HFG RESEARCH AND POLICY IN BRIEF

Fueling the Fires: How Corruption and Conflict Keep Each Other Burning

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DECEMBER 2025

HFG | HARRY FRANK GUGGENHEIM FOUNDATION

Executive Summary

While endemic corruption in any state can erode trust, undermine legitimacy, and cannibalize government resources, the effects of corruption in states beset with political violence are particularly insidious. As conflicts in Afghanistan, Guatemala, South Sudan, and other countries have shown, corruption can become an entrenched feature of political economies and a major obstacle to building sustainable peace after a war ends. The converse is also true: political violence can create opportunities for corruption to fester and grow. While international responses to conflict are often "corruption-blind," better understanding how conflict and corruption fuel each other is essential for peacebuilding and anticorruption efforts to succeed and last.

A review of recent academic literature finds that the corruption-conflict relationship works in four key ways. First, corruption drives and accelerates conflict by generating illicit wealth used to finance and perpetuate fighting, fueling underlying social and political grievances, and undermining state capacity to deliver goods and services, thereby eroding belief in the legitimacy of the state. Second, the relationship also works in the opposite direction, with conflict allowing and worsening corruption by weakening the oversight capabilities of the state and enabling the growth of informal and illicit economies, which can negatively affect political systems long after the end of active conflict. Third, international peacebuilding tools like power sharing and decentralization can enable corruption by increasing and entrenching systems of patronage, favoritism, and clientelism in postconflict governments. Finally, it impairs the long-term stability and peace of postconflict countries by leaving the root causes of conflict in place and undermining the trust needed for societies to recover after war.

Because corruption and conflict are so intertwined, peacemakers and others invested in ending conflicts must take corruption into account when implementing peacebuilding mechanisms. Efforts to end armed conflict and build peace should also include safeguards for preventing future corruption if peace is to last.

Introduction

A common thread that runs through conflicts around the world—from Afghanistan and Guatemala to South Sudan and Myanmar—is the insidious role of endemic corruption. The connection is clearly illustrated by comparing global indexes that assess corruption against those that assess fragility or conflict. For instance, sixteen of the twenty states that were at the bottom of the 2024 Fragile States Index also appear in the bottom 20 percent of the control-of-corruption dimension of the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGIs). Ten of those twenty states also appear in the bottom twenty of the 180 countries in Transparency International's 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index. Comparing the Global Peace Index (GPI) to WGI's control-of-corruption dimension yields a similar result: ten of the countries classified as least peaceful are also in the bottom 10 percent of the control-of-corruption WGI.

This is not a coincidence. The Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) has found that corruption (especially in security and judicial sectors) is a "key explanatory variable" of low levels of internal peace (IEP 2016, 3).

Yet *how* endemic corruption and violent conflict influence each other defies simple explanation. The relationship is complex, and the particularities vary by context. Some corrupt practices may exacerbate divisions or violence—as when patronage is used to exclude groups from employment, or when funds obtained from corrupt practices strengthen violent actors. Others, by contrast, can mitigate the negative impacts of conflict, as when corruption enables marginalized people to earn a livelihood by smuggling goods when there are no other opportunities (Olson and Chigas 2024).

Gaining insight into this relationship requires viewing violent conflict and corruption as complex adaptive systems. These systems are interdependent and interact in nonlinear ways, each serving to sustain the other and make it resistant and adaptive to efforts to change it (Hopp-Nishanka et al. 2022). Failure to understand this complexity and the linkage between the two undermines the effectiveness of both peacebuilding and anticorruption efforts.

This brief synthesizes the ever-expanding literature on corruption and conflict, which includes theoretical treatments, qualitative case studies, quantitative analyses of large global datasets, and

more. The brief is organized around four primary aspects of the conflict-corruption vicious cycle. It starts by exploring what is known about how endemic corruption fuels violent conflict. It next explores the role of conflict in facilitating corruption, and then how international responses to conflict may fuel corruption. Finally, the brief looks at the role of corruption as a practice that serves to maintain short-term peace.

Within each of these themes, common ways that the relationship can play out are described. Every conflict is unique in this respect. Thus, for example, a corrupt practice that fuels violence in one context may play only a minor role in another; similarly, the degree, type, and impact of conflict on corruption will vary from context to context.

