Power-sharing in Africa: Does It Still Have a Role to Play?

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ALEXANDRA REMOND, JUL 1 2015

Within the last two decades, the prescription of power-sharing as a form of conflict resolution has increased substantially over the African continent despite a mixed record at best in bringing peace. Criticism is widespread and diverse, questioning the compatibility of power-sharing with the African setting it is implemented in to the broader negative consequences of the model on politics and society (e.g. Tull and Mehler, 2005; Vandeginste, 2011). The persistence of injustice, violence and weak, un-accountable states brings into question the workability and feasibility of power-sharing in Africa. This article will address these issues by arguing, firstly, that power-sharing has been generally misused on the continent and that is very definition has been misrepresented leading to different understandings of its functions. Secondly, the African states and the broader peace-building agenda within which power-sharing sits are problematic and need to be understood in order to locate the limitations of the model and not miss its potential due to inherited problems from elsewhere, keeping in mind the initial conceptualisation of power-sharing as dealing with deeply-divided places. Divided-places are characterised by a heterogeneous society where politics is conducted along ethnic lines and almost every issue is seen 'though the lenses of ethnic identity' (Choudhry, 2008:5). The term ethnicity itself will refer to a wide range of characteristics, including race, religion and language. This article concludes that the way power-sharing is currently used is unsustainable and damaging. Nonetheless, it should not be so readily dismissed by academia and practitioners alike. Its ability to deal with divided societies is challenged by whether African societies can really be categorised as such and the broader failings of liberal peace. Based on its theoretical foundation, the strengths of power-sharing and its likelihood of success are best embodied within the understanding of the interconnectedness between extremist articulations of identity, security and legitimacy. Indeed, at the core of divided societies and conflict is the lack of legitimacy of the supreme authority of the state for a segment of the society. This lack of legitimacy comes primarily from the fact that the authority of the state does not operate as a security-guarantor and, often, can be perceived as the source of danger. Power-sharing can alleviate these problems. Accordingly, those elements shall still be considered as part of comprehensive reforms on how to bring peace and stability on the continent.

The Misuse of Power-sharing in Africa

Power-sharing has been applied throughout the African continent to deal with division at large, and enable opposing parties to share political power along with the economic and military resources that stem from such positions. In South Africa, it was used as a transitory institutional set-up to bring different parties following the end of apartheid to work together and not weaken the newly-found peace (Lijphart, 2004). In the Great Lakes region, Burundi and Rwanda have seen more than one attempt to install power-sharing to deal with ethnic division. In Kenya it served as an instrument to lessen electoral violence, and from 2009 Cheeseman notes that it became 'commonplace for power-sharing to be discussed before elections that were expected to be close and controversial' (2011:337). Within the extensive literature on the subject, only two cases are commonly referred to as successes, yet not unanimously or without downsides: South Africa and Burundi (e.g. Horowitz, 1991; Dixon, 2005, Choudhry, 2008; Jastrad, 2008).

This variety of contexts and actors do not all fit comfortably the purposes of power-sharing in its original conceptualisation. The concept of Power-sharing in its essence is about bringing together all major segment of society and provides them with a permanent share of power. In contrast to traditional forms of government built

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around the government vs. the opposition model, opposition is minimised and the forming of grand coalitions becomes a predominant feature of politics. The protection of minorities is emphasised in the constitutions along with the decentralisation of power and the need for consensus-politics. The form of power-sharing political agreements in Africa rest on has been developed within a specific western literature aiming at dealing with divided societies along salient identity cleavages, be they ethnic, religious, or linguistic. It is based on the assumption that identity, while not unchangeable, is very persistent and is at the source of deep-rooted division, enmity and violence between citizens of the same country (Nagle and Clancy, 2010:1). Sometimes accused of primordialism (e.g. Dixon, 2005:358), this approach emphasises instead pragmatism. It rests on the belief that the promotion of identities within the state can be central to stability and democracy, rather than an inevitable source of conflict (Kerr 2009:209). Most famous among them, and serving as a model for many African agreements, is consociationalism (Sriram and Zahar, 2009:16). Developed primarily by Arendt Lijphart, it is based on four main principles including the need for a grand collation among opposing parties, minority or mutual veto powers, proportional representation, and forms of group autonomy. In practice this means dividing the population into distinct groups, and occasionally the territory of the state, to provide proportional representation in public institutions, from guaranteed seats in parliament to the military. Accordingly, the identity groups form 'the building blocks of politics' (Reilley, 2006:851).

