knowledge. In complementary consultation with outsider mediators, insider mediators can combine their regional expertise with the technical know-how of professionalized outsider mediators for maximum effectiveness.

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