

Everyday conceptualizations of sustainable peace in Nepal - post-liberal peace and beyond?

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By employing semi-structured interviews this article investigates the peacebuilding environment in Kathmandu, Nepal, with an eye in particular to capture everyday conceptualizations of sustainable peace, and to investigate whether these might contribute to more holistic peacebuilding approaches in the country. The article draws initial inspiration from the post-liberal peace framework put forth by Oliver Richmond, which problematizes the liberal peace model by highlighting its tendency to neglect the local context and needs, as well as its frequent reliance on top-down and technocratic measures. Instead, Richmond calls for peacebuilding approaches which are more holistic and sensitive to the everyday needs of inhabitants of post-conflict societies. It is found that the post-liberal peace approach largely corresponds to the manner in which the interlocutors of this article conceptualize sustainable peace, i.e. by highlighting everyday issues such as material improvements, social justice, and national political stability. However, the article concludes by arguing that there are also issues of practical concern with both the post-liberal peace framework and the manner in which sustainable peace is conceptualized by interlocutors in Kathmandu.

Key words: Nepal, peacebuilding, liberal peace, post-liberal peace, everyday peace

Following 10 years of civil war in Nepal, a peace agreement was finally reached between the antagonistic parties, the Nepal Government and the Maoist insurgency, in 2006. The peace agreement indicated the onset of the peacebuilding process; a process which set out to create conditions for sustainable peace in the country. Although the actual peacemaking process culminating in the peace agreement had been largely a Nepali achievement, the subsequent peacebuilding phase came to involve the international community to a much larger extent (see for example: *Insight on Conflict*). Perhaps most notably, the UN came to occupy a central role in this delicate phase through the United Nations Mission in Nepal, the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, as well its other bodies such as the United Nations Development Program (Surkhe 2009; Von Einsiedel et al 2012; UNDP-NEPAL).

The peacebuilding process in Nepal can so far best be described as a mixed bag – some commentators argue that it constitutes a liberal peace success story in the making (UN News Centre; USIP; Denskus 2009) while others argue that it has failed to address the root causes of the conflict, and should as such be considered a failure (New York Times; ICTJ; Nepali Times). How can these contrasting perspectives be understood? Critical scholars suggest that it can be fathomed as the inherent logic of the liberal peacebuilding model, which tends to prioritize security and institutional approaches to peacebuilding, while in practice often neglecting the civil dimensions of peace (Richmond 2006; Richmond 2009). As such, a peacebuilding operation can be successful in, for example, establishing democratic institutions and helping contain large-scale violence by disarming former combatants, while on a day-to-day level it fails to address the everyday needs of the inhabitants of the post-conflict society in

question.

One of the more prominent contemporary critical scholars of peace is Oliver Richmond, who has put forth the post-liberal peace framework as an alternative, or complement, to the liberal peace model (Richmond 2009). Richmond is an avid critic of the liberal peacebuilding model, which he argues is fundamentally flawed due to its top-down centrism, institutional bias, universal claims, and the power-asymmetries between “giver” and “receiver” it often entails. Instead, Richmond calls for peacebuilding approaches which are more holistic and sensitive to the everyday needs of inhabitants of post-conflict societies (*ibid*).

Richmond’s focus on the everyday dimension of peacebuilding involves a realization that peace-promoting measures must be anchored in local contexts, cultures, and needs in order to be legitimate and effective at building sustainable peace. Therefore, it goes without saying that peace should be conceived of as open to difference, and that no universally applicable peacebuilding approach can be fashioned (Richmond 2009). This is opposed to the liberal peace model, which tends to assume that a “blueprint” approach to peacebuilding can in fact be prescribed in all post-conflict societies (Richmond 2012). Therefore, Richmond notes that a methodological repositioning of the liberal peacebuilding project is necessary, where participatory methods, such as fieldwork, are increasingly favored over institutional ones. Only through such a methodological repositioning can the liberal peace evolve beyond its current top-down institutional inception and incorporate an approach to building peace which includes the dimensions of the everyday (Richmond 2009).

