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Representation, Citizenship and the Public Domain in Democratic Decentralization

by Jesse C. Ribot

Countries and agencies claiming to undertake or support democratic decentralization have transferred few public powers to existing and new democratic local governments. Instead, governments, international agencies and international NGOs are choosing to transfer powers to a wide array of other local institutions, empowering chiefs, headmen and other customary leaders, in some cases threatening democratic decentralization reform efforts.

Meanwhile, fledgling elected local authorities are frustrated by a lack of power while they must compete with other local institutions being recognized and empowered by central governments and international institutions. The result is a proliferation of local institutional forms with a fragmentation or diffusion of public powers among this new mix of local institutions.

What motivates governments and international agencies to make these local 'institutional choices' and what are the effects on local democracy of 'recognizing' this new mix of local institutions? I use the term 'choice' to attribute agency and therefore responsibility to government and international organizations for the decisions they make. Through their institutional choices, they are transforming the local institutional landscape. Understanding why the choices are being made helps us to link the effects of those choices back to policy. Understanding the effects helps us identify approaches most likely to strengthen local democracy while serving the needs of local people.

Researchers need to unpack the logic governments and international organizations use to choose their local interlocutors. A well-structured, elected local government may appear to be a

good choice for sustainably improving local public-sector accountability and service delivery. Still central governments, international development agencies and other organizations are transferring power to private bodies, customary authorities and NGOs—all in the name of democratic decentralization.

The effects of institutional choices on the emergence and consolidation of local democracy may differ from stated objectives or expected outcomes of governments and international organizations. Empirical data linking the institutional arrangements associated with different development approaches to social or ecological outcomes are scarce. Researchers need to fill this gap by examining the democracy and service effects of the ensemble of institutions being recognized in the local arena.

In current decentralizations, governments and international donors are largely choosing to avoid elected local government—which would in a democratic decentralization ostensibly be the appropriate site for democratic local inclusion—in favor of other institutional forms. This choice is critical in that it at once deprives local elected authorities of powers being transferred to the local arena, while empowering alternative or 'parallel' authorities or institutions. The elected local government is forced to compete and struggle with these other local institutions for the legitimacy that follows from the control of public decisions and service delivery.

Recognizing different institutional forms produces different kinds of belonging. In democracy, belonging is residency based. In private groups and NGOs, belonging is based on shared interests. In customary and religious institutions, belonging is often based on identity—such as ethnicity, place of origin, language or religion.

Fraser (p. 112)¹ argues that by reifying group identity, recognition obscures internal cultural differences and subordinates the 'struggles within the group for the authority—and the power—to represent it.' It subordinates individuals to the recognized cultural forms—encouraging 'repressive forms of communitarianism, promoting conformism, intolerance and patriarchalism' (Fraser, p. 112).

By examining the effects of choosing these different institutions in sectoral decentralizations (such as natural resource or health), researchers can test the propositions that support authorities, privileges and strengthen those authorities—whether their constituencies are residency, identity or interest based. Criteria are necessary to judge the likely human rights and material equity effects of choosing particular authorities. Fraser (p. 115) does so by proposing the ideal of 'participatory parity', by which all citizens and citizen groups, regardless of identity, must have equal opportunity to participate in democratic institutions.

The transfer of powers to non-representative institutions can reinforce forms of belonging and associated identities. It follows that retaining powers in the public domain—the public political space where citizens feel able and entitled to influence authorities—maintains and reinforces public belonging and identity. Conversely, privatizing public resources and powers to individuals, corporations, customary authorities or NGOs diminishes the public domain. Without public powers there is no space of democracy—there is no 'public domain' for citizens to engage in and belong to.

In decentralizations, distributing public powers among multiple interest and identity groups may enclose the public domain and fragment society into interest- and identity-based forms of belonging. The privatization of public powers to NGOs, customary authorities and other private bodies is a form of enclosure. When the authorities receiving these powers are customary or religious authorities, this enclosure constitutes a desecularization of powers. These acts diminish the domain of integrative public action, undermining residency-based belonging and citizenship. A public domain of powers and decisions that motivate people and society to engage with those who govern them is a necessary part of representation and of the production of citizenship. It is the space of integrative collective action that constitutes democracy. For decentralizations to produce benefits in equity, efficiency and democratization, retaining substantial public powers in the public domain is essential. (... .) The elected local government—though not exempt from needing multiple other accountability mechanisms—is the institution that should hold public powers in the local arena and with which citizens and all local institutions can interact to coordinate and improve public accountability and responsiveness.

¹ Fraser, Nancy. 2000. "Rethinking Recognition." *New Left Review* 3(3) May/June.

