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Bad Idea: Brokering National Unity Governments in Fragile States

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Over the last decade, the United States has helped broker the formation of national unity governments in conflict-ridden states including Afghanistan, [Iraq](#), Libya, Yemen, South Sudan, and elsewhere. These power-sharing arrangements, however, have rarely panned out the way Washington has hoped. Instead of opponents setting aside their differences for the greater good, political rivalries are carried into the new government. Dysfunction ensues. Internal divisions deepen. For the United States, already weak partner governments become even weaker and less capable of standing on their own. National unity governments have a poor track record of success and carry serious downsides that policymakers often overlook. Nevertheless, they have assumed a place at the top of Washington's playbook for staving off crises and consolidating democracy in fragile states. Just last month, the Trump administration called for a national unity government in [Kenya](#) to resolve its post-election standoff. This is a bad idea that needs to be reexamined.

Perhaps the most obvious drawback of national unity governments is that they weaken the function and effectiveness of governments by introducing veto players within the executive. Even routine decisions can devolve into a Machiavellian game of chess among fierce rivals. Addressing critical national priorities quickly takes a back seat to infighting and settling scores. Consider the case of Afghanistan. In 2014, the United States [brokered](#) a controversial deal to form a national unity government to resolve the contested presidential election between rivals Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah. The arrangement sputtered from the start as Ghani and Abdullah disagreed on just about everything. [Seven months](#) passed before they could put forward a cabinet, and a year lapsed without a defense minister. The timing could not have been worse. U.S. forces were ending their combat role and transitioning security responsibilities to Afghan forces. Somewhat predictably, security conditions across the country took a nose-dive as the divided government in Kabul muddled through the security transition. Over the past three years, the Taliban have inflicted high casualties on Afghan forces and seized large portions of the countryside. Hard-fought gains made by U.S. and allied

troops were reversed. While numerous factors contributed to Afghanistan's deteriorating security, Kabul's political dysfunction is certainly a key reason. In short, policymakers should be clear-eyed that a national unity government is likely to severely impact government effectiveness and weigh that risk against other alternatives.

The drawbacks of national unity governments run deeper than their impact on government effectiveness. Perhaps more important is the damaging effects these arrangements can have on democracy. While national unity governments are instinctively viewed as democratic, their formation often requires breaking eggs to make an omelet, except the eggs are sometimes constitutional structures and democratic norms. Creatively carving up state power to accommodate rivals is a prominent feature of the impromptu solutions the United States tried in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the latter case, Ghani was declared the winner of the election and assumed the presidency while Abdullah was made the Chief Executive Officer, a post invented for him that has vague powers and no legal basis. Moreover, the release of the final election results was [delayed](#) for two years.

National unity governments also tend to suffer from a lack of political legitimacy. After all, national unity governments are not voted into power. They are brokered behind closed doors. Public confidence in democracy and underlying democratic institutions is undermined when election outcomes appear to matter little in determining who gains power. Rank-and-file supporters on all sides become disheartened with indecisive results. Afghan public satisfaction with democracy [dropped](#) from a steady 73% in 2014 to 57% in 2015 after the formation of the Ghani-Abdullah government. Moreover, legitimacy issues become amplified when national unity governments are [perceived](#) as the product of foreign powers interfering in domestic political processes or when they are formed as transitional bodies absent of clear internal support. When Libya's civil war erupted in 2014, the United States and other outside actors sought to unify the country's two warring administrations. Despite the proposal failing to garner much support from Libyans factions, Washington and other outside mediators including the United Nations plowed ahead and brokered the formation of the Government of National Accord (GNA). Rather than fostering peace, the GNA became a third government in the conflict and perhaps the least legitimate. Libya's two other governments can at least trace their formation to prior national elections. By contrast, the GNA's leaders were selected during negotiations held behind the closed doors of a conference room in Morocco. Despite receiving diplomatic recognition from

the United States and many European powers, it isn't surprising that the GNA has failed to attract much support and controls only a [few](#) city blocks in Tripoli.

Finally, the eagerness for the United States and other outside mediators to press for national unity governments can create insidious incentives. In many post-conflict states in [Africa](#), warlords and rebel leaders have a history of blackmailing governments into power-sharing deals in exchange for maintaining peace, often at the expense of legitimate political opposition. In Afghanistan, Abdullah lost the election but used the specter of political unrest by his supporters to gain a seat at the table, setting the stage for other Afghan powerbrokers to follow his footsteps in the upcoming 2019 presidential election. Policymakers would be prudent to think carefully about how short-term political compromises today may incentivize future malign behavior.

None of this is to suggest that the United States should abandon its commitment to advance democracy in troubled states. Nor should the United States "give war a chance" in the cynical hope that bloodshed might produce more decisive outcomes. Rather, Washington would be wise to assume a more skeptical attitude toward unity governments as a means for managing political crises in fragile states. To be sure, national unity governments can sometimes work, but they are hardly the cure-all that Washington seems to think it is. Policymakers should better appreciate the value of a *unified* government acting with singular resolve and be far more cautious before advocating for a weak state's executive power to be parceled out. A good starting point for policymakers is to return to core democratic principles in mediating these crises rather than pursuing short-term fixes that are likely to backfire in the long-run.

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