Moreover, Richmond stresses that in order for post-liberal peacebuilding to be realized, local actors must increasingly be included in the peacebuilding process. In fact, Richmond goes so far as to state that they should be the driving forces behind peacebuilding operations, and thus the most appropriate role of international actors would be to adopt a merely facilitative function.

This facilitative function, Richmond suggests, could in practice take the form of a dialogue-oriented process where international actors seek to grasp how support can be directed towards locally driven peace initiatives. In the absence of such local ownership of the peacebuilding process, it will invariably be considered illegitimate in the eyes of local populations (Richmond 2009; Richmond 2010).

Following up on these post-liberal assertions, this article sets out to investigate the peacebuilding environment in Kathmandu, Nepal, with an eye in particular to capture everyday conceptualizations of sustainable peace, as well as to investigate whether these might in fact contribute to more holistic peacebuilding approaches in Nepal. The generated data presented in this article date back to April and May 2013, when 11 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with interlocutors in Kathmandu, Nepal. The interlocutors were identified mainly through the help of a local connection, and were selected in order to represent as much difference as possible in terms of gender, ethnic background, current employment et cetera. Due to the relatively modest number of interviews, however, the findings presented in this article are not intended to be generalizable to Kathmandu or Nepal as a whole, but should be treated merely as preliminary findings which need to be substantiated by more extensive studies. Nevertheless, the findings provide a tentative understanding of what everyday conceptualizations of sustainable peace in Kathmandu might entail, and may as such serve as a starting point for further research.

Everyday conceptualizations of sustainable peace in Kathmandu

One of the more interesting findings from the interviews in Kathmandu is that most interlocutors considered that the current situation in Nepal should not in fact be called peace. While all interlocutors acknowledged and appreciated that most large-scale violence had effectively been contained since the end of the conflict, most of them carried a sense that peace should entail

more than that in order to qualify as real, or sustainable, peace. One of the main deficits of the current situation was identified as the overall lack of improvements for people in their daily lives, as several interlocutors outlined how their everyday lives were absorbed by a struggle for basic necessities such as water, food, fuel, and employment. This sentiment was vividly expressed by a male interlocutor, a tour organizer for the tourist industry and a father of two:

People in Kathmandu today are only thinking about how to survive, what to eat in the evening, what to eat in the morning, when to go to the office [...]. This is the main problem; if they had enough resources then they could think about the political situation, about the government, and about the country (Interview 1).

Another interlocutor, a teacher in Bansbari, Kathmandu, elaborated on this:

Yes, the level of struggle is a bit more nowadays [...]. Earlier the struggle was less when we went for an employment opportunity [...]. The employment situation is a bit tough (Interview 2).

Additionally, the service delivery of Nepal's public institutions was overwhelmingly considered faltering by those interviewed for this article. A student interlocutor employed the example of how passports are issued in Nepal to illustrate this point:

If you pay 5.000, you get your passport in 45 days, if you pay 10.000, you get your passport in two weeks, if you are ready to pay 15.000, you get it in 48 hours [...] the government is just doing business in Nepal instead of serving the people (Interview 10).

Those interviewed for this article thus suggest that there is a strong correlation between material development and sustainable peace – without the former the latter is left wanting. This finding resonates well with the assumptions of the post-liberal peace framework, which notes that it is essential to address the everyday needs of popula-

tions in post-conflict societies in order to build sustainable peace.

Furthermore, multiple interlocutors pinpointed the fact that Nepal remains a structurally unequal society as one of the main barriers to arriving at sustainable peace. Interview statements such as the following are suggestive of this position:

If people are considered as secondary citizens of a country, if citizens have to stay in a very remote part of the country so that they don't have the same opportunities [...]. Such problems should be addressed in maintaining peace (Interview 6).

With regard to the structural inequalities in Nepal, several interlocutors proposed that decentralization of political power could serve as a remedying factor to this problem. The following statement of an interlocutor puts forth this position: "I think the major problem in Nepali politics is decentralization of power [...] The power delivery to local level is essential, in my view" (Interview 6).

