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POLITICAL FORGIVENESS AND THE HEALING OF NATIONS

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Background

Politics are fragile and can easily be manipulated. Unfortunately, politicians can also stir the pot to incite violence that often leads to dehumanization and polarization ending in genocide or civil war. Once entrenched in the mindset of “us” versus “them,” it becomes very difficult to move toward a process of co-existence with one another. The only way out may require a collective form of forgiveness.

Every nation has citizens who continue to hold on to unresolved resentments against other citizens or the ancestors of groups considered the “enemy.” The past century has yielded notable cases of dehumanization and polarization, the most well-known being the Nazi holocaust in Germany. Other countries, such as Rwanda, have also experienced the suffering that comes with dehumanization, which was the culmination of decades of

If the New Agenda for Peace (NAfP) is to be meaningful, it will need to engage with processes of healing and reconciliation—and especially within the United Nations—if it wants to deliver the global public goal of building peace by addressing and healing the multigenerational legacies of past wounds. Political forgiveness provides a framework where victims and perpetrators (or so-called “others”) can come together to repair what was broken and what was inherited, and lay a new foundation for future generations. This supports a culture of political forgiveness, which can sustain an enduring global peace.

oppression and hatred toward the Tutsi by the Hutus.¹ This was in part due to the long-standing emotional undertow which was never resolved between the Hutu and Tutsi peoples that boiled over into a conflict between the Tutsi-led RPