Review of Bullets to Ballots: Collective De-Radicalization of Armed Movements

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It is my pleasure to review an excellent and timely anthology, *Bullets to Ballots: Collective De-Radicalization of Armed Movements*, edited by Omar Ashour. In 2007 I had the privilege of co-editing *From Revolutionary Movements to Political Parties: Cases from Latin America and Africa* with David Close and Kalowatie Deonandan. This contemporary volume asks many of the same questions that we asked almost a generation ago. It revisits some of the same transitions as South Africa, El Salvador, and Uruguay adding insights gained from subsequent years of political practice by movements like the African National Congress (South Africa), Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (El Salvador), and the Broad Front (Uruguay). However, this book goes far beyond our efforts to cover transitions in Europe like the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Basque Homeland and Liberty (ETA) and important recent transitions in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq. The latter chapters are especially important because conflicts in those countries have been at the center of world politics over the last twenty years but now may be coming closer to a less violent political resolution.

The framework for this study is provided in the introduction by Professor Ashour. He quotes a study from the Rand Corporation that between 1968 and 2006 of the 268 armed groups that were studied only 20 (7%) were defeated militarily. Smaller groups were often dismantled by a variety of means, primarily policing, but the larger ones, especially those with more than 1000 members, the most common trajectory was the conversion to unarmed political and social activism. This reality leads to questions we asked in our 2007 book and that these authors ask today. Why do such transformations happen? What are the conditions for initiating them and sustaining transformation? What are the different trajectories that move armed groups away from armed struggle to a political dialogue and eventually entry into mainstream politics? Do these transformations happen after a military victory, military defeat, or a stalemate? What role do outside actors and international organizations play in such transitions?

The editor attempts to create a working framework for the chapter authors in the context of competing scholarly narratives on political violence that can be problematic. In recent years the field of security and terrorism studies has sought to frame the issue in terms of deradicalization implying an automatically negative connotation on the armed groups. Ashour acknowledges the lack of agreement on the deradicalization terminology and seeks to find an approach that simply focuses on the circumstances in which an armed group decides to lay down its arms and makes no value judgment on the legitimacy of its cause. The author only partially succeeds in this effort by choosing to keep the term in the deradicalization in the title of the book. Fortunately, many of the chapter authors who focus on traditional national liberation movements do not use the framework. Deradicalization is used to analyze armed Middle Eastern groups like the Islamic State. Ultimately, seventeen organizations are examined with ideologies ranging from religious to left to ethno-nationalist and nationalist. In addition, four others are comparatively revisited.
including the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) and the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) of Algeria that were studied in our 2007 book.

As a scholar of South Africa, I will give special attention to the two articles in the book with a focus on the African National Congress’s transition from armed struggle to negotiated state power in the early 1990s. The first chapter is from Ronnie Kasrils, a long-time ANC activist and founder of the organization’s armed wing, Spear of the Nation (MK), in 1961. The other is by a South African historian, Thula Simpson, and is a reflection on the 1990-1994 transition with the hindsight of thirty years Kasrils’ chapter is particularly interesting in that it places the ANC’s armed struggle in historical perspective, arguing that “guerrilla warfare became the norm-utilization of irregular methods against the superior force of a conventional army” (p. 27). He notes that in some instances armed movements developed ‘People’s War’ that led to successful revolutions in China, Vietnam, Cuba, Algeria, and Southern Africa. He also observes that without revolutionary politics armed movements can resort to banditry and barbarism as in the case of the Islamic State, Al-Shabab, and Boko Haram. Kasrils follows with a critique of terrorism and argues that the MK never consciously targeted civilians as part of its armed actions but rather focused on military forces and infrastructure. When units strayed from that strategy they were disciplined. This strategy allowed the ANC to keep the moral high ground and maintain international support that was crucial to the pressure on the apartheid regime for a negotiated settlement. His assessment of the reasons why the negotiated settlement occurred was that neither side could win militarily and that several factors came together in 1990 to facilitate the ANC decision to end its armed struggle and accept the opportunity for dominant political power in a democratic South Africa.

Thula Simpson’s chapter on the key factors facilitating the democratic transition tends dovetail with Kasrils and my own thinking in a 2006 Politikon article on the same subject. For Kasrils the key factor in the transition was the ANC’s politics favoring of political democracy gave it a distinct advantage over its adversary’s denial democracy in the apartheid system. This advantage was particularly strong as first Latin America and then Eastern Europe transitioned to democratic governance in the late 1980s, early 1990s. Also, working class activism embodied in the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) were mobilizing non-white South African to a new level of activism that was making South Africa’s townships ungovernable. The international divestment campaign, BDS, was highly effective in isolating the South African government weakening the economy and leading some key industrialists to question the viability of the apartheid system. The apartheid’s armed forces suffered a crucial defeat in Angola by combined Cuban and Angolan forces that led to the independence of Namibia. These factors and others were tilting the scales toward fundamental change away from the status quo, but the ANC leaders still had to make the choice to end the armed struggle and seek their goals through the political process knowing full well that white South Africans would hold the bulk of the economic power. Taking that economic power would have required a military victory that was not in the offing. In this regard most writers, including Kasrils and Simpson credit the leadership of Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo in properly assessing the historical moment and sizing for the liberation forces what was possible, not what was their greatest hopes. By ending the armed struggle in return for democratic elections that they were confident the ANC would win, Tambo, Mandela, and the other ANC leaders saved South Africa from what many thought was an inevitable and bloody civil war.