

Securing Peace in Angola and Mozambique

by Miranda Melcher, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024, pp. 172 + notes + bibliography + index, £85.50 (hbk), ISBN 9781350407930

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BOOK REVIEW

Securing Peace in Angola and Mozambique, by Miranda Melcher, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024, pp. 172 + notes + bibliography + index, £85.50 (hbk), ISBN 9781350407930

Have you ever brushed your teeth and thought about the relevance of oral hygiene to peace negotiations? Probably not. But in this comprehensive account of peace processes in Angola and Mozambique, Miranda Melcher centres the importance of intangible factors such as human dignity, interpersonal relationships, and yes, toothbrushes, alongside treaty specificity and technical process design, as key ingredients for warring parties to move from conflict to peace. It is this combination of factors, drawing from rich archival and interview source material, which elevates Melcher's account from a historical comparison to something that fundamentally challenges anyone engaging in contemporary peace process research or practice. This challenge is particularly important at a moment where the field of international mediation is widely accepted to be in a state of crisis.

Melcher's argument is that it doesn't just matter *what* issues are included in peace agreements, but *how* the agreement texts refer to these issues: 'that for negotiations to produce treaties that can be successfully implemented, the negotiations and treaty terms must be specific' (p. 5). Melcher links these peace agreement provisions to the ecosystem of negotiations that they result from, through to the implementation processes and post-conflict institutions that they are aiming to create. The book leads us chronologically and comparatively through the civil wars in Angola and Mozambique that occurred concurrently – but which progressed differently and ultimately with divergent outcomes – through detailed accounts of the negotiations, agreement texts, and implementation of security sector reform.

The selection of Angola and Mozambique as comparative case studies, and the decision to reflect on both throughout the book, means that the reader is consistently invited to understand how varied approaches to process design and agreement drafting impacted Mozambique's ability to reach and implement a peace agreement relatively successfully, whilst Angola embarked on multiple rounds of negotiations and agreements only to repeatedly fall back into conflict. I say 'fall': Melcher's skill is to coherently demonstrate in remarkable depth that parties don't just 'fall' back into conflict, and peace processes don't just 'fail', but instead that these outcomes result from combinations of sometimes very small, yet important, decisions and details.

For example, the toothbrushes. Melcher's source material opens up the often-closed space of peace negotiations to reveal that an important ingredient of the Rome negotiations between the ruling Frente de Libertação de Moçambique

(FRELIMO) and Resistência Nacional Moçambicana (RENAMO) was the provision of suits, shoes, and eyeglasses to individuals who had been fighting an insurgency campaign in the bush for decades (pp. 42–43). This material support from the Italian government and the religious community of Sain't Edigio was intended to level the negotiating field between both sides, enabling RENAMO delegates to enter the talks with a sense of dignity and, according to Melcher's interviewees, boosted the confidence of RENAMO in their ability to participate as equals. Later, during the process of demobilizing RENAMO fighters, the United Nations Operation in Mozambique (ONUMOZ) convinced Colgate to donate around 50,000 oral hygiene packs for new arrivals in the camps (p. 57). Some of Melcher's interviewees suggest that this basic provision, along with soap, shoes, underwear, and other elements of improving camp conditions, was a key factor in attracting demobilizing fighters to stay in the camps (pp. 57–58), thereby also increasing the chances of peace agreement implementation.

There are limits, however, to the applicability of lessons learned from Angola and Mozambique. Melcher is open about this, and presents the findings responsibly. Both conflicts, and negotiations, were primarily conducted between two main conflict parties, eventually in the positions of a recognized government and a rebel group insurgency (even if the conflict in Angola included multiple armed groups in earlier phases). Each involved complex relationships between the main conflict parties and regional and international players, including states (the United States, Zambia), intergovernmental (the United Nations), and non-state actors (Sain't Edigio, De Beers), which influenced the negotiations in both countries. However, ultimately there were fewer parties to bring to the table than is often the case in contemporary armed conflicts. So, whilst some findings from this book may help us to think about the recent war (primarily) conducted between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front, for example, they may be less comparable to the complex conflicts in Yemen, Myanmar, and Syria, that involve a proliferation of armed actors, multiplying the interests, capabilities, and personalities involved.


That being said, some of the themes that Melcher centres in this book are acutely relevant to the conflict landscape of today. The inability of mediators and interested external actors to learn from the failures of the Bicesse and Lusaka negotiations for Angola follows the reader throughout the book and rings painfully true in spite of the now-enhanced capacities of the international community to access comparative knowledge, which, as Melcher points out, was not as available to mediators in the 1990s. It should be a basic premise of mediation efforts to treat participants with dignity, respect, and on equal footing; yet, from this reviewer's experience, this premise is still not always guaranteed. And, as climate breakdown continues to accelerate, the impact of flooding and food scarcity on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration processes will only become more important to think about: another repeated failure in both Angola and Mozambique.

The story that Melcher tells will be interesting to scholars, activists and students with wide-ranging interests such as peace processes, peace agreements, mediation, security sector reform, UN peacekeeping, Southern African history,

to name a few. A section on the role of natural resources (oil and diamonds) in both prolonging conflict and bringing parties to the negotiating table (pp. 114–121), and another on corporate sponsorship of demobilization essentials such as toothpaste, raises the increasingly relevant question of how capitalism impacts peace processes. Although not specifically identified as gendered analysis, some detail in the book raises issues that arise when peace processes do not include a gender perspective (such as failing to anticipate and provide for the families and dependents of demobilized combatants). Ultimately, this book tells a compelling and convincing story about how peace processes happen, how they progress, and how any resultant agreements stick.

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