Security Sector Reform in Africa: Relevance to Peace Building

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The enterprise of reforming the security sector in Africa implies a need for corrective action. The dictionary definition of the word "reform" has two senses: (1) to make changes in an institution or practice in order to improve it; and (2) to cause someone to relinquish an immoral or criminal lifestyle. Any genuine reform of the African security sector has therefore, perforce, to encompass both the institutions of the security sector and the personnel that operate the machinery of the institutions of which the security sector comprises. Furthermore, the definitions of the words "immoral" and "criminal" aptly express, within the African context, the kinds of activities that the security sector in many countries has carried out in the name of the security of the state.

The security sector in Africa evolved in two milieu, with two diametrically opposed cultures. During the colonial milieu, the security sector as a whole was apolitical, impartial and law-abiding. This sector was composed of the uniformed services, namely the Army, the Police Force (or Gendarmerie), and the Prisons Service.

The basic functions of the colonial armies were to defend the colonial territories against external attack, and to engage militarily any armed internal insurgency. European military culture, structures, doctrine, training, standards and discipline were replicated and institutionalised.

Apart from ceremonial functions, African armies were basically in a permanent state of standby, with the exception of the two World Wars. As these establishments were under the command of European colonial officers, the prospects for mutiny were unheard of and military intrusions into politics non-existent. While the colonial political ethos within which the African security sector operated was undemocratic, authoritarian,

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discriminatory and oppressive, the personnel who ran the security machinery were themselves subject to the rule of law.

The security sector in Africa then therefore had clear operational authority. The Army, Police (or Gendarmerie) and the custodians of penal institutions operated strictly within prescribed legal parameters. Over time, these security institutions acquired stability and proved their worth as an invaluable part of the apparatus of implementing the colonial agenda. Their apolitical nature complimented the impartiality of the Civil and Judicial Services. As colonial rule in Africa ended, African administrators replaced European colonial administrators.

The dominant political party in a multi-party system (or the sole political party in a single party system) combined authoritarian rule and centralised bureaucratic direction of policy and administration. The consequence of this kind of authoritarian rule was that it politicised the security sector in Africa, along with the other institutions of government that had hitherto been apolitical and impartial. The personnel who operated the security machinery in the changed political ethos also acquired the attributes and characteristics of the new political system. More often than not, they engaged in a capricious exercise of authority by routinely violating the citizens “human and peoples” rights. When civilian security personnel violate human and people’s rights, or when military establishments impulsively stage coups d’état that result in unconstitutional changes of government, or prison officials maltreat detainees or prisoners at will, their individual actions qualify as "immoral" or "criminal" or both.

Today, the African security sector is made up of the Uniformed Services, namely, the Armed Forces (comprising the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force in a number of countries), the Police (or Gendarmerie), the Prisons Service, Paramilitary Groups, Militia and a new institution dubbed the "National Security Agency" or "State Intelligence Service".

Quite often, and in many countries, State Intelligence Service personnel assumed powers they had not originally been given. Their actions became intrusive and their operations extra-judicial. In short order, this earned many civilian National Security Agencies an unflattering reputation. Their activities became, in effect, antithetical to constitutional and democratic government, and violated fundamental human rights.
Reforming the security sector in Africa is a challenging task. It addresses, on the one hand, the regular security establishments, especially the military and civilian State Intelligence Service personnel, and, on the other, demobilised personnel from the Armed Forces.

Respect for the rule of law and for human and peoples' rights, accountability, transparency and commitment to the democratic ideal – all these values must of necessity form the core of the reform process. It is these elements that must constitute the foundation stone of a new security ethos. The doctrine that would emanate from such a security ethos should, if it is to be effective, be predicated on strict discipline and adherence to the rule of law. In practice, it should become the modus operandi for all branches of the national security sector.

It is important to stress that this discussion of the reform of the security sector in Africa falls under the rubric of "peace building". Peace is not only the absence of war. It is an environment of hope, tranquility and security of the person and safety of his or her property – in jurisprudence aptly captured in the phrase "life, limb and property". Security of the person is perhaps the most challenging goal because it is dependent not only on good governance and the rule of law but, most importantly and generally, on employment opportunities.

As a concept, peace building therefore has a dual nature. On the one hand, it is associated with institution building, relative political stability, the rehabilitation of infrastructure and reconstruction in post-conflict situations where there is a modicum of peace and security. On the other hand, peace building consists of activities that are undertaken by the state and community groups to broaden the democratic political process by peaceful means, and the promotion of popular participation in government and development. Popular participation in development embraces the involvement in and with programmes, projects and activities designed to improve and uplift the lives of the people. It is in this context that the process of demobilisation and integration of ex-military personnel assumes great importance.
There are no set standard conditions for the demobilisation of military and security forces, or for their reintegration into society at large. It is clear, however, that certain conditions must exist to induce demobilisation and reintegration, and one of these conditions is retraining. Moreover, there must be a genuine desire for peace at the level of society. The political leadership must be confident that it can engage in these exercises without feeling threatened, and the military establishment must likewise share that frame of mind. Furthermore, availability of the resources needed for meaningful and effective demobilisation and re-integration constitutes an incentive for creating a small, highly professional army that is manageable in terms of financial, material and material requirements as well as in operational terms.

One of the major threats to peace building, security and development in Africa is the proliferation of small arms, or light weapons, as they are alternately referred to. According to the United Nations Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Africa, this group of weapons "covers a broad spectrum including weapons with exclusive application, to firearms, used by police forces, to hand guns or hunting rifles". These weapons are the destabilising elements in many African countries. African countries have begun to give serious attention to the issue of small arms and the need for their effective control. With the reform of the security sector, therefore, should come effective arms retrieval and arms control measures.

As an operational concept, demobilisation can be a double-edged sword for those countries that are emerging from conflict. If it is well planned and efficiently executed. Demobilisation can provide the needed additional manpower to the existing labour force in both urban and rural settings. When demobilisation results in the unplanned offloading of thousands of ex-military personnel on to society, it becomes an explosive catalyst for social and political disorder. A well-planned and purposefully executed demobilisation programme eases the re-integration of demobilised military personnel into society. An essential element in such a programme is the acquisition of skills. In the short term, acquisition of skills eliminates dependence on governments for welfare relief; in the long term, it contributes to economic development by increasing the size of the productive labour force.
The challenge of reforming the security sector in Africa is institutional in nature, and it calls for organisational restructuring, delineating civilian management and control systems of the security sector, as well as the development of a truly professional security sector.

Reforming the security sector in Africa is therefore going to be a complex undertaking. It will require the political leadership in each country to manifest the required political will in favour of reform. This political will must also be complimented by a rigorous re-orientation of security personnel towards a new democratic milieu. This is the best hope of making the African security sector a “contributor” as opposed to an “obstacle” to peace and development.

If, as the saying goes "Old habits die hard", then reforming the security sector in Africa and making it relevant to peace building is going to be a difficult, but achievable goal.