The above statements convey a deep concern with social justice by highlighting the diverse and harsh realities that people in different parts of the country face. Again, this is an indication that the everyday situation of inhabitants of Nepal is conceived as an essential dimension in building sustainable peace. Yet, this is a dimension which is frequently missed by the "cold institutionalism" (Richmond 2009:574) of liberal peacebuilding. Moreover, the opinions presented above give credence to the post-liberal argument that sustainable peace must be anchored in local realities and contexts – here this argument is framed in the language of decentralization of political power.

Finally, the national political system was problematized by several interlocutors. The majority of interlocutors portrayed Nepali politicians as greedy, corrupt, self-serving, and unwilling to compromise. Most interlocutors felt that there is a lack of a common sense of purpose amongst national politicians, who are generally not perceived to be working for the interest of Nepal as a whole. The idea of the self-serving politician

was voiced by, amongst others, a male interlocutor who works as a teacher at a school in Budhanilkantha, Kathmandu:

Value based politics is becoming eradicated from the country [...]. Instead it is replaced by selfish politics. If they find any benefits from the politics, leaders do that, whether this is ethically correct or not (Interview 6).

The interviews also confirmed that political parties are frequently seen as obstacles to achieving sustainable peace due to their inability to cooperate in a democratic manner. This opinion was conveyed by, among others, a female lawyer interlocutor of Lazimpat, Kathmandu:

Since the peace agreement there has been so many leaderships of Nepal [...] there is no political stability [...] the parties do not trust each other [...]. The parties should come to consensus, all parties, in order to get a fresh mandate and to bring peace (Interview 4).

Despite having identified the national political system as dysfunctional, most interlocutors remained hesitant about international involvement in the country, and harbored a general skepticism towards international agencies working in development and peacebuilding in Nepal. There was a commonly held attitude amongst the interlocutors that international agencies fail to have a positive impact due to a lack of understanding of the local context, an urban bias, national vested interests, as well as a reluctance to incorporate local people and resources in the process. A male teacher in Bansbari, Kathmandu expressed his disappointment with the work of international agencies in the following statement:

They don't like to go to the rural areas [...]. You are going to conduct a program in the rural area, but still you are not thinking about the participation of the local people [...]. Public participation should be more [...] the local area, the local people, local resources should be utilized to the optimum level (Interview 2).

When encouraged to elaborate on how international agencies could make a better contribution

to Nepal, the teacher continued:

INGOs are somehow always working for their own nations first and then secondly they are working for Nepal [...]. Whenever you have come to help Nepal, see that the Nepalese are helped [...]. If your vision is not clear, then you will not do anything – and that is happening in Nepal (Interview 2).

Another interlocutor, a youth leader of a political party, put forth his view of international involvement in Nepal in the following manner:

They are playing political games here [...] We would accept them if they were truly benevolent to us, but we feel that they are playing political games and using Nepal as a field to play their games. They are looking only for their own interest, not Nepal's interest (Interview 3).

These statements correlate well with the post-liberal peace framework – highlighting how the largely internationally led and defined peacebuilding agenda creates local resistances, which in turn undermine the legitimacy of the peacebuilding operations. Moreover, the interlocutors in Kathmandu reaffirm the post-liberal assertion that in order to make a real difference, peacebuilding must be anchored in local cultures, contexts, and needs.

Discussion

The interviews presented in this article generally affirm the post-liberal assertion that peacebuilding must move closer to the ground in order to be able to achieve sustainable peace. In the absence of material improvements, social justice and political stability, people living in Kathmandu are strongly hesitant about calling the current situation peace. Thus, the liberal peacebuilding operations deployed in Nepal since 2006 have arguably failed at sufficiently incorporating the dimensions of the *everyday* into their agenda. This is not to argue that there have been no positive impacts of the liberal peacebuilding operations so far, but simply that the overall peacebuilding approach is considered flawed from the bottom-up perspective of lived experiences in post-conflict

Nepal. In order to remedy these problems, one might for example suggest that international peacebuilding agencies increasingly take on the task of providing directed social welfare mechanisms in Nepal. This would arguably improve the everyday situation for many people in Nepal, and could also help ameliorate the staggering social inequalities of the country.