Before turning to the broader problems of implementing power-sharing it is important to point out that in many African countries this institutional set-up has been diverted from the aforementioned aim with appalling consequences. Additionally, power-sharing is rarely 'well' practiced, with only partial implementation and little enforceability. For instance, Lemarchand shows how the Global Accord in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is a stretched form of consociationalism departing quite substantially from the Lijphart model. Its elaboration and implementation have been 'a more or less improvised form of co-optation' that left out key political actors (Lemarchand, 2006:13). Lastly, pro-power-sharing scholars recommend considerable outside support, which in the African context already presents a considerable challenge (Le Van, 2011; Sriram and Zahar, 2009:13). In Burundi and Liberia, for instance, 'multi-party politics was dependent on the willingness of donors to act as external guarantors of the process and to provide both peace keepers and election monitors' (Cheeseman, 2011:359).

More worrying is the use of power-sharing as a response to flawed or contested elections. It can become a region-wide incentive for predatory groups to exercise sufficient violence to be noticed and offered a share of the political pie (Tull and Mehler, 2005). Indeed, the stronger the rebel group, the more likely it is to be included in a power-sharing agreement (Gent, 2011), while moderate civilian parties are often excluded from the process and receive little attention (Mehler, 2008). It impacts negatively on peace and democratization as none of these actors are truly representative of the population, not even of a specific minority.

Contrary to the caricatured representation of African societies as principally tribal and ethnicized (e.g. Chabal and Deloz, 1999), Erdmann (2007) found that in most African countries there is no distinctive relationship between the population and state leaders based on ethnic organization. Furthermore, despite the heterogeneity of African states, the presence of specific group domination over other minorities, and natural geographical resources offering potential 'greedy' partitioning movements, secessionist advocacies are rare (Englebert and Hummel, 2005). For instance, in the DRC, notwithstanding years of conflict, poverty, and ethnic and linguistic diversity, recognition with the national 'Congolese' identity among people has become stronger with surveys showing that a vast majority believe the unity of Congo is more important than sub-group interests (Weiss, 2000; Young, 2012:306). If identity is not the primary source of division, why do we see so much power-sharing prescribed for African states?

The systematic assumption that conflict in ethnopolitical in nature can be misleading, argues Mehler, pointing out that while some cases, such as Burundi's civil war, have obvious 'ethnic coloration and significance, this is much more difficult to assert for, for example, Comoros, Liberia, and Central African Republic' (2008:38). Certainly, there is a difference between the instrumentalisation of ethnicity for political gains seen in many African countries at a local, decentralized level, and the same phenomenon at a national scale with overt conflict, and sometimes genocide, between exclusive groups. Power-sharing and consociationalism in particular work on the organisational structure around ethnicity to channel it in a constructive and democratic way. Consideration of the relationship between society and state, and how they are organised, is necessary to judge what would be the role of a power-sharing agreement in a specific context. It is often difficult to make such distinction, not least because even in a context where ethnicity is

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at the core of violence, adjacent insurgencies can also instrumentalise the issue for personal gains and become entangled with it without representing genuine identity interests making it difficult to identify and single out what are the 'ethnicities' and 'groups' which are to constitute the accommodationist polity (Mehler, 2008:37). Accepting groups capable of doing the most damage without acknowledgement of their actual legitimacy at population level is indeed bad practice in power-sharing, which neither helps peace nor democratization in the long term. Spoiling capacity should not be the only criteria, and its ready adoption shows the carelessness of outside actors who reward political formations or military entrepreneurs without clear popular credentials.