Jesse Ribot, Senior Associate at the WRI (World Resources Institute, Washington, DC., USA).

Staff Spotlight



Natalia Krieger

Natalia Krieger (Russia / Germany) joined BICC in January 2006 as part of BICC's database (LINK) project, where she evaluated the correspondence of 170 countries to a set of criteria based on the EU Code of Conduct for Arms Exports. She is now conducting research on resource conflicts and governance with a specific focus on the position of major international actors in this field. Due to her regional expertise of former Soviet Union and Eastern European countries Natalia has also been engaged in a number of projects related to this region, such as "Identifying Surplus Military Small Arms in Kazakhstan" or "Institutional Preconditions for Stability and Conflict Management in Russia". Besides the issues of conflict and security, her research interests include democratization and human rights, political and economic transition with respect to the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe as well as foreign and energy policy of the EU, Russia and the United States.

Natalia studied Political Science and Economics at the University of Cologne and at the High School of Economics in Prague. She was born and raised in Russia, but immigrated to Germany upon finishing Russian high school. Prior to this she was awarded a scholarship of the Freedom Support Act Programme and spent a high school year in the United States. Thanks to these experiences Natalia has developed a vivid interest in the issues of international and Eastern European politics and has been pursuing them ever since.

In her spare time, Natalia enjoys traveling, learning languages and swimming. Her fascination for Eastern Europe has a great impact on her choice of recreational activities, too. She loves reading contemporary Russian literature and attending Eastern European cultural events.

→ For further information please contact Natalia Krieger at krieger@bicc.de

Friedensgutachten 2007

On 13 and 14 June, the Annual State-of-Peace Report (*Friedensgutachten*) was presented to the Bundestag Committees of Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Economic Cooperation as well as in the *Bundespressekonferenz*, which was attended by 31 national and international journalists. Minister Wieczorek-Zeul personally took a copy signed by the editors.

The *Friedensgutachten* was also presented during a public panel discussion with the chair of the Bundestag's Foreign Affairs Committee, Mr. Polenz/CDU, in the "Urania", Berlin.

The annual *Friedensgutachten* is a joined publication of the five major German peace research institutions and is funded by the *Deutsche Stiftung Friedensforschung* (DSF). This year's edition focuses on "Military operations under close scrutiny". In respect to the German *Bundeswehr* the editors emphasize: "Last year, we criticized the discrepancy between what our armed forces are now allowed to do and what we actually know about. Unfortunately, this criticism still applies. The White Paper does not close the gap between constantly changing operations with varying mandates and the clear precepts of a democracy. What is actually meant by an "army in action" and what such an army should or should not be allowed to do often remains unclear. At least the White Paper calls for a more thorough public discussion of the new role of the *Bundeswehr*. We are taking up this demand in our focus. It is intolerable that *Bundeswehr* soldiers should risk their lives in countries all over the world without knowing exactly why. All too often, politicians seem to be deploying them according to the old motto: *On s'engage et puis on voit.*"

→ English summaries of the report may be visited at www.bicc.de/friedensgutachten/2007/fga_2007_summaries.pdf

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An der Elisabethkirche 25, 53113 Bonn, Germany.

Responsible for this issue: Susanne Heinke, Heike Webb (editing), Svenja Bends (layout and publishing management).

Phone: +49-228-911960
Fax: +49-228-241215
E-mail: bicc@bicc.de
Internet: www.bicc.de

Perspectives of the German arms industry

BICC conducted a two-year study, supported by the Hans-Böckler-Foundation, on European perspectives of the—technologically—leading German industry for land systems and the difficulties of a restructuring of this high-technology sector. The study is mainly based on numerous discussions and interviews with experts in enterprises, institutes and the policy arena.

As a reaction to the change in the security policy situation and the demands with regard to the new skills of the *Bundeswehr*, industrial enterprises are forced to adapt their skills through new architectures, modified components and new software and to put more emphasis on modular construction. The ability to develop concepts, processes, organizations and technologies in parallel, and the ability to find spontaneous technical solutions is what is needed today. Enterprises have to decide which abilities, which skills they want to maintain or develop in the future. Privately owned companies, however, can only do justice to such pressures if their operational business is running steadily.

Resulting from the German leadership in the technology of land systems the Federal Republic of Germany virtually has the European responsibility to take over the leadership in restructuring this sector. However, this should be based on the decade-long experience that one-sided sacrifices on the European altar do not pay off, as is shown by many instances of cooperation, where Germany has already lost a lot of money, technology and jobs. There must not be any advances in favor of a '*patriotism économique*' of other governments. In the end, the Federal government will not be able to do otherwise but appropriately define and assert its national interest in the western European consolidation process of this strategic sector. Should this not be possible, one would have to critically verify the fixation on western European cooperation projects and look for alternatives in and beyond Europe.