I. What is corruption?

The following definition of corruption, developed by Transparency International (TI) in the 1990s, is the closest the anticorruption field has to a generally accepted one: "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain" (TI, n.d.). It encompasses a wide variety of practices—from nepotism and patronage to embezzlement, sexual exploitation, and petty bribery—conducted by a broad range of actors in different sectors and levels of society.

Many practitioners and scholars of development and corruption adopt a broad interpretation of the main elements of the definition. "Entrusted power" includes power held by public officials as well as actors in the private sector, civil society, and traditional institutions. "Private gain," which has conventionally been conceived of in terms of individual monetary benefits, can also be nonfinancial (for example, status, power, sex access). Further, the benefit need not be strictly personal but can be directed to one's family, friends, networks, political parties, and institutions.

This definition remains problematic, though. It has been criticized as analytically imprecise, giving no guidance, for example, on what counts as abuse. Some have even questioned the very effort to find a universal definition or concept of corruption. They posit that this quest imposes a particular (Western) view of the proper relationship between private and public domains and a notion of proper public governance that simply does not exist in much of the rest of the world (Gupta 1995; de Sardan 1999; Orjuela 2014, 724; Miller 2023, 11–12).

Though the concept of corruption exists around the world, and is universally condemned, the specific actions that are deemed to be corrupt are highly variable. Sextortion (sex for favors), for example, is considered corrupt in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) but not in Uganda, where it is considered to be abusive but not an "abuse of power for private gain." Similarly, using one's networks to gain advantages in employment, contracts, healthcare, etc., often is considered corrupt in contexts with strong institutions and rule of law; but in fragile contexts, where security and services are uncertain and reliance on social networks and kin are key to survival and advancement, it is not (Hough 2017, 35).

Despite its weaknesses, the TI definition does help in distinguishing abuses that are corrupt from abuses that reflect other illegitimate or unacceptable exercises of power but are not corrupt practices, such as human rights abuses, theft, politically motivated prosecutions, and illegal detentions. It also distinguishes corruption from unfair and abusive practices that are popularly characterized as corrupt but that may result from mismanagement, poorly designed processes, slow systems, or nonfunctioning or noninclusive institutions (Scharbatke-Church and Nash 2022).

II. How is corruption a system?

Corruption in fragile and conflict-affected states is qualitatively different than in states based on the rule of law. It goes beyond ad hoc individual deviations from the rules, whether common or rare. Instead, in fragile states, it is a "team effort" embedded in and perpetrated by broad networks across private and public sectors. In the system of corruption, action is taken in a coordinated and organized way according to "informal" institutionalized rules and practices in the service of social, political, and economic gain. This distinction between endemic (systemic) and individual (one-shot acts) corruption is particularly important for understanding how corruption and conflict interact. In these contexts, corruption is not only a tool for the personal enrichment of greedy, opportunistic actors; it also is a key feature of the political economy. It acts as a means to access, control, and distribute resources in order to compete for, attain, and maintain political power.

As an Afghan official is reported to have told American embassy officials, corruption "is not just a problem for the system of governance in Afghanistan: it *is* the system of governance." Those in authority "can seek to maintain their control over resources and levers of power through their abuse of entrusted authority" (SIGAR 2016, 4; 2021, 4). In its most extreme form, governance embedded in systemic corruption becomes what Alex de Waal calls a "political marketplace," where transactional politics dominate formal institutions (Miller 2024), and "politics is run on the basis of personalized transactions and loyalties and services are sold to the highest bidder" (de Waal et al. 2020).

III. The conflict-corruption vicious cycle

The relationship between conflict and corruption is the epitome of a vicious cycle. Corruption is an underlying cause of violent conflict and can undermine progress towards peace if not addressed. And it is a legacy of conflict, insofar as conflict opens opportunities for corruption that can not only affect the quality of the emergent peace but also lay the foundations for renewed conflict. When international responses to conflict are "corruption-blind," they too can entrench this vicious cycle.

Notably, the literature on the relationship of corruption and conflict does not generally differentiate between types of corruption. As a result, we do not have a good handle on what corrupt practices (e.g., bribery, trading in influence) are most salient to conflict. This gap is evident throughout the discussion below of the four primary aspects of the vicious cycle.