When it comes to the dysfunctional political system in Nepal, the discussion on possible solutions turns more complex. While it is true that most interlocutors in this article saw national politicians as an impediment to building sustainable peace, the argument that international peacebuilding actors should seek to intervene politically is dubious. As evidenced by the interviews in Kathmandu, there is a general skepticism towards international political involvement in the country, as this is often perceived merely as self-interest in disguise. Instead, the post-liberal argument that international actors should take on a facilitative, discussion-oriented, approach would seem to resonate better with the sentiments of people in post-conflict Nepal. In practice, this might entail a participatory peacebuilding approach which centers on understanding how international actors can direct support towards local political peace initiatives, without taking on an overly directive role.

While this article has found that the post-liberal peace framework appears to resonate well with the perceptions of people living in Kathmandu, there are still a few points that warrant a critical discussion.

First of all, one might problematize the post-liberal assumption that local involvement in the peacebuilding process is invariably the best way to reach sustainable peace. After all, one should bear in mind that today's conflicts are more often than not internal (Kaldor 2012), and that therefore there are bound to be local actors who are anything but peace-loving (Donais 2009:12-13). Thus, it becomes essential to unpack the notion of "local involvement" in the peacebuilding process. What does this entail in practice? Which local actors might fruitfully be involved in the

peacebuilding process, and on what grounds could such involvement be justified?

Richmond does not offer any clear answers to these questions, but simply notes that all peacebuilding operations should be based on an "empathetic and emancipatory approach" (Richmond 2012) and that therefore any "oppressive social, economic, political, or military structures" (ibid) must be excluded from peacebuilding operations. While on the surface this may appear sound, it does not provide any concrete suggestions on how to decide which local actors should be included. After all, how could we ever objectively decide what constitutes "oppressiveness"?

The same lack of a sufficiently nuanced discussion on the role of local involvement is found amongst several of the interlocutors in Kathmandu, who treat local involvement in the peacebuilding process as a *panacea* to reach sustainable peace. It is asserted that international peacebuilding operations are flawed and will fail to have a positive impact on Nepal as long as they are void of local actors and local connection. Again, on the surface this appears as a sound argument; it lacks, however, the essential unpacking of the notion of "local involvement" in order for it to have any practical implications for peacebuilding practitioners.

Thus, while the post-liberal peace framework and the interviews in Kathmandu have provided us with an important critique of traditional liberal peacebuilding, they also fall short of contributing with a nuanced discussion on the role of local involvement in peacebuilding. In the absence of such a discussion, the ideal of local involvement will remain simply an ideal, which peacebuilding actors will be hard pressed to translate into practice.

More in-depth research is therefore needed on the role of local involvement in peacebuilding in Nepal, preferably by deploying participatory methods such as fieldwork with an aim to understand the complexities of local contexts and actors. Only through such methods can a necessary understanding of the many nuances of "the local"

be developed, after which one might be better able to conceive of contextually sensitive best practices for local involvement in peacebuilding in Nepal.

On a related note, it should be reiterated that post-liberal approaches to peacebuilding are intrinsically uncondusive to universal “blueprint” solutions. While this has clear advantages, as we have seen in this article, it can also be problematic in the practice of peacebuilding – an enterprise which calls for immediate measures. After all, without prompt and firm action from peacebuilders there is a very real risk that the fragile peace disintegrates into violent conflict yet again. Herein lies the appeal of “blueprint” solutions for peacebuilders – which the liberal peacebuilding model is never short of providing – as well as the frequent reluctance to rely more on post-liberal approaches. Yet, as this article has indicated, in the long term, post-liberal measures are needed in order to secure sustainable peace on an everyday level.

Finally, it should be duly noted that the efforts to capture everyday conceptualizations of sustainable peace in Nepal is not merely a pretense for further academic discussion. Rather, it should be understood in direct relation to the root causes of the civil war in Nepal, which have invariably been identified as endemic poverty combined with vast inequalities between different groups (Von Einsiedel et al 2012; NOREF 2013), i.e. some of the same issues that have been highlighted as wanting by interlocutors in this article. Thus, a failure to understand and address these issues could potentially have very serious consequences indeed – including, in the worst case scenario, civil war recidivism.

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