

Book Review

Power Sharing and International Mediation in Ethnic Conflicts
by Timothy D. Sisk
Washington DC: US Institute of Peace, 1996, pages: 144

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This study by Timothy Sisk, author of an earlier work *Islam and Democracy: Religion, Politics and Power in the Middle East*, was written in 1995 as the Taliban were coming to power in Afghanistan. The book is filled with good advice not taken then by the Taliban or their Pakistani advisors who had a “winner takes all” mentality. Perhaps it can now be re-read as the Taliban leave power. It is unclear, as the review is written at the end of October 2001, what type of power sharing between ethnic groups and ideological factions will be conducive to peace and development in Afghanistan. The immediate post-Soviet years (1989-1995) were filled with governmental instability and armed strife. As Sisk notes “High levels of violence do not inevitably mean that political leaders will be more moderate and adopt power sharing”.

The aim of Sisk’s study is not to develop a single model of conflict-regulating practices through power sharing but rather to present a menu of practices from which disputants, advisors or mediators can choose.

Basically, there are two poles of power sharing. At one end of the continuum is power sharing within the central government. This is usually done by sharing out ministries and other key posts (Central Bank, State-owned industries, etc.) taking into account ethnic, regional and party loyalties. Each minister has his fiefdom, and certain benefits (jobs, loans, roads, etc.) go to the constituency, which the minister represents. One can also find the same system at different levels of government: cities and regions as well as in the structure of the central government. One find this type of power sharing both in democratic states where representatives are elected and in autocratic governments where the political personnel are chosen taking into account ethnic-regional power bases.

The other pole of the continuum is power sharing through the decentralization of authority. In such a system, the make up of the central government is of less importance than the effective control of regions by local leadership. Again, this pole can be seen with a democratic system as well as an

autocratic one, feudal systems being the classic example of this type of decentralized power or the War Lords of China, in the 1920s and 1930s.

The “rules of the game” – that is how patterns of interaction are routinized – will be different according to where a government is situated on this continuum and how often the players can change. Power sharing requires restraints and a spirit of moderation. A “winner takes all” mentality or the permanent marginalization of some groups will quickly weaken such a system.

Power sharing is an attitude, when carried out through practices and institutions, it provides every significant group (which has an identity of self) with decision-making abilities on common issues and a degree of autonomy over issues of importance to the group. Thus power sharing needs to be a long-term, institution-building process carried out by people who have an interest in structuring the society in this way.

Power sharing among a coalition of victors in a conflict can be put together rather easily for these are usually coalitions of convenience. Such coalitions seldom last. For power sharing to work over time, the institutions and practices need to be embraced by a core group of leaders who are genuinely representative of the group they lead and who desire that such power sharing lasts.

In Afghanistan, in the recent past, such a core group of institution builders has been difficult to find. Thus, there remains the question; under what conditions, and in what manner can outside advisors promote power sharing as a means to prevent, manage or resolve violent ethnic and ideological conflicts? Sisk’s study provides a useful overview, with a good bibliography, of current social science thinking on power sharing approaches. It is not a guide for practicing politicians but for advisors who will need to “translate” these ideas into culturally acceptable forms.