Corruption as a driver of conflict

Corruption, in interaction with other driving factors of conflict, functions as an accelerant. It exacerbates underlying long-term structural factors as well as more immediate causes and triggers. The primary pathways of this dynamic involve use of corruption to obtain illicit wealth to finance a conflict agenda, corruption fueling grievances, and corruption diminishing state legitimacy. Alone, however, corruption is rarely sufficient to catalyze violent conflict; there are many endemically corrupt countries—China and Egypt, among others—without armed conflict.

I. Illicit wealth finances and incentivizes violent conflict

Corruption generates illicit wealth that can be used to finance one or more sides of a conflict. Nonstate armed groups actively participate in illicit economies that generate significant financial gains. Illicit drugs, for example, were key in sustaining the Taliban in Afghanistan and the FARC in Colombia (See, e.g., Cook 2011; Otis 2014; Felbab-Brown 2021). Areas rich in natural resources provide particularly fertile ground for illicit economies. Armed groups extract and sell resources in areas they control, in addition to taxing everything from minerals unearthed by artisanal miners to the equipment and vehicles used to extract and transport minerals and other resources (Mahtani et al. 2009; Global Witness 2017; Lederer 2020; Hanai 2021).

Armed groups also raise revenues through protection rackets and forcible collection of taxes at checkpoints along key transportation corridors for smuggling and humanitarian aid (Keen 1998; Schouten 2018; Walker and Botero Restrepo 2022). The Mozambican rebel group RENAMO was reputed, for example, to have obtained regular payments from the UK-based multinational Lonrho for "protecting" its oil pipeline during the height of Mozambique's civil war (Keen 1998, 16).

These corrupt wealth-generating efforts can translate into significant financial gains, which are often then reinvested in weapons, fuel, and vehicles, as well as payment to soldiers (Schouten 2018; Kiley 2018; Walker and Botero Restrepo 2022). In Somalia, it has been estimated that Al-Shabaab earns $15 million annually from its checkpoint extortion operations alone (Petrich 2022).

Seeking illicit wealth through corrupt activities is not limited to nonstate armed groups. Seventy-one percent of the roadblocks in DRC, for example, are run by the Congolese military, and troops regularly engage in illegal mining in government-controlled areas (Schouten 2018; Vorrath and

Zuñiga 2022), even colluding with the very armed groups they are supposed to be fighting (see, e.g., Keen 1998; Global Witness 2021). Government tolerance of these corrupt practices provides a means for unpaid or underpaid military officers and soldiers to secure salaries and continue to fight (Stearns et al. 2013; Schouten 2018).

In addition to financing war, illicit wealth-generating actions fuel violence as groups compete for control over lucrative territory and illicit markets. The proceeds of this corruption can also create perverse incentives to keep fighting, even among those purportedly intervening to facilitate peace. The Nigerian military, acting as part of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) peacekeeping force, for example, was accused of egging on the war in Sierra Leone, as the military leadership was making so much money through the diamond trade that peace was not in its interest (McGreal 2000).

II. Corruption fuels grievances that drive conflict

In our 2017 research into corruption in the criminal justice system in Central African Republic (de Coster et al. 2017), we found that officials in the police—who are mostly Christian—alleged that Muslims were the perpetrators of corruption. They claimed Muslims gave "gifts" and cultivated relationships with public officials to smooth the path for their businesses and to escape justice. From this perspective, Muslims were responsible for the sorry state of the rule of law. Muslims, by contrast, asserted that Muslims and Christians alike participated in corruption, but that Muslims were systematically charged more than Christians for corrupt transactions. Moreover, they said they were treated more harshly if they were arrested, which galvanized them to take whatever measures were necessary, including bribery, to avoid entanglement with the police. These contrasting narratives provide a window into how corruption can be explicitly connected to "the other" and exacerbate intergroup conflict.

More generally, corrupt practices among officials—from favoring members of their personal networks for jobs to diverting funds to those networks—provide a means for one group to gain benefit at the expense of other groups. This entrenches inequality and exclusion in a vicious cycle that Eric Uslaner calls the "inequality trap": inequality breeds corruption, which in turn exacerbates inequality, undermines social trust, and further motivates corruption (Uslaner 2008; Ariely and Uslaner 2017). When this inequality trap aligns with ethnic, religious, ideological, or other significant cleavages, it can be explosive. It creates "horizontal inequalities" between groups

(Stewart 2008; 2010) that can fuel resentment against those perceived to be responsible for the marginalization or exclusion of one's group and can increase the risk of intergroup conflict.