The German land systems industry can only become a sought-after cooperation partner and nucleus of international restructuring if its competitive strengths are kept and if it forms a 'Lead System Integrator'. The study suggests an active cluster policy with a dovetailing of industry, research and politics that goes beyond a mere concentration of industrial capabilities.

→ For further information please contact Hartmut KÜchle at kuechle@bicc.de

New BICC Publications

BICC. 2007. *Annual Report*. May

Brief 35:

Christine Beeck. 2007. *Re-paving the Road to Peace*. July.

Paes, Wolf-Christian and Jolien Schure. 2007. "Armer reicher Kontinent. Konfliktressourcen in Afrika." *BICC Brochure*. June.

BICC Focus 5:

Eva Niepagenkemper. 2007. *Zwischen Förderung von Stabilität, Menschenrechten und langfristigen Wirtschaftsinteressen. Wo steht die Zentralasienstrategie der EU?* Juni.

NEW:

A CD with a selection of recent BICC publications is now available. If you are interested please contact pr@bicc.de

BICC Notes

On 24 July, the photo exhibition "Diamond Matters" will be opened in the Wissenschaftszentrum Bonn, Ahrstr, 45, 53175 Bonn. On 102 black and white photographs the famous photographer Kadir van Lohuizen is reflecting the diamonds' way from the mines in Africa to the jet-set in London and New York. The exhibition is supported by the campaign "Fatal Transactions" and NIZA (Netherlands Institute for Southern Africa). It will be accompanied by various events to inform the public, such as a panel discussion on 8 August with representatives of "Fatal Transactions"/BICC as well as of the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme, Brussels, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development) and of the diamond industry (to be confirmed). On 13 August, there will be a presentation of the documentary "Africa—War is business".

→ Further information at pr@bicc.de or www.fataltransactions.de

Peter Croll will participate in the International NATO Advanced Research Workshop "Lessons Learned from Non-Proliferation Failures and Successes" on 28/29 June in Moscow and will give a talk in the session "Evolution in Interaction on Nuclear Affairs between Iran and External Actors". The workshop is organized by the Hudson Institute (USA), the Center for Political and International Studies (Russia), the Federation for Peace and Conciliation, Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs and the Russian Political Science Association.

→ For further information please contact Peter J. Croll at croll@bicc.de

On 19 June Dr. Detlev Wolter presented his book "A United Nations for the 21st Century: From Reaction to Prevention" at BICC. Detlev Wolter, former Political Counselor at the German Mission to the United Nations in New York and currently Head of European Policy and Law Division, State Chancellery, Brandenburg, has written a superb overview of the UN's transition from reaction to prevention. He covers fundamental problems and the best ways in which the UN can deal with them preventively.

→ For further information please contact Peter J. Croll at croll@bicc.de

On 16 June the German Platform for Peaceful Conflict Management together with BICC organized the study day "The Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Afghanistan—Successes, failures and lessons learned in civil-military cooperation". Experts discussed the German engagement in PRTs in Afghanistan in the field of peace consolidation, security and stabilization, reconstruction and institution-building.

→ For further information please contact Diana Burghardt at burghardt@bicc.de

Visitors of the Protestant Church Day, which took place from 6–10 June 2007 in Cologne, Germany, were very much interested in the action- and information stand of the Alliance: Resources for a Juster World, entitled "In the Shadow of the Oil Rigg—Natural Resources for a Juster World". BICC was part of this alliance and supported the Church Day with its own brochures and flyers as well as presentations (movie: Africa—War is Business) and members of staff. The German daily newspaper *taz* printed a 4-page special supplement on this topic on 5 June. Peter Croll spoke at an event in the framework of the 'Workshop Africa' at the Church Day.

→ Further information at pr@bicc.de or www.bicc.de/publications/misc/taz_beilage/taz_beilage.pdf www.kirchentag.net

Peter Croll chaired the panel "DD&R and Security in BiH: Lessons of the Past and Remaining Challenges" at the expert seminar "EU Contribution to Disarmament, Demobilization & Reintegration (DD&R): A Look at Bosnia and Herzegovina" in Berlin on 6 June, organized by the German Foreign Ministry, EU and the Institute for European Politics (IEP).

→ For further information please contact Peter J. Croll at croll@bicc.de

BICC has seconded its expert Willem Jaspers to the Kimberley Process office of the European Commission in Brussels. Mr. Jaspers will support the development of the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme (KPCS).

→ For further information please contact Willem Jaspers at jaspers@bicc.de