

Elite Strategies to Support or Resist Peace Processes and Political Transitions

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The Research Project

This Briefing Note is based on IPTI's research report *Supporting or Resisting Change: Elite Strategies in War to Peace and Political Transitions*, funded by UK Aid from the UK Government. The project investigates the strategies elite actors apply in order to influence political change in support of or in resistance to political change processes, i.e. the objectives they pursue, and the approaches they use in order to achieve them. To this end, it reconstructs the patterns of elite behavior across 43 peace and transition processes from IPTI's qualitative database. This work builds on previous case study research conducted in the framework of the Graduate Institute's multi-year project, "Broadening Participation in Political Negotiations and Implementation."

Key Findings

- Elites affect the processes and outcomes of peacemaking and political reform efforts in order to influence political change in their favor.
- Influential elites are not only political and military actors, but can also be powerful civil society actors and movements, as well as business representatives.
- Elites apply both "soft" and "hard" approaches, ranging from efforts to negotiate, influencing political views, shaping the political setting of a transition, to using force to undermine peacemaking efforts.
- Elite strategies and approaches vary across different phases of a transition process. The research determines five distinct phases of transition in which elites can influence political change in their favor, spanning from the events that trigger transitions through to the negotiation process and the implementation of different types of agreements.
- In each phase of a transition process the research identifies clusters of pro-change and anti-change elites. The elite actors within these clusters change from phase to phase, and even within phases, due to the evolution of elites' objectives.
- International actors can influence elite behavior by conditioning both elites' resource base, as well as their cost-benefit calculations regarding specific behaviors, notably through the threat or application of a mixture of positive and negative incentives.
- This research is relevant for policy and practice in helping to analyze and predict elite behavior, and develop more adaptive and effective national and international responses to support political change processes.

Elites' influence over political change in Peace Processes and Political Transitions

International efforts to support peace processes and political transitions increasingly acknowledge the importance of inclusive arrangements, meaning that efforts to prevent or end armed violence and sustain peace now commonly involve a relatively broad range of actors including civil society.

Nevertheless, this emphasis on broad-based arrangements should not distract from the fact that these political processes continue to be dominated by, and dependent on, a relatively small number of powerful actors from the political, military, and economic realms but also from civil society. Peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts often intervene in—and shape—environments in which power is exercised through comparably small networks of influential individuals and groups—i.e. elites, who hold strategic positions in powerful organizations including institutions and social movements and are thus able to affect political outcomes.

While elites play an important role in shaping political reform processes, they often see their position and authority challenged, as political transitions are characterized by the dynamics of elite formation, transformation, and decay. In consequence, elites will act strategically in order to secure their own survival. In some instances, elite actors may be willing to concede power fully, or in parts, while less powerful elites may use political change processes to strengthen their political and economic positions and thus support reform agendas. More often than not, however, they will aim to maintain a status quo that guarantees their position. A better understanding of the role played by different elite actors in critical change moments is thus pivotal for effective peace process support.

Principle Elite Approaches

The research identifies four principal approaches through which elites aim to influence political change:

Elites negotiate between conflicting positions, by engaging in efforts to resolve dispute through finding a common position. This usually involves deliberation and often bargaining specifically efforts to reach a political settlement through agreement on what each party will do for the other.

Elites influence political views, i.e. the manner in which the conflict(s) and possible solutions to it are portrayed and perceived by key stakeholders in the context. In many cases, influencing plays a key role in the political dynamics that trigger the outbreak of conflict in the first place. Subsequently, it is a crucial part of elites' efforts to further their pro-peace or pro-conflict agendas, which can be instrumental in the escalation or de-escalation of conflict and the success of a peace process.

Elites shape the setting of the transition, in which the negotiation process takes place. Elites' efforts to shape the setting first pertain to the negotiation process in a narrow sense, such as through calling for negotiations, establishing a negotiation process and its bodies, providing political or financial support, or influencing who is able to participate. Beyond the negotiation table, elites can aim to shape the broader political environment through the threat or the actual use of violence and coercion, as well as through forms of collaboration and alliance building.

Elites undermine the process or existing settlement, i.e. they deliberately obstruct or derail the negotiation process or an existing political settlement through violent or non-violent means. This involves unilateral actions that roll back on earlier achievements that led to a negotiated settlement, or actions that obstruct, derail, or sabotage an existing negotiation or implementation

process. Elites often use relatively soft approaches, such as boycotting the negotiation process, inhibiting the work of mediators, or creating an atmosphere of fear and mistrust. However, they also use violence against individuals, armed groups, or the broader population.

