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How Does a Battleground become Common Ground? Lessons from Post-Conflict Countries

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In the United States, many people have deplored the state of public discourse. Increasingly, it appears that rancorous diatribes are replacing civil debate. Rather than thinking critically and thoughtfully about the many pressing challenges facing the country, politicians and pundits hurl insults and talk past each other in 24-hour news cycles. How can we go from demonizing each other to working together to solve problems? We can learn a great deal by examining the experiences of other countries. Several countries offer incredible examples of lifelong enemies putting down their weapons and solving conflicts through the ballot box instead of the battlefield. To learn how bitter enemies can become at least grudging partners, the countries of Costa Rica, Chile, and South Africa offer some important lessons.

Costa Rica

Today, Costa Rica is widely considered to be a paradise. As returning UNH J term students can attest, ecotourism promotes responsible enjoyment of the country's stunning landscape, while providing good jobs to local economies. Costa Ricans are well prepared for gainful employment, as the country's social welfare system guarantees universal education and healthcare. While studying in Costa Rica, UNH students in POLT 543 found it hard to believe that about sixty years ago, Costa Rica was wracked by civil war. How did Costa Rica emerge from civil war to become a successful democracy?

Costa Rican exceptionalism is frequently traced back to its 1949 decision to abolish its military after the 1948 civil war. This six-week war was brief, but with approximately 4,000 casualties, it

was the bloodiest political event in Costa Rican history. The bloodshed shocked Costa Rican elites, and a consensus emerged on the need to avert future conflict. Political elites negotiated a series of compromises and identified the key elements of the new Costa Rican state upon which they could agree. Most importantly, political elites famously abolished the standing army and increased investment in social welfare programs, proclaiming their preference for an army of teachers. Thus, the subsequent 1949 constitution was famous not only for eliminating the military, but also for establishing a social welfare state that prioritized near universal education and healthcare. The establishment of this welfare state was striking given Costa Rica's limited economic means. A half century later, this investment would pay off. While the rest of Central America was either engulfed in war or ruled by repressive dictatorships, Costa Ricans never experienced repression, exile, or threats to their fundamental freedoms. Rather, former Costa Rican President and Nobel Prize winner Oscar Arias notes that:

During these 41 years, when military barracks have been turned into schools, our symbol has been the teacher who extols intelligence. The youth of Latin America have the right to have new heroes, to have new leaders who cut back on arms and practice dialogue.

Costa Rican political and economic development became a source of pride for its people, and an example for the rest of the region. Today, with approximately one third of the income of advanced industrial democracies, Costa Rica boasts health and education indicators on par with wealthier democracies like the United States. Elite consensus and investment in human capital paid off.

Chile

Students of Latin American Politics, POLT 554, have learned of the fascinating Chilean example of consensus after horrific division. Early in the twentieth century, Chile had emerged as one of the first stable democracies in the region. Class tensions existed, but the political processes were able to resolve them relatively peacefully. This all changed in the 1970s, when President Salvador Allende sought to reduce income inequality by increasing the role of the state in the economy and providing social services to the poor. Allende aimed to improve the plight of workers by ushering in reforms guaranteeing a minimum wage and safe working conditions, for example. These proposals proved very divisive, and political elites (and their supporters among the public) clashed in parliament as well as in the street. These moves frightened the Chilean elite, and with the help of the United States, they sought to remove Allende from power. On September 11, 1973, General Augusto Pinochet led a successful coup against Allende. Allende died in the ensuing battle, along with Chile's democratic tradition. The generals who had organized the coup later appeared on Chilean television, announcing the suspension of all political activity "until further notice." This further notice did not arrive for another sixteen years. Immediately upon taking office, General Pinochet emerged as the leader of the group, and launched a campaign to crush the organized working class.

Ironically, even though Pinochet bombed the presidential residence, tortured dissenters, killed opponents, disbanded Congress, and suspended political rights and civil liberties, he did not like to be thought of as a dictator. He viewed his military intervention into Chilean democracy as necessary in order to save Chile from the chaos imposed by Allende and the political left. His quest for legitimacy ultimately opened the door to the restoration of democracy, as he held a series of

referenda that reintroduced elections into Chilean politics.