It is not always the corrupt practices per se that fuel grievance; sometimes, it is the perception that the other side is obtaining an unfair advantage through corruption that matters most for conflict. For example, during the war in Sri Lanka from 1983 through the late 2000s, corruption by the Sinhalese-dominated state fed Tamil grievances around mistreatment and exclusion; like Muslims in Central African Republic, they felt that they were subjected to corrupt practices more than the Sinhalese were (Orjuela 2014). Perception of unfair advantage is one reason violence broke out around the 2007 Kenyan elections, claiming 1,100 lives and displacing 350,000 people. Believing it was "their time to eat," ethnic groups excluded from power protested what they thought was a manipulated election (Orjuela 2014). In both cases, the outrage is caused by the perception that another party gets more corruption spoils than one's own.

The impunity for corrupt acts or other legal infractions that abusers buy with illicit wealth generates another common corruption-fueled grievance. In contexts of endemic corruption, preserving access to illicit wealth requires the ability to rig the system to avoid accountability. Laws are passed to shield political and economic elites, and accountability institutions are regularly hobbled through underresourcing or undermining their independence with patronage appointments and removal of impartial, capable professionals. Corruption within accountability processes—from political interference by high-level officials to "persuade" a judge to acquit an official accused of human rights violations to powerful actors paying a prosecutor to "lose" evidence in a case of politicians buying votes—can secure impunity for corrupt actors.[1] The mistrust of the state and the grievances engendered by such impunity do not necessarily lead directly to violence, as people may feel resigned and disempowered. But they are an underlying driver and can be mobilized for violence.

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1 Guatemala has experienced all of these forms of corruption within accountability processes. For example, legislation in 2017 to reduce the scope and the penalties for campaign finance crimes in response to campaign finance prosecutions by the International Commission on Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) was aptly named the "Impunity Pact." Although that "pact" was eventually reversed after citizens took to the streets, efforts by political and economic elites to undermine CICIG's efforts intensified as CICIG's cases increasingly touched them, eventually leading to the disbanding of CICIG altogether (Call and Hallock 2020, 48). Since then, corruption cases have been closed on a large scale, investigators and judges forced to flee Guatemala to escape trumped-up charges, and the justice system commandeered to harass newly elected President Bernardo Arevalo's party and administration (Neau and Salomon 2023; 2024).

III. Corruption undermines state capacity and erodes legitimacy

Hospitals without critical supplies. Schools with ghost teachers and police stations without pens to document complaints or petrol to respond to emergencies. Civil servants without the requisite qualifications or equipment to perform their roles. These are common phenomena in endemically corrupt contexts, resulting from diversion of resources by political leaders, internal petty corruption, nepotism, and patronage in government employment. All compromise the ability of state institutions (e.g., infrastructures for healthcare, education, justice, and security) to deliver services. The impacts on security institutions were on full display in the 2000s within the Afghan military, whose capacity and morale to fight the Taliban were compromised by an array of corrupt practices: payments to "ghost soldiers," commanders stealing soldiers' salaries, cronyism, fraud in procurement contracts, and government militia leaders accepting payments from the Taliban (SIGAR 2016; BBC 2021).[2]

The reduction in state capacity, legitimacy, or both, can potentiate conflict by undermining the social contract in two ways: enhancing in-group obligations and loyalties, and undermining the effectiveness of—and trust in—the state (McCandless et al. 2018; McCandless 2020).[3] First, a state with no social safety net deepens people's reliance on their own group or networks for basic needs, making group, not state, loyalty of paramount importance. This can further undermine social cohesion in divided societies (Chigas and Scharbatke-Church 2019; Scharbatke-Church and Chigas 2019, 1819). Governance through patronage and clientelism reinforces these in-group mutual obligations, as patrons become obligated to provide benefits to their clients to secure political support. Conversely, clients' access to what they need to survive and advance (jobs, licenses, services) depends on loyalty to their patrons (Bellina et al. 2009; Dix et al. 2012).

