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Chances, Dilemmas and Obstacles of Security Reform

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The need for security sector reform in new democracies or countries in transition towards democracy is undisputed. The papers by Azca, Ball, Caparini, Farr and Nathan underline both the necessity of such reforms as well as the challenges and obstacles to implement them. This is also emphasized in new guidelines recently published by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD).¹ The terms ‘system’ and ‘governance’ in the title of the OECD/DAC guidelines are intended to highlight that it is the interplay between various actors of the security sector (not just the military) that require attention and, furthermore, as it says in the opening policy statement of these guidelines, that „security is important for improved governance“ since „inappropriate security structures and mechanism can contribute to weak governance and to instability and violent conflict...“ This is a broad and ambitious agenda and the OECD/DAC guidelines go on to broaden the issue area by drawing a line from the establishment of security to poverty reduction and ‘human security’.

I do consider the papers by Azca, Ball, Caparini, Farr and Nathan as a welcome complement to my ‘Security Sector Reform in Developing and Transitional Countries’. The case study on Indonesia by Azca illustrates the negative consequences of a half-hearted or poorly implemented reform while the case study on South Africa underlines the obstacles to security sector reform even in a case of relative political stability, economic strength and a widely acclaimed positive transition process. The call for a security sector reform and the emphasis on the need for such reform as a precondition for governance and development should not underestimate the obstacles to implementing it. The existence of the daunting problems related to such a reform process are the reason for me to deliberate on the dilemmas of security sector reform in my paper – dilemmas that exist in this politically sensitive area in the new democracies themselves as well as in the policies of the donors who want to assist in implementing such a reform.

Marina Caparini’s paper is written from the perspective of a practitioner with experience in both developing and transitional countries. Her emphasis on the need to design and implement security sector reform as a holistic concept is an important reminder that stop-gap measures might miss the objective, namely to ensure the security of people. She strongly underlines the approach in my paper that security sector reform „must deal with effectiveness in the provision of security (capacity, efficiency) and the effectiveness of oversight in the security sector (accountability, transparency, control, responsiveness).“ And furthermore, that reform aimed exclusively at modernizing the security actors does not necessarily contribute to reform; inputs from civil society are required. As a practitioner she also realizes that in many cases civil society has played a minor part, due to sheer absence of informed and engaged members of civil society.

Vanessa Farr’s paper ‘Voices from the Margins’ addresses a dimension that goes very far beyond what I consider to be security sector reform. She not only addresses the security concerns of marginalized people, with an emphasis on women, but she discusses it in such broad terms that the same text could be used for a debate on the failures of democracy or development. Not to create any misunderstanding, I agree with most of her analysis that women’s particular insecurity in times of war and peace need to be of great concern, not only in security sector reform debates. But do these topics remain, as she suggests, really a taboo? Her suggestion to identify the individuals and social classes „who have been marginalised from this conversation“, to ask whether these „individuals

have expressed their opinions“, to „discover how these have been articulated“ and to „ascertain if anyone in a position of authority and power is paying attention“ are good intentions. I wish she would have articulated in more detail how this can be done. To „support women’s entry into the public sphere“ remains such a general appeal, that probably everybody supports it, at least in theory. What is needed are concrete measures for the current programmes in countries in which security sector reform is being tried with best intentions and still fail to result in a sea-change. I would argue that most of the proponents of a genuine democratic security sector reform need not to be convinced that the „voices from the margins of society“ should play a more significant role. This is a widely accepted notion. And in Vanessa Farr’s own country, South Africa, this acceptance has resulted in an unprecedented participation of the general public in debates on security, defense white books, arms exports etc.

Nicole Ball emphasizes that security sector reform „consists of a broad range of activities involving a wide variety of local stakeholders and external partners“. This is very much in line with the new OECD/DAC guidelines that confirm donor commitment to a security sector reform process that adheres to the following principles.² Security sector reform should be:

- “People-centered, locally owned and based on democratic norms and human rights principles and the rule of law, seeking to provide freedom from fear.”
- “Seen as a framework to structure thinking about how to address diverse security challenges facing states and their populations through more integrated development and security policies and through greater civilian involvement and oversight.”
- “Founded on activities with multi-sectoral strategies, based upon a broad assessment of the range of security needs of the people and the state.”
- “Developed adhering to basic principles underlying public sector reform such as transparency and accountability.”
- “Implemented through clear processes and policies that aim to enhance the institutional and human capacity needed for security policy to function effectively.” (p. 8)

I want to take up two points where Nicole Ball disagrees with my paper. First, she rightly emphasizes that the seven categories of states, described in my paper, where the potential for security sector reform runs from ‘impossible’ to ‘major potential’ is too mechanistic. Indeed, the proposed scale cannot be more than a heuristic instrument to classify countries. And, as often with classifications, it is usually possible to find exceptions to the rule. She mentions Uzbekistan as one such deviant case. My statement that transition countries have a good potential for reform does not imply that this potential is being used in each and every case. I would hasten to add that I am well aware of the difficulties of reform in Uzbekistan. In another study I have referred specifically to Uzbekistan as a case where „on paper Uzbekistan is the most promising country of the region in implementing security sector reforms, the results on the ground are disappointing and frustrating.“³ The contextual approach, suggested by Nicole Ball, also with seven categories of different contexts and several factors in each category, is more ambitious, less mechanistic but also extremely difficult to apply in the real world.

Another point of disagreement is my controversial statement that the supply of „weapons, materials and other equipment“ can be important components of security sector reform, if that reform is adequately designed. Nicole Ball maintains that „it does not constitute an improvement of democratic security sector reform.“ Why not? Whether we like it or not: If security sector reform is

¹ OECD/DAC, Security System Reform and Governance, Policy and Good Practice. OECD, Paris 2004. (www.oecd.org/dac/conflict).

about establishing the legitimate monopoly of force in a country – and the term ‘legitimate’ implies appropriate democratic control – than the institutions of organized violence need to be given the instruments to exercise this monopoly of violence. It is a given, and I have criticized this in many publications, that in the process of transferring weapons and other materials to the police and the military all too often corrupt, criminal and irresponsible practices prevail. I am not pleading for an indiscriminate transfer of weapons to the police and the military but want to emphasize that security sector reform can also mean spending more resources on the security sector actors, including on weapons.

Security sector reform is a laborious process and many hiccups are likely to slow down or even derail this process in certain cases. I fully agree with Nathan’s conclusion: „Because of the complexities ... there are no ‘quick fix’ solutions to the problems of security sector reform ...“ He is also right in emphasizing that the security sector reform policies of the donor countries, their emphasis on democracy and disarmament are undermined by the failure of these countries to adhere to their own values. To engage in security sector reform requires practicing what you preach. This is, however, often not the case. Marina Caprini reminds us that „in the current hyper-securitised climate of the so-called global war against terrorism, the concept of SSR contains the reminder that essential values of transparency, accountability and democratic control of security institutions need to be respected in democratic systems even in the face of perceived heightened security threats.“

² The agreement between Ball’s statement and the new OECD/DAC guidelines is no surprise since Nicole Ball was one of the main authors of the OECD/DAC guidelines.

³ Bonn International Center for Conversion, Conversion Survey 2004, Nomos Verlag, Baden-Baden, p. 63.