Chapter 3: The Politics of Mediation in Fragile Democracies: Building New Social Contracts through, and for, Democratic Citizenship in Angola

Bettina von Lieres

Introduction

It has become widely accepted that the institutions of liberal democracy have a significant, but inadequate role to play in building inclusive societies in the global South (Gaventa 2006). While acknowledging the importance of the pluralist politics it proposes, many commentators argue that liberal democracy offers ineffective and weak forms of political representation for marginalized communities. Excluded groups frequently fail to access crucial state resources through liberal democracy’s institutional and party-political processes. They often do not have the capacity to represent themselves in the formal corridors of liberal democracy and the institutions of liberal democracy, in turn, do not have the flexibility to accommodate the highly informal political practices of marginalised and unorganized people (Chatterjee 2004). As a result, for many marginalised people in the global South, the liberal state is disconnected from their everyday lives and appears to function ‘as much as an absence as a presence’ (Corbridge et al 2005: 20).

In recent years there has been a renewed focus on decentralised, participatory forms of governance as mechanisms for overcoming liberal democracy’s failure to accommodate marginalised people. In many parts of the global South participatory governance is seen to offer solutions to the complexities of building democracy in contexts with high levels of poverty by providing decentralized and accessible institutional mechanisms for including marginalized communities in decision-making on, for example, municipal budgets and health policy. Recent studies from Brazil have highlighted successes in poverty reduction and political inclusion as a result of participatory governance (Baiocchi 2001; Baiocchi et al 2011). However, while there is a growing consensus on the importance of participatory governance and democracy for marginalized communities’ access to state resources, there are surprisingly few systematic studies that examine the specific democratic outcomes of participatory governance across different contexts in the global South. Most studies focus on middle-income countries such as Brazil and India that have long histories of participatory governance and well-publicised pro-poor outcomes as a result of their states’ willingness to lead participatory governance experiments (Avritzer 2010, Baiocchi et al 2011).

Relatively little has been written about the relationship between participatory governance and pro-poor outcomes in fragile political contexts, i.e. societies with centralised states, widespread elite capture of state institutions, unresponsive local authorities and weak social contracts. The few studies that do look across diverse political contexts and different regimes types and include fragile contexts, have shown that decentralised forms of participatory governance do not necessary lead to deeper
forms of democracy, more responsive states or pro-poor outcomes. For example, Crook and Sverrison (2005: 254) argue that there is little evidence of any necessary link between decentralised participatory governance and the development of pro-poor or poverty-alleviating outcomes in most political contexts. Arguing that the key variables accounting for pro-poor outcomes are the ‘politics of local-central relations’, they show how elite capture of local decentralised participatory institutions is a key obstacle to pro-poor outcomes. They further argue that citizen empowerment and policy responsiveness do not automatically flow from increasing levels of citizen participation nor from increasing the representation of the poor and marginalised. They highlight the importance of political factors such as adequate central state capacity in order to monitor local government performance, effective mechanisms for public and institutional accountability, the emergence of a pro-poor coalition within the ruling party and local forms of representation that are supported externally in the context of a conflict between local and central forces with different power bases (Crook and Sverrison 2005: 254).

Crook and Sverrison rightly highlight the importance of key enabling factors such as state support for localised participatory institutions in creating the conditions for pro-poor outcomes. To their list, and with specific reference to fragile contexts in which states do not necessarily support participatory governance interventions, this chapter argues for taking seriously the specificities of the politics of representation, in particular the dynamics of ‘mediation’, i.e. third-party representation of citizens to states, as an important factor in building citizen empowerment for pro-poor gains. The focus in this chapter is on Angola, a political context with widespread elite capture of state institutions and forms of state power unconstrained by expectations of reciprocity between citizens and states. The lack of state responsiveness to citizens means that the Angolan state in effect not only negates the validity of marginalized groups’ claims, whether rights-based or oriented at social services, but it also frequently acts in ways that actually weaken institutional possibilities for citizen empowerment. In this chapter I argue that emerging forms of ‘civic-educative’ mediation play an important, if underestimated, role in enhancing marginalized groups’ claim-making capacities. While these in and of themselves do not necessarily lead to greater state responsiveness, they play a role in empowering marginalised communities to demand that the state recognizes the legitimacy of their demands. In this sense, then, forms of civic-educative mediation contribute to deeper forms of citizen empowerment.

In what follows I first discuss and describe state-society relations in Angola. Then I examine the dynamics and outcomes of selective cases of civic-educative mediation in Angola. In the final section I argue that in fragile contexts like Angola civic-educative forms of mediation can enhance marginalised groups’ capacities for self-representation and, with it, built more conducive political conditions for greater state responsiveness to the demands of excluded groups. In Angola it is the practices of mediated citizenship and not the institutions of liberal democracy that most significantly shape the contours of democratic politics.
Angola: state-civil society relations

Angola became independent from the Portuguese in 1975 and immediately entered a civil war for twenty-seven years from 1975 to 2002. During the civil war much of the country’s state infrastructure, including agriculture and rudimentary health and education services were destroyed. Entire rural populations fled the insecurity of the war in the countryside which led to rapid and unplanned urban growth. About half of all Angolans, approximately seven million people, were displaced from rural peripheries into cities and towns. Today at least a third of Angola’s population is marginalized and lives in slum settlements in urban areas. Since 2002 the state has attempted to consolidate its hegemony through territorial occupation, the cooptation of local elites and the subjection of the majority (de Oliveira 2013). De Oliveira argues that rather than creating a service-delivery state, the ruling party MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) has been concerned to consolidate itself in areas of the opposition party, UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) support, and that the ruling party’s emphasis on political order, authority and legitimacy based on the war victory has left little room for responsive relations with society and its citizens (de Oliveira 2013). Multi-party elections held in 2008 did not in any significant way weaken state centralization and the dominant position of the ruling party, which has extended its control over many areas of Angolan society, including civil society.

Since 2002 Angola has had a substantial economic growth rate, largely fuelled by oil resources. Today Angola has one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, its GDP increasing from US$ 11.4 billion in 2000 to US$ 100.9 billion in 2011 (World Bank 2013). The Angolan economy is built on oil extraction, which accounts for over 95 per cent of export revenues and over 75 per cent of government revenues. With current oil reserves anticipated to peak in 2015 and the possible exploitation of new deep-sea oil deposits, economic growth is likely to continue (World Bank 2013). Poverty, however, remains high. According to the UNDP, 36 per cent of the population is living below the poverty line and 26 per cent in extreme poverty (UNDP 2013a). While the country’s human development and social indicators show significant improvements since 1992, they are still low: primary school enrolment (54%), life expectancy (41.7 years), maternal mortality (1.700 per 100,000) and infant mortality rates (134 per 1000). Access to improved sanitation and water sources stand at 31% and 53% respectively, and 35% of the population is undernourished (UNDP 2013b: 2).

In recent years the state has attempted various forms of urban and rural state decentralization in order to build the institutions of local government, but it has yet to show evidence of meaningful decentralisation. De Oliveira shows that since 2002 only 20% of local government civil servants were in local municipalities or communes. The rest were in provincial headquarters. After a series of failed attempts at decentralised financing, by 2010 Angola had returned to direct expenditure by the central government.
Traditional authorities are powerless, there is no medium-term prospect of municipal elections, and the Conselhos de Auscultação e Concertação Social (CACS), the consultative organs for engagement with ‘social forces’, are either transparent MPLA vehicles or peripheral for decision-making. De Oliveira argues that the ruling party is postponing decentralisation because it does not want to provide political rivals with locally legitimate platforms. Real power lies within the party apparatus and decentralisation is a strategy of administrative occupation designed to extend the state apparatus, and to increase the size and support of the party. It is not intended to put into place a meaningful state-citizen social contract (De Oliveira 2013: 176-177).

Conversely, institutional hurdles for civil society organisations (CSOs), such as legal accreditation, are still very high and keep them uncertain about their legal status and the activities they are allowed to carry out (Schubert 2010: 663). Most civil society organisations focus on civic education, humanitarian assistance and basic service provision. The majority work closely with government agencies and avoid overtly political challenges to the state in this highly charged context. Nevertheless, despite the challenges, there is growing NGO-initiated citizen engagement in both urban and rural areas demanding improved public service provision. In marginalised urban areas some development NGOs have begun to build communal networks focusing on conflict resolution and citizen control over water services (Development Workshop 2009). In rural areas NGOs, have begun to facilitate the development of local associations, such as neighbourhood committees, to resolve disputes and manage infrastructure needs (Ferreira and Roque 2010). Despite a marked lack of service provision by the state, spontaneous social protests are infrequent and are often quelled immediately and with force by the Angolan army. Recent exceptions include protests over the violence used by police in forced removals in some neighbourhoods in Luanda (Human Rights Watch 2013). State responsiveness to organised popular citizen action is rare.