Pinochet's 1989 referendum fueled the opposition, galvanizing them to mobilize to defeat the dictator. However, fifteen years of repression had taken their toll. Labor organizations in particular were divided and weakened. Leftist parties experienced both internal divisions as well as greater distance from one another. The Center parties, such as the Christian Democrats (PDC), enjoyed a slightly stronger position and assumed a leadership role in opposing Pinochet. Even though the opposition parties experienced both internal and external divisions, elites did remember the lessons from their earlier failed attempts to compromise, which led to the fall of democracy in 1973. Eventually these disparate parties were able to forge a sixteen party coalition – la Concertación por el No (Coalition for No) – to compete against Pinochet. United together, the opposition managed to defeat Pinochet, as 55 percent of the voters cast ballots saying "no" to his regime. The rejection of Pinochet's rule paved the way for the return to democracy. The military and Pinochet maintained their involvement in politics, but the united opposition was gradually able to reduce their political roles incrementally. In 1989, Chileans voted in the first presidential election held since Allende's 1970 victory. Every subsequent year witnessed an erosion in the power of the military and Pinochet in politics. The Coalition for No became the Coalition for Democracy, and became the dominant political force in Chilean politics, capturing every presidential election until 2010. By the time of Pinochet's death in 2006, his reputation and legacy had been completely dismantled, and he faced charges of human rights abuses and corruption. Ultimately, a fragmented opposition was able to unite and return to democratic rule.

South Africa

As students in POLT 544 (Pathways to Democ-

racism) can attest, South Africa offers an even more striking example of former political opponents setting aside their differences in order to govern. Until 1990, South Africa was ruled by an oppressive form of government known as apartheid. Under apartheid, the white minority (comprising less than 15 percent of the population) had complete political, economic, and social control of the country. Black South Africans were not considered citizens of the country, and were forced to carry around pass books to monitor their movements. Black South Africans faced daily discrimination and injustice, barred from many public spaces, educational institutions, and job opportunities. When black leaders protested their exclusion, they met with stiff repression. Black activists were “banned,” or restricted to specific neighborhoods, forbidden to meet with more than one person at a time, or to write. Activists like Nelson Mandela were jailed for opposing apartheid and coerced into hard manual labor. Most tragically, activists who defied such threats and continued to oppose apartheid faced brutal police beatings and even death, as was the case of Steven Biko.

This legacy of harsh discrimination and abuse made the eventual emergence of democracy truly remarkable. Most famously, in 1990 Nelson Mandela emerged from jail to begin negotiations with the very people who had denied him his liberty and basic human rights for almost thirty years. For four years, when negotiations were often threatened by violence, boycotts, and elite refusal to compromise, South Africa appeared on the brink of civil war. Mandela in particular led the nation back from this brink time and time again, stressing the need to create a Rainbow Nation, which would not be divided by race and exist for the benefit of all South Africans. Rather than retaliation and retribution, Mandela and his fellow activists preached reconciliation. Against all odds, this message was persuasive. In April of 1994, South Africa held its first ever multiracial elections, and white and black parties competed

electorally for the support of the people. Mandela won these elections, and shepherded his country through a time of transition. Today South African democracy faces many problems, largely due to its sobering legacy. Thus far, however, it has been able to face these problems without jeopardizing its multiracial democratic foundation.

Lessons

What do these examples tell us about overcoming division, and learning to “agree to disagree” amicably? Unfortunately, these cases illustrate that often things get worse before they get better. Sometimes elites need to be scared straight before they can find themselves willing to compromise and work together. After witnessing firsthand the horrors of civil war or repression, elites were more willing to compromise. Second, these examples illustrate that when average people have access to the basic tools they need to address their grievances, it is easier to reach consensus peacefully. In South Africa and Chile, citizens became mobilized to work through political parties and elections. In Costa Rica success was even greater (and more stable), as citizens had not just the ability to engage in politics but also the tools to do so well, as universal education and healthcare created a strong citizenry with the capacity to participate in decision making. These diverse cases illustrate that pragmatic elites are key – compromise must be valuable over ideological purity. When these elites invest in their people, ensuring they are healthy and educated, that success has longevity, as empowered citizens have the tools they need to engage efficaciously in their communities and countries.