The 'Bigger' Problem in the African Context and Why the Continent's Conflicts Should Not Be Generalised to Identity-Based Violence

In addition to the discrepancies between theory and practice in power-sharing, the broader divergences between the liberal peace-building agenda and the empirical reality in African states have been increasingly highlighted as problematic. Authors such as Bellamy and Williams point to the resulting inequality, exclusion and under-development of the western intervention in Africa which simply simulates an ideal without ever achieving it in practice (2004:198). While state-building is concerned with the creation and consolidation of a strong functioning state along the western model, peace-building is more generally about consolidating peace and preventing the recurrence of war (Paris, 2004:2). In practice, however, the emphasis has often been on short-term stability (the absence of outright violence) rather than radical, long-term, change. Elections are conducted in the name of democracy with little concern as to whether this leads to effective representation. The shaky 'democratisation' process, whether it is based on power-sharing or not, has led to more instability exacerbated by economic recession and structural adjustment programmes taking away much-needed social services (Paris, 1997).

Most of the criticisms directed at power-sharing decry it as a failure to bring peace, democracy, development or satiability. Yet, these shortcomings are not linked to the model itself but more generally to the malpractice of peace-building and state-building which suffers from contradictory principals, unrealistic time-frames and insufficient monetary and human capabilities. The failure of such approaches, in addition to the problems inherited within the development agenda (c.f. Ferguson, 1999), are due to the lack of acknowledgement for the reality on the ground, notably Africa's enduring patrimonial system.

The weaknesses of African states represent an extensive resource for elites and, more controversially, citizens (c.f. Chabal and Deloz, 1999; de Waal, 2009). In this system legitimacy operates on the basis of redistribution of resources along ethnic or tribal lines by 'big-men' who use and proactively maintain a state of relative chaos, insecurity and uncertainty. The situation in most African countries is an enduring and fluid form of politics in contrast to institutionalised western democracies. Scholars are increasingly questioning whether it is realistic to think that poorly conducted and externally imposed political reform can help improve the situation (Englbert and Tull, 2008:121).

Indeed, 'neither elections, nor changes in leadership, nor various configurations of state and provincial borders have been able to prevent, fix or, in some cases, even alleviate the tendency toward patronage politics' (Spears, 2013:39). Meanwhile the state is a resource where a nationalist discourse represses the 'political expression of local cultural identities which find outlets in 'tribal' clientlism' (Englebert and Hummel 2005:245). More interestingly, Spears (2013:43-44) finds that within this (neo)-patrimonial system, inclusion between opposition groups happens even without external manipulation. This inclusion, however, happens through temporary greedy calculation and fails to bring about sustainable peace and benefit citizens. The compatibility of power-sharing with this system is debated. In the case of the DRC, Raeymeakers (2007) argues that the failure to account for the country's political reality, together with a confusing employment of power-sharing for conflict resolutions, is likely to lead to more conflict. He blames the fostering of the patrimonial state to the detriment of real change.

Looking into the way power-sharing ought to work in managing ethnic diversity, its limited ability to alter the informal power relations between elites and the population brings into question its feasibility in the African context, especially the extent to which the trickled-down logic of representation at the leadership level will help ethno-linguist groups feel the state is legitimate and secures their interests. In any divided society the will to secure peace by elites is not so

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straightforward. In the context of the African system, assuming identity is the primary source of conflict, it is difficult to isolate hardliners wishing to spoil peace because they do not trust the agreement to protect their group. Other forms of insurgencies capitalise on instability to remain without regards to the protection of an identity group. Finding legitimate leaders on each side that can appeal to their people and ease the separation by cooperating with each other and showing an example to the divided population makes power-sharing potentially inapplicable in many African states.