The absence of effective, accessible local and municipal public institutions connecting state and society, considerably weaken the impact citizens have on state power. As Shubert argues, ‘thirty years of war have taught Angolans to find individual solutions to collective problems. Especially outside the cities, the relationship between state and population is very weak; there is little to no sense of mutual responsibility and no link of reciprocity between these two spheres, which seem completely disconnected. There is little recognition of the obligations of the state in terms of service delivery and infrastructure. Knowledge of the functions of a democratic system and of rights of political participation is limited’ (Schubert 2010: 671). Citizen agency is weakened primarily by fragile or non-existent political institutions, but in part too by the absence of effective practices of communal solidarity and associationalism amongst marginalised people. In a study of communal solidarity in the urban musseques of Luanda, Roque and Robson (2001) found that the social heterogeneity, brought about by widespread displacement, has had negative consequences for the density and extension of social solidarity networks. Where solidarity and communal networks exist, they are largely organized around churches that are apolitical.
In Angola civil society is marked by the frequent absence of even minimal and tacit recognition by the state of the validity of marginalized groups’ claims. In this sense it differs from the kind of political society described by Chatterjee (2004). Chatterjee argues that in many contexts of the global South marginalized groups often do not engage political authorities on the terrain of civil society (with its universalised rights of citizenship and social contract relations), but instead they do so on the terrain of ‘political society’. In ‘political society’ marginalised communities are not regarded as citizens, but only as populations and as ‘targets’ of governmental policy (Chatterjee 2011: 223). Dealing with these groups, however, does force states tacitly to acknowledge their claims and practices. As a result governments often treat these groups and their demands as exceptions, which while denying their status as legitimate legal citizens, does acknowledge the moral force behind the claims by marginalised groups. While the claims of people in political society are never secure and are a matter of constant political negotiation, they nonetheless force states into relations of political reciprocity and informal social contracts which are defined and reinforced by ongoing practices of strategic manouevre, resistance, and negotiation between marginalized groups and political authorities.

This is not the case in Angola’s civil society where the state frequently does not recognize the claims of marginalized communities, not even in an instrumental way. This politics of deep non-recognition renders it crucial that marginalized communities in Angola develop their direct strategic capacity to demand and negotiate relations of responsiveness (albeit often only informal ones) to force the state to acknowledge, even tacitly, the legitimacy of their claims. In the next section I argue that mediation, specifically ‘civic-educative’ mediation in the form of civic education, represents a crucial set of interlocutory political practices which can enhance marginalized communities’ self-organisation capacities, i.e. for claim-making and engagement with state power. I show how mediating organizations in Angola have had small, but important successes in strengthening the capacity of marginalized groups for self-representation, and with it, the capacity to engage public authorities to demand rights and wider democratic social contracts. I argue that enhanced, ‘mediated’ capacities for self-organisation, empowerment and self-representation are critical democratic outcomes if we understand the terrain of political society in fragile states like Angola as one in which the state does not recognize (even tacitly) the validity of marginalised groups’ claims to political rights and economic resources. The practices of ‘mediated citizenship’ embody significant, albeit also limited, democratic possibilities for the emergence of a reciprocal social contract between state and society in Angola.

**Civic-Educative Educative Mediation in Angola**

Gaventa and Barrett’s recent multi-case study overview of 150 cases of citizen engagement in the global South (Gaventa and Barrett 2010) examines the potential of participatory democracy for overcoming marginalization in both stronger and fragile
democracies. Gaventa and Barrett discuss diverse cases of citizen engagement across political contexts that vary significantly in terms of constitutional and legal frameworks, state capacities and histories of citizen mobilization. They argue that in political contexts where there is a longer history of civil society-state relations, as in South Africa, India and Brazil, and where social movements play a key role in mobilising marginalized citizens, there is a better chance of larger-scale democratic gains – such as greater state responsiveness to marginalised communities’ mobilizations and demands, the implementation of new national pro-citizen agendas and sustained access to economic resources, rights and accountable institutions.

