

Opinion – Are Peacemakers Really Blessed?

Written by Mukesh Kapila

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MUKESH KAPILA, NOV 4 2021

A recent listing identified 27 active armed conflicts worldwide, of which six are inter-state or territorial disputes, three are transnational terrorism, and the rest various forms of civil wars and domestic unrest. In past days, a 28th joined the list: resurgent instability in Sudan following a military coup. This is just the tip of the iceberg of conflicts. For every country embroiled in violence, there are several others inciting or arming one side or other – or profiting in myriad ways. Such conflicts display the properties of an ‘infectious’ disease. They spill out to infect neighbours and then go geopolitical, akin to a ‘pandemic’. Palestine is a familiar example. The impact is like a ‘chronic’ ailment (think Syria), or indeed transmitted inter-generationally like a ‘bad gene’ (think Afghanistan).

With no vaccine against war, world doctors – United Nations and regional organisations such as the African Union – prescribe their favoured elixir. This is a cocktail of condemnations, exhortations, sanctions, and dribbles of humanitarian aid (Ethiopia/Tigray/Eritrea). Over time, the medicine loses potency (Iran) and needs something stronger – known as ‘peace-keeping’ (Mali). This remedy may help temporarily (Darfur) but make matters worse in the longer-term (DRC). When all else is failing, it is time for the healer-magician to come in. With a grand title such as ‘Special Envoy’ or High Representative’, their job is to negotiate or mediate peace. This is big business nowadays with scores appointed by the UN, AU, European Union, ASEAN and other regional bodies, or governments.

The mediator seeks to create an enabling environment for the warring parties to, first, defuse their quarrel by reducing and suspending hostilities; second, clarify the disputed issues; third, agree the framework or rules to bridge differences; fourth, to build mutual confidence by talking less horribly to each other and allowing humanitarian succour; and finally, most important, helping the parties to honour their agreements. A ‘peace dividend’ is promised to flow thereafter. Unfortunately, this is usually short-changed, and the disillusioned protagonists resume conflict. A peace imposed from outside (South Sudan) or temporarily rented with fake promises (Haiti), usually unravels.

Thus, the reality is that peace negotiations are messy. Not least because conflicts have to be ripe for solving. This only happens when one side has almost won (India/East Pakistan-Bangladesh) or both sides have battered themselves to stalemate (Yemen). Otherwise, mediation freezes – not solves – the conflict (Bosnia).

The quality of peace that comes is closely correlated to the brutality with which the preceding war was conducted. This is associated with debate on the trade-off between justice and peace: which comes first? Also, thorny is the issue of compensation for victims and reparation from aggressors. Often, the negotiators don’t strike the right balance and conflicts rumble on (Mexico), despite paper peace agreements (Colombia).

No mediator can ever claim victory because all peace agreements are fragile, and all peace is provisional. That is because there are always those who throw spanners in the peace works because constant conflict suits them (Lebanon). Or they make hay at home while fomenting proxy wars elsewhere (Cold War Mozambique). Such spoilers make the job of mediators tricky, especially if the external cheerleaders or conflict sponsors are powerful actors in their own right (Iraq).

Mediators also need their own sponsors. They are friendly governments and institutions, who give discreet advice and criticism to keep you honest and focussed. This is vital because the chances of distraction and derailment are very high. Called by designations such as “Friends of...” and “Contact Group for ...”, they add muscle and money to a

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mediator because peace processes are expensive and require much lubrication.

I discovered from my (successful) experience of negotiating humanitarian access between the Sudanese and the then rebels in the South that mediation may require drinking much beer in the cause of peace, as well as exchanging suitably shiny gifts, and enduring lengthy stays in luxury hotels. As I also learnt (Sierra Leone), other inducements may be needed. For example, a generous life-long stipend at a Western university as distinguished scholar in flower-arranging, if it helps the peaceful exit of a stubborn dictator.

Mediators are obviously noble versions of our normal quarrelsome selves. Aspiring mediators can also attend courses, read books and follow handbooks. I have never come across an effective mediator who did that, though they can have lucrative lecturing careers. I got vital practical tips from them.

Working alongside General Sumbeiywo on Southern Sudan peace, I learnt that a mediator who gets amidst a quarrel of 'brothers' will have a short life. In Afghanistan, as special adviser to UN Special Representative, Lakhdar Brahimi, I learnt that patience and persistence are indispensable. Also giving mind-numbing attention to everyone's grumbles is crucial. With Sergio Vieira de Mello in Kosovo and East Timor, I understood that charm was a powerful tool to get recalcitrants on board, but had to be deployed with creativity. Tragically, Al-Qaeda were immune to charm and assassinated him in Baghdad.

That mediation has its limits was a lesson that I also learnt painfully as UN chief in Sudan when the Darfur genocide happened on my watch. Having personally witnessed previous genocidal conflicts in Rwanda and Srebrenica/Bosnia, I absorbed history's lesson that force is ultimately necessary to stop genocides (Nazi Germany). We are now observing the same in Tigray/Ethiopia. Visiting post-genocide Cambodia as special adviser to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, I understood that for societies that have once tasted this special evil, peace-making is a permanent mission: lest we forget, lest we repeat.

"Blessed are the peace-makers" says the Christian Bible. Islam, Hinduism, and other faiths have comparable beliefs. But do they deserve Nobel Peace Prizes? While Martin Luther King Jr. did, the premature awards to Henry Kissinger (Vietnam), Aung San Suu Kyi (Rohingya/Myanmar) and Abiy Ahmed (Ethiopia/Tigray) indicate that 'God' and the Nobel Committee don't always keep the same standards.

Mediators should be neutral and impartial so that their 'good offices' are trusted by all sides. But they must also be astute politicians; that is where principle and pragmatism collide. Possibly, the shady dealings of South African ex-President Thabo Mbeki as African Union mediator on Darfur actually delayed resolution until street mobs got rid of the genocide-indicted Sudanese dictator Al-Bashir. A taint also attaches to Olusegun Obasanjo, AU envoy for the Ethiopia/Tigray crisis. Once, Nigeria's strongman President he is said to be a pious, reformed man. Who makes for better real-world negotiators? The pure saintly types, or those with experience of sinning?

It is said that "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed." Finding the key to unlock the minds of human beings remains the perennial challenge for mediators.

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