Elites apply these four principal approaches at various stages along a given peace or transition process, in order to change the formal political arrangement in their favor. The project identifies five distinct phases that are characterized through critical moments in which elites can influence political change: the transition trigger; the beginning of negotiations; the negotiations; the conclusion of negotiations; and the implementation process. For each phase, the research identifies two major clusters in which elites can be differentiated pro-change and anti-change depending on their interests and objectives. Significantly, the specific elite actors within these clusters fluctuate both from phase to phase and within the same phase, depending on elites' changing objectives.

International Responses to Elite Behavior

Elites' struggle over political change is primarily a domestic affair. Nevertheless, international actors can influence elite strategies. Overall the research found that international responses have shaped elite behavior more substantially in highly internationalized contexts such as in well-known cases like Afghanistan, but also in less well-known cases such as the DRC or Papua New Guinea/Bougainville. International actors have done so in two distinct ways: first, they often affect the resources and means that elites require in order to pursue their preferred strategies. Importantly, this may not be limited to material or financial resources, or technical skills and knowledge, but may also include elite actors' motivation to pursue a specific strategy in the first place. Second, international responses can increase or reduce the costs of specific behavior, by threatening and implementing negative consequences or providing positive incentives.

International actors often seek to support the resolution of conflict through peaceful negotiated means, encourage a conducive political climate for negotiation, and support political reform processes. International actors can support elites' efforts to influence political change via negotiation through formal mediation or mediation support, helping specific elite actors to develop more nuanced positions on technical issues as well as providing options for conflict resolution. International actors can also influence the agenda for change by lobbying or pressuring for the inclusion of a broader range of actors such as civil society groups in the negotiation process, proposing agenda items, endorsing or rejecting specific negotiation positions or outcomes, setting deadlines or issuing ultimatums, and preparing comprehensive reform proposals and supporting reform processes particularly through technical advice and expertise. More broadly speaking, international actors can contribute to coalition and alliance-building between stakeholder groups, fund campaigns or lobby for an overall peaceful settlement of a conflict, and shape narratives on which a new political settlement can be formalized. They can also employ more technical measures including training programs or the provision of technical and financial support for media hubs and radio stations.

International actors can also provide positive incentives for elites to favor negotiated solutions, and negative incentives for playing destructive roles, through a variety of means including political support or pressure; the provision or withdrawal of financial aid, development aid, or military support; and by dispelling political or military elites and their supporters from their territory.

International actors can contribute to the creation and strengthening of a propitious political climate for a negotiation process, ensuring that political change occurs through negotiation, thereby delegitimizing other methods of advancing political change. This can happen through statements or

symbolic acts, such as inaugurating negotiation bodies or opening negotiation processes through formal ceremonies. Foreign governments may also encourage specific elite actors to participate in talks, by providing incentives to join a process and center efforts to influence change on the negotiation table. However, they may also aim to dissuade specific actors from participating, for instance by offering exile or threatening elites in power with prosecution. International actors can also support negotiation processes through direct funding of the negotiation process itself as well as via ancillary bodies for the implementation of peace agreements.

Foreign governments have a variety of means to dissuade conflict parties from resorting to violence or from undermining a peace or political transition process. These include diplomatic pressure, public condemnation to reduce an actor's political standing in the international arena, and the threat of sanctions especially economic and trade sanctions, or targeted sanctions against individuals. In addition, international actors can threaten the legal prosecution of war crimes and other acts of violence. To produce evidence, foreign governments can establish international observation missions, monitoring and verification mechanisms to control existing ceasefire agreements and security arrangements, or fact-finding missions to investigate war crimes and human rights abuses. International actors may also support non-governmental initiatives that produce such data. International actors can also deprive elites of the necessary resources to undermine a process or from using force to achieve their preferred outcomes. This primarily involves curtailing military support and support to the security sector by cutting bilateral assistance, or enacting international sanctions, particularly arms embargoes. Ultimately, the United Nations and troop-contributing countries may deploy peacekeeping missions in order to prevent elites from undermining peace processes and their achievements.

The Relevance and Utility of the Research for Policy and Practice

The relevance of this research for policy and practice is three-fold: firstly, through a focus on elite strategies, the report offers a systematic perspective on elite behavior that cuts across actor categories and focuses on the dynamics between clusters of elites pursuing common objectives. This allows for national and international responses that are both more adaptive and directed towards supporting a political change process. Secondly, the results highlight that political change dynamics are not only influenced by elites stemming from the political and military realms, but also by influential civil society leaders and business representatives. Thirdly, the framework introduced in this research can be used for the analysis, monitoring, and prediction of elite behavior as a means to develop more targeted planning and response strategies.

This Briefing Note was written by Alexander Bramble and Thania Paffenholz on the basis of IPTI's report *Supporting or Resisting Change: Elite Strategies in War to Peace and Political Transitions* and IPTI's lessons from applying research results in policy and practice.



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