In fragile states, like Angola and Bangladesh, with long histories of state authoritarianism and unreciprocal state-society relations, the most significant outcomes of citizen engagement are associated with the smaller-scale civic-educative outcomes, which Gaventa and Barrett refer to as the ‘construction of citizenship’, e.g. increased knowledge of rights and the deepening of horizontal solidarity networks. The majority of cases discussed by Gaventa and Barrett examine marginalised groups that rely on mediators or interlocutors to trigger their actions and strategies. The mediating actors involved in these forms of mobilization are both urban and rural, and include non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs), local associations and social movements. Gaventa and Barrett draw our attention to the importance of mediators and outcomes associated with civic education in shaping marginalized groups’ capacities for claiming rights and with it democratic citizenship and state accountability.

In response to ongoing state attempts to limit civil society mobilisation and opposition, Angolan civil society organisations have largely focused their activities on civic education aimed at engaging marginalised communities at the local level. During the 2009 elections, and in a context of tight government control over election-related political activity, for example, ADRA (the Association for Rural and Environmental Development) Angola’s largest development NGO, carried out electoral education activities that included the promotion of electoral registration with the consent of the authorities. Prior to the 2008 elections NGOs had not been permitted to operate in rural areas (Schubert 2010). These civic education programs led to greater contact and trust-building with local rural communities. There is also evidence that NGO programmes resulted in communities’ enhanced understanding of their rights and greater capacity identify and seek solutions for local concerns. For example, Shubert shows how in rural villages where ADRA conducted its 2008 election education programs, the NGO facilitated wider consultation processes in which community members begun identifying service and infrastructure problems, such as faulty water pumps and inadequate transport, schooling and health services, and discussing ways of overcoming these service deficits (Shubert 2010).

In 2011 the Angolan NGO Development Workshop (DW) implemented an infrastructure program in the informal neighbourhoods of Luanda. By installing residents’
management committees made up of men and women equally, the program is widely seen to have contributed towards civic empowerment and self-management of conflict within communities (Schubert 2010: 668). Besides improving access to water, DW’s mode of ‘empowerment’ mediation is seen to have promoted ‘a culture of engagement and participation’ at a very local level, and a greater willingness by marginalised communities to demand that the local government administration consult these committees before making decisions (Schubert 2010:668). By engaging with and listening to communities’ grievances, DW’s work in Luanda is seen widely to have opened up expectations of participation in reciprocal public spaces with political authorities.

In a recent insightful and telling case study of citizen engagement in rural Angola, researched and published as part of the Development Research Centre for Citizenship, Participation and Accountability’s (DRC) network of researchers focusing on global forms of citizen participation, Ferreira and Roque (2011) describe how they worked with a federation of fifteen local associations in the community of Dombe Grande, a small town near Benguela, a provincial capital in western Angola. This network of local community organizations, *Nucleo Representativo das Associaoes do Dombe Grande*, the Federation of Representative Associations of Dombe Grande (NRA), was made up of fifteen local civic associations, the majority of which represented small-scale farmers and focused on offering civic education to local community members.

Ferreira and Roque identify multiple practices of mediation within the federation. The network of associations initiated by ADRA, the NRA, mediated between its member associations and the municipal government. It also provided services for its member organizations, such as technical training, advice on constitutions, engagement with donors, access to technical expertise and the monitoring of the associations’ credit activity. Central to its mediating efforts, however, were attempts to build members’ capacities for participation through strengthening connections between local participating associations themselves and between local community organizations and local state officials. The mediating actor, the NRA, thus, played an educative- and network-building mediating role, strengthening networks between local associations, mediating their connections with public authorities and at times co-ordinating collective action (Ferreira and Roque 2010). The NRA also mediated between member associations and international NGOs and development agencies.