Second, low capacity in state institutions results in poor service delivery. When that delivery is also perceived to be unfair or to privilege one group over another, when interactions with frontline government workers are negative or disrespectful, or when people perceive they have no avenues for redress or voice in how services should be provided, it erodes citizens' sense of the legitimacy of their government (Mcloughlin 2015; 2018; Nixon et al. 2017).

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2 Similar dynamics have been documented in the Nigerian military's efforts against Boko Haram and in the Iraqi army's 2014 routing by ISIS in Mosul (MacLachlan et al. 2017), as well as in the Malian army's inability to restore security following a 2012 rebellion in the country's north and the resulting delegitimization of the government (Joly 2021)—with corrupt practices leaving soldiers ill equipped and unmotivated to fight despite large military budgets.

3 McCandless et al. (2018) identify three drivers of resilient social contracts in fragile and conflict-affected contexts: (1) inclusive political settlements addressing core conflict issues; (2) increasingly effective, fair, and inclusive state institutions; and (3) increasingly broad and deep social cohesion—both horizontal (across groups or conflict divides) and vertical (between elites and nonelites).

A weakened social contract creates conditions that can play into the hands of emerging rebel groups or political entrepreneurs who promise (and sometimes actually provide) surrogate structures and services that respond to people's needs (see Dix et al. 2012; Weigand 2022). This is particularly problematic in the justice and police sectors, which citizens often perceive to be the most corrupt. Research has shown corruption in these sectors to be most correlated with declines in peace because of the effect on citizens' perceptions of the rule of law and of the state's ability to resolve disputes fairly (Jenkins et al. 2020).

Conflict as an enabler of corruption

Corruption fuels conflict. And, like all vicious cycles where the consequence is also a cause, conflict also worsens corruption (Orjuela 2014; Lohaus and Bussmann 2021). A Justice Ministry official we spoke to in our research in Central African Republic summarized it well: "Corruption is like an animal raised on hay and grain. In a period of conflict, it gets fat, and in a period of peace, it gets thin. War is a grazing land for corruption" (de Coster et al. 2017). Conflict and corruption feed into each other, making it difficult to address one without addressing the other.

While the relationship may seem self-evident, there is surprisingly little research on how conflict worsens corruption. The evidence that does exist suggests that conflict weakens the ability of government institutions to prevent and sanction corruption while also galvanizing illicit economies.

I. Conflict weakens oversight abilities of the government, which motivates corrupt acts and provides opportunities for corruption

The features of war—intergroup violence, extreme scarcity, physical destruction, and trauma—weaken state institutions as well as key pillars of transparency and accountability (e.g., parliaments, civil society, independent media). Institutions weakened in this way lack capacity to detect, investigate, and punish corruption. This creates a permissive environment for entrenchment of corruption and impunity (Chêne 2012; Lohaus and Bussmann 2021). In Iraq, for example, a year following the establishment of the Coalition Provisional Authority, public institutions even struggled to know how many employees they had, much less keep track of state resources, hiring, and contracting practices (Leenders and Alexander 2005). Fifteen years later, Iraqi ministers were reporting that political blocs were processing contracts without their oversight (Eaton et al. 2019).

The criminal justice sector is part of these dynamics—with the additional consequence that the main mechanism for investigating and sanctioning corruption is not only ineffective but frequently also up for sale during and after conflict. The resulting culture of impunity normalizes corruption and opens the door for elite capture of the state and expansion and infiltration of organized crime into state structures (O'Donnell 2008; Chêne 2012).

The weakened administrative structures also create incentives to participate in corruption. During war, corruption is used as a coping mechanism to deal with insecurity and lack of access to basic needs, services, and livelihoods that have been destroyed in the war (Goodhand 2004; Belloni and

Strazzari 2014). When alternative livelihoods do not exist, this need-based as opposed to greed-based corruption often means participating in illicit activities like drug cultivation or smuggling (Bauhr 2017). Civil servants who go unpaid for long periods of time during war may seek to make ends meet by using their positions to charge "fees for service," or to collect future favors.

Other incentives to engage in corruption are grounded in the conflict itself and the obligations of loyalty to one's "own." The Justice Ministry official in Central African Republic articulated motivations we have seen across multiple contexts: "If someone [within your social network] asks for a service, you are required to do it, even if it goes against your own ethics. To refuse is to put oneself in opposition [to one's clan] and this can be dangerous" (de Coster et al. 2017).