The Feasibility of Power-sharing in the African Context

As seen above, power-sharing was designed with a specific purpose in mind. It is in accordance with this purpose that the feasibility of power-sharing shall be assessed and questioned. Accordingly, its potential and notably its (liberal) consociational form rest on its ability to untangle the complicated relationship between security, extremism and legitimacy in deeply-divided societies. It can help put an end to violence and provide a stable ground for the building of a legitimate system that accounts for identity and prevents it from becoming a source of conflict or be capitalised upon for greedy ends. However, as discussed above, like any other form of political engineering, the state and power structure of African nations, along with ineffective western oversight, does not make it necessarily better at answering the need for radical change.

Such considerations shed even more doubts on the use of power-sharing for conflicts not primarily related to identity. While this article does not wish to categorically assert that it should not be used, considering the amount of problems it potentially holds even when well implemented (c.f. Reilley, 2006; Jarstard, 2008 among others) an integrationist approach might suffice. One needs to assess whether identity is the origin of violence and division, as the alternative rests on partition or the burning out of conflict at a great human cost (Lemarchand, 2006:2). This important criterion might mean that actually very few cases in Africa would qualify, and when they do and power-sharing helps lessen tensions it may create unforeseen drawbacks.

The cases of Rwanda and Burundi are most compelling. In both countries, 'political competition was consistently characterized by the deliberate exclusion of both individuals and whole ethnic communities' (Cheeseman, 2011:341). The division between Hutus and Tutsi existed before colonialism but was made salient by colonial rule which escalated into violence after independence. In Rwanda, the Arusha Accords introducing power-sharing in 1993 was put forward to end the conflict with the Rwandan Patriotic Front and ease cooperation between the two groups. It included an integrated armed force (Spears, 2013:40). 'But some Hutu found inclusive provisions within the agreement unacceptable', and even the original moderate supporters felt they could not stand the protest and joined the hard-liners starting the genocide (Spears, 2013:42). The marginalisation of extremists such at the Coalition for the Defence of the Republic (CDR), a far-right Hutu group, allowed them to capitalise on the communities' fear and call for pre-emptive strikes (c.f. John, 2008). Although such actors might have spoiled peace for personal gains, they also represented the deepest form of ethnic divide. The use of coercion and fear to initiate the attacks by such factions (Strauss, 2006) was combined with a message that found resonance within communities and allowed them to capitalise on identity.

In retrospect, some argued that 'the lesson of Rwanda is that one cannot afford to leave anyone out of the political process' (Spear, 2000:115). This does not mean, however, that all insurgencies should be given access to political positions and resources. Tull and Mehler's (2005:383) warning of the 'hidden cost of power-sharing' is relevant in this case as well. The inclusion of illegitimate violent groups can be mitigated, firstly, with the international community paying more attention to the nature of insurgencies. Parties with no legitimate popular support should not be able to win or disturb elections, therefore the protection of civilians across the territory is vital (Fuamba et al, 2013:334).

The case of Burundi is an example of how identity can be managed and expressed in non-violent forms so as to no longer be a source of conflict. Conversely, it also points to the limitations of power-sharing. The country has remained stable and power-sharing was successful in putting an end to the ethnic conflict. More importantly, 'while Burundi was once known for its ethnic divisions and antagonism, today ethnicity is no longer the most salient feature around which conflict is generated', and power-sharing helped create a more stable political environment (Curtis, 2013:72). On the other hand, it remains fragile in terms of state-building objectives, with the Burundian politicians and

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administration remaining largely ineffective, undemocratic and unreceptive to the rule of law (Vandeginste, 2009:63). The emphasis and sole focus on identity has shadowed other forms of conflict that were, and still are, present in the country despite the beneficial outcome of the lessening of the salience of identity as an acceptable tool for mobilisation. While communities are no longer the victims of each other, enabling them to move towards peaceful relations in the long term, their condition has barely improved.