In assessing the outcomes of the NRA’s mediations, Roque and Ferreira argue that the case shows how associations have played a key role in fostering a greater knowledge of rights and in building up their members’ confidence and capacity to participate politically. They report that increases in the membership of associations in Angola resulted not only in material improvements in the livelihood of association members brought about by credit schemes, but as well an increased sense of citizenship, self-esteem and capacity to intervene in public life. Roque and Ferreira argue that the case shows how, in the context of fragile democratic institutions and strongly centralized
states, mediating NGOs and the associational networks they spawn can make a difference in fostering civic virtues, in teaching political skills, in nurturing a growing ability and willingness on the part of grassroots leaders to check abuses of power at the local level and in empowering small-scale farmers associations to protect the livelihoods of their members. The NRA and affiliates report greater access to funding, deeper relations between associations and ordinary citizens, and greater economic and political empowerment of farmer associations (Ferreira and Roque 2010: 92-94).

Roque and Ferreira argue that while the existence of networks of local associations does not, in itself, lead to more democratic relations between state and civil society, their everyday practices and deliberate programmatic interventions can and do contribute to shaping active citizenship and with it, possibilities for democratic state-society relations (Ferreira and Roque 2010: 92-94). It must be noted, however, that despite these positive civic educative and network-building outcomes, Roque and Ferreira caution against over-stating the efficacy of local associational mobilization in Angola to foster a more robust engagement between marginalised groups and public authorities. While channels of communication with the local state have been opened and there has been some success in promoting dialogue between communities and local government, the interactions seem to have had a very limited impact on state responsiveness to citizens’ demands. Most of the gains remain localized, restricted to enhanced civic empowerment, and do not yet include a deeper reciprocal culture of state-society engagement.

The Politics of Civic-Educative Mediation

In fragile contexts like Angola, which is characterised by a deep disconnect between state and civil society and weak institutions of democratic citizenship, mediating actors often engage in ‘civic educative’ modes of mediation, aimed at empowering marginalised groups to represent themselves in claiming rights. The emergence of mediating civil society organisations that focus on civic agency challenges the assumption that marginalised communities will necessarily benefit from multi-party elections or from policies that promote decentralisation without access to mediation, facilitation and empowerment. The Angolan cases demonstrate that civic educative mediating practices can trigger important democratic outcomes related to civic agency, strengthening of practices of participation and building associational networks (Gaventa and Barrett 2010). In particular, they often trigger non-instrumental outcomes such a strengthened sense of citizenship and greater political awareness of rights and agency. Many theories of democracy discuss the importance of an empowered citizenry who can actively participate in democratic life, hold the state to account and exercise their rights and responsibilities effectively (Michels 2011). Learning these skills involves the development of citizens as actors, capable of claiming rights and acting for themselves. In this sense, then, mediating practices contribute to democratic life by empowering citizens to demand visibility in the eyes of the state and with it, reciprocal, if informal public engagements.
At the same time we need to be aware of the limitations of civic-educative mediation in fragile settings. In Chatterjee’s ‘political society’ a marginalised community’s place in political society is dependent on its ability to operate within the field of strategic politics. They have to ‘pick their way through a terrain where they have no standing as citizens; rather their strategies must exploit, on the one hand, the political obligation governments have of looking after poor and underprivileged sections of the population and, on the other, the moral rhetoric of a community striving to build a decent social life under extremely harsh conditions’ (Chatterjee 2011: 205). In order to achieve their demands, then, marginalised communities have to build their capacity for effective self-representation and win state recognition for reciprocal engagement with the poor.

In Angola, marginalised groups are required to emerge as active political agents in a largely non-existent terrain of strategic politics. It is the terrain itself that has to be constructed. To participate in the construction of the social contract and a terrain of engagement, however, requires more than civic-educative mediation. It involves building capacities for political participation that actively engage state power and demand reciprocity. This is easier achieved in contexts with functioning middle-level institutions that mediate the relation between state and society, and, as such, provide a strategic institutional terrain for state-society engagement. In Angola, the relative absence of political institutions means that marginalised groups have fewer intermediary political spaces in which to engage the state. It is one thing to develop greater capacities for claim-making and self-representation, but it is quite another to co-construct new terrains of engagement and social contracts which force states to become more responsive and accountable. It is clear that empowering marginalised citizens will not automatically translate into state responsiveness. For this to be achieved, further forms of engagement will be required.

References