II. Conflict can entrench illicit economies and elevate actors dependent on illicit wealth and power

Conflict has multiple negative effects on the economic structure of a country. It entrenches informal economies that are often intertwined with organized criminal networks. Over time this transforms the economic foundations of a country—making informal and illicit activities more important for elite accumulation of wealth and for the livelihoods of ordinary people.

Conflict fuels the emergence of a "combat economy." The necessities of war (weapons, ammunition) require resources, many of which may be obtained illicitly, especially as international sanctions restrict access to arms and financial resources (Goodhand 2004). Following the imposition of international sanctions on the Assad regime in Syria, for example, Syria became a hub for producing and trafficking the drug Captagon on an industrial scale, with the government itself participating as a means of financing the military effort against rebel groups.

The end of armed conflict does not mark the end of informality or of the activities of war-financing networks (e.g., arms and drug trafficking or illicit natural resource extraction). They continue, effectively creating a "shadow economy" (Goodhand 2004) that embeds illicit sources of income into the economic structure of the postwar state, often with the participation of postwar political leaders (de Boer and Bosetti 2015; GI-TOC 2023). The destruction of the regular economy incentivizes people to participate in these illicit economies as there are few alternative livelihoods. This increases the difficulty of breaking them up without hurting the most vulnerable popula-

tions.[4] The impacts can be huge. In the Balkans, the proportion of heroin destined for Western Europe that transited through Kosovo and Macedonia rose from 40 percent to 80 percent in the first five years following the 1998–99 war in Kosovo (de Boer and Bosetti 2015, 13).

The shadow economy also has a deleterious effect on the political system of a postwar country. It elevates political leaders whose legitimacy and power stem from violence, wartime accumulation, and patronage. It also enhances the influence of informal actors, including criminal groups, who have become powerful through their role in the war (see Andreas 2008, 123). These groups can manipulate the rules of the game from the shadows to gain access, for example, to the spoils of economic liberalization, international aid, or protection for continuing illicit activities.

The experience of Bosnia during and after the war of the 1990s provides an instructive example of how this happens, and with what consequences. Organized crime and corruption predated the war, but armed conflict expanded the space for black marketeers, including criminal syndicates, to operate, often in close cooperation with political and military leaders (Vučetić 2002; Andreas 2008; Brady 2012). The survival of these wartime networks after the war turned Bosnia into a regional smuggling hub and helped to create a ruling oligarchy that captured the postwar state (Andreas 2008, 119; Belloni 2020). Those who had been wartime political leaders gained access to resources to consolidate their power in the postwar period. At the same time, the "nouveau riche criminalized elite" (Andreas 2008, 122) emerging from the war used their influence to manipulate the rules and further enhance their wealth (Andreas 2008, 118-122; Belloni and Strazzari 2014, 857; Belloni 2020, 57).

The impacts are still being felt three decades later. Bosnia remains one of the poorest countries in Europe, intergroup tensions remain high, and there is "almost total control of the judiciary by political parties and organized crime" (Forto 2024). As the head of the Steering Board of Transparency International in Bosnia and Herzegovina warned in 2023, "A special danger for the state is a full symbiosis of the organized crime and state institutions, leading to a further destabilization of the country and collapse of its security" (Ljubas 2023).

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4 This has been documented in Afghanistan but is a feature of many contexts, where people affected by a war and struggling to survive and provide for their families have nowhere else to turn but illicit economies. Until the Taliban's prohibition of poppy cultivation in 2023, opium poppies provided an important source of income for rural populations whose livelihoods and market access had been destroyed by the war, amounting to nearly 29 percent of the country's entire agricultural sector. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated that poppy farmers lost 92 percent of their income with the ban, with only part being made up for by shifting to wheat, which brings in a fraction of the income of opium (UNODC 2023).

Corruption as a legacy of international responses to conflict

It is well established that the introduction of large amounts of aid into resource-scarce environments with weak institutions and limited absorptive capacity can seriously distort economies and increase corruption and organized crime (see von Billerbeck 2012; de Boer and Bosetti 2015; Fabra-Mata and Asseline de Williencourt 2024). As the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) has noted, "The United States contributed to the growth of corruption by injecting tens of billions of dollars into the Afghan economy, using flawed oversight and contracting practices, and partnering with malign powerbrokers" (SIGAR 2016, 71).

Less discussed are the possible corruption effects of different peacebuilding tools and approaches when they are implemented in a corruption-blind way. Two common strategies for addressing intergroup conflict—power sharing and decentralization—illustrate this danger.

Power sharing involves establishing structures that give excluded groups a voice in government—either on a transitional basis, as in Liberia, or more permanently, as in Lebanon. It is intended to end a conflict while addressing root causes around exclusion (Bell 2018; Cheng and Zaum 2008). However, emerging evidence, at least with respect to executive-level power sharing, suggests that it can also increase corruption, patronage, and clientelism (Haass and Ottmann 2017). This is not surprising. Consociational structures often reflect an (implicit) agreement among the conflict parties to "divvy up" access to state-controlled resources, so as to accumulate wealth and power themselves and reward their supporters with jobs, contracts, and funds in exchange for political loyalty—to the exclusion of other parties (Bell 2018; Haas and Ottman 2017). In transitional periods, moreover, parties' uncertainty about their power and access to resources in the future can provide additional incentives to take advantage of power-sharing structures. At the end of the Liberian civil war, for example, the transitional government, in which cabinet positions were divided among the three warring factions, provided a two-year window for ministers to extract whatever benefits they could from their positions (Cheng and Zaum 2012, 9). While this arrangement can facilitate stability in the short term by providing more of the pie to different elite leaderships, as discussed below, in the long term it often entrenches corruption and favoritism in governance and can undermine intergroup reconciliation.

Decentralizing power carries similar corruption risks. Kosovo provides a good example. Power was devolved to municipalities partly to ensure some autonomy for the Serb minority and induce their acceptance of Kosovar (majority-Albanian) institutions. As a result, opportunities

for rent seeking were shifted to the regions and prompted political parties and national elites to strengthen vertical patronage systems. This led to political party capture and control of municipal governments (Schultze-Kraft and Morina 2014).

Corruption can contribute to short-term peace but long-term instability

Peacebuilding actors are often reluctant to work on diminishing endemic corruption in the immediate aftermath of conflict, for fear that success could destabilize a delicate emerging peace and trigger violence or withdrawal from a peace agreement by key conflict parties who are benefitting from corruption (Cheng et al. 2018; Hopp-Nishanka et al. 2022). These fears are not unfounded. In the short term, corruption can be effective in "buying" peace, especially if it is inclusive, with benefits flowing across divided groups and/or shared with wider communities (Cheng and Zaum 2008 2012). As the former Kenyan anticorruption head John Githongo explains, although patronage and clientelism may be a bad way to govern, they can be a mechanism for preventing violence or helping key groups buy into a peace agreement (Githongo 2006).

Corruption may serve as a glue to hold conflict parties together, but this is not the same as building a stable peace. Buying peace can enable and incentivize other forms of violence. These include repression of civil society and media to suppress their anticorruption efforts or indeed any challenge to the elites' power, land-grabbing, use of armed units by government actors to protect illicit interests, and government facilitation of violence by guaranteeing impunity for drug traffickers or other groups in exchange for benefits (Cheng et al. 2018; de Waal et al. 2022). Indeed, in Guatemala, levels of violence in the early years after the war were higher than during the war due to alliances between police, the military, and criminals; citizens were subjected to violence both from the government and from further-empowered criminal groups (Cheng et al. 2018, 79).

Furthermore, stability based on rent sharing is challenging to sustain. To be successful, it requires increasing the resources that can be distributed—what de Waal calls a "bull political market." When those resources decrease—as, for example, when oil prices decrease or international assistance diminishes—relations can be destabilized as parties vie for a smaller pot of resources (de Waal et al. 2022). South Sudan's descent into violence after gaining independence from Sudan can be seen in this light. The governing SPLM/SPLA was a "conglomerate held together by a number of deals among the political-military elite" for access to state resources in return for support (de Waal 2017). When they decided to shut down oil production and go to war with Khartoum to gain a greater share of oil revenues, they triggered, in de Waal's words, "a collapse in the major sources of political finance, as a result of which the major political bargains dissolved" (de Waal 2017, 5).

In the longer term, buying peace by ignoring or deprioritizing corruption locks countries into a "negative peace," which is simply the absence of violent conflict, while hindering the emergence of a more inclusive and equitable "positive peace" in which the root causes of conflict are addressed.[5] By the time stability is achieved, the corruption may be so endemic that it becomes difficult to address without triggering resistance. Moreover, governance through patronage tends to delegitimize both the current government and the political system (Dix et al. 2012; Rose-Ackerman 2012; Cheng et al. 2018). It leaves root causes of conflict unaddressed and undermines the (re)building of trust needed for society to recover and develop after war (see Looney 2008). In other words, over the longer term, peace through patronage may sow the seeds for renewed conflict.

Shared opposition to elite corruption can potentially help citizens and civil society build bridges across conflict lines (Orjuela 2014) and create a force for reconciliation and positive peace in the longer term. In one city in Nepal, shared resentment of elite politicians' corruption facilitated reintegration of rank-and-file Maoist ex-combatants; community hostility toward them dissipated as people saw these former rebels living in equally precarious conditions, in contrast to the visible wealth of the rebel leadership (Jarvis 2020).[6] In Bosnia, similarly, rampant and endemic corruption motivated citizens to come together across conflict lines in widespread protests in 2014, nearly twenty years after the Dayton Accords (Lai 2020). Still, citizen solidarity across conflict lines to combat corruption is challenging; as the evolution of Bosnia's protests, and similar experiences in Kenya and Sri Lanka, show, elite resistance to citizen movements and efforts to demobilize them with partisan exhortations emphasizing conflict narratives and fears can be very powerful (Orjuela 2014; Lai 2020).

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5 Following Galtung (1969), the IEP (n.d.) defines positive peace as the "attitudes, institutions and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies." Cheng et al. (2018, 3) refer to a similar concept of "developmental peace" as the evolution from an elite bargain over the exercise of power to a political settlement that is more stable, equitable, and broadly inclusive of the population.

6 Jarvis (2020) also found that local political parties in Nepal made common cause and were able to cooperate due to common corruption-related grievances against the bureaucrats who had been imposed on them during the transitional period.

The corruption-conflict nexus: The ultimate Gordian knot

The relationship of corruption to conflict is neither simple nor one-directional. Corruption is a significant driver of conflict, exacerbating root causes. It serves as an important tool for parties waging war and is also a legacy of conflict that not only diminishes the quality of peace but also increases the likelihood of a return to violent conflict. Yet corruption can also bring about short-term stability. It not only facilitates buy-in (or at least tolerance) by key elite parties into governing arrangements but can also be a lifeline for marginalized and conflict-affected people who depend on corruption for survival.

This presents a dilemma for peacemakers: is it possible to have the short-term benefits of corruption in facilitating stability but avoid its long-term corrosive effects on positive peace and its potential to fuel future outbreaks of violence? For many researchers and practitioners, the answer is no. As Cheng and her colleagues argue, "All good things do not go together" (Cheng et al. 2018, 5); rather, there is a trade-off between promoting stability and addressing longer-term drivers of violence, poverty, and exclusion—including corruption. Immediate goals of stability may necessitate accepting corrupt practices—such as impunity for actors engaging in illicit diversion of private or state resources—as a necessary evil. The assumption in such cases is that once the situation is stabilized, it will be possible to turn attention to reforms to reduce corruption and promote good governance. The flaw in this approach is that it ignores the systemic nature of corruption in these contexts, which defies a sequential approach. By the time good governance becomes a priority, it may be too late, as corruption will have become resistant and adaptive to efforts to combat it.

Is there a way out? Is it possible to foster accountability and disrupt illicit economies without fueling violence? Anticorruption and peacebuilding approaches and tools have, to date, not been able to provide a comprehensive solution to this dilemma. Success will require developing approaches to ending armed conflict and building peace in the immediate postconflict period that can also lay the foundations for safeguards against corruption and state capture. If interventions to ameliorate one ill cannot be implemented without exacerbating the other, the prospect for moving beyond mere negative peace is poor: entrenchment of corruption can sustain and exacerbate root causes of conflict and stymie progress towards a more positive—that is, just and lasting—peace.

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