Moreover, because it suffers from contradictions inherent within the liberal agenda implemented in Burundi, the very consociational system that had the valuable effect of de-polarizing identity is in jeopardy. Similarly to Rwanda, Vandeginste warns of the willingness of international actors to allow for a more authoritarian regime to settle as long as the country and region remains stable, compromising the consensual form of politics needed to manage divided societies (2009:83-84). The positive effects of power-sharing and its success can be frustrated by a narrative focusing only on identity as a source of conflict (c.f. Autesserre, 2012). The way power-sharing is currently conceptualised will only answer part of the complex origins of violence: identity, which can be predominant and therefore needs to be addressed as a priority. Nonetheless, if broad corruption, insecurity, and famines still exist, reconciliation will not be a priority for individuals. When implemented by authoritarian systems, it can even become entangled with a form of resistance and resentment that has little to do with identity, therefore continuing to de-stabilise the political scene on other grounds (c.f. Thompson, 2011). More profoundly, the presence of such grievances can once again feed mobilisation around identity if correctly mobilised by 'ethnic' entrepreneurs generating a narrative of 'deep-rooted hatreds'.

Therefore, power-sharing ought to also concern itself with addressing other forms of violence if it is to be implemented. Additionally, it can have some drawbacks, especially in the long term, if only focused on elites (Jarstad, 2008:107-108). There is a risk of 'freezing' disputes and allowing for illiberal politics to continue within the format of power-sharing (Norris, 2008; McGarry et al, 2008). Power-sharing itself fails in its original conceptualisation to address local and community issues (Mehler 2009:7), shortfalls that, as noted earlier, are generally present within peace-building.

The earlier accounts of the nature of African states leave two potential options within which this could be achieved. The first one would keep the state-building and peace-building agenda advocated so far. However, given the inconsistencies in its application and the considerable cost and human capital, the implementation of most of the principles would make it a particularly challenging task and unlikely to be fulfilled within the current international practices and economic consensus. The second option would be through considerable reforms in its application allowing for a more coherent approach acknowledging the empirical realities of African state structures, societies and power-relations. For some, the international community's principal goal would be to respond 'to local demands and simultaneously deliver [...] and discipline[...] state provision for democratically determined needs' (Roberts, 2011:419. In short, peace can be negotiated at the top, but to be sustainable, ultimately the individuals matter more regardless of whether the conflict is about identity or not. When it is, power-sharing can answer the 'identity' element, but only if it also accounts for other challenges not necessarily a priory-linked to identity. Accordingly, as the literature on alternatives to the current liberal model expends, considerations for how power-sharing core principals could be used to address conflict over identity should also be considered.

When Spears concludes that power-sharing agreements 'rarely achieve more than what local leaders can achieve on their own' (2013:38), he obscures the original purpose of power-sharing: to bring together parties which are unwilling to cooperate due to deep-rooted incompatibilities find at the heart of their identity. When closely considering the nature of conflict in the majority of African states it seems power-sharing should be a rarely prescribed solution to conflict on the continent.

This article has shown how some of the criticisms of power-sharing are misplaced. When implemented as a magic formula to achieve stability, it is rarely done well and often works to the detriment of real change for citizens. Despite its bleak results, power-sharing should not yet be dismissed altogether, for several reasons: firstly, because most of its failures in Africa cannot be directly attributed to power-sharing. Secondly, it still offers the most promising tool for dealing with deeply-divided places thanks to its ability to account for the intertwined elements of security, extremism and legitimacy. It can offer a system that does not leave too much room for the exploitation of ethnicity, be it from

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genuine grievances around identity or their potential instrumentalisation by warlords. The model cannot, however, be concerned only with stability and be over-reliant on states and institutions which are not working the way they ought to, and hope to see changes in behaviour through their manipulation. It is therefore likely that power-sharing still has a role to play on the African continent, but only in a very few states and if it is part of a broader framework accounting for other conflict dynamics to create a more encompassing and self-reinforcing peace taking into account the realities of most African state-structure.

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About the author:

Alexandra Remond is currently a PhD Student in Politics at The University of Edinburgh studying secessionism and independence referendums. She is also a research assistant working on constitutional reforms in the UK following the Scottish independence referendum. She previously studied International Relations and Politics at the University of Cambridge and before that worked in research centers at the University of Aberdeen specializing in Federalism and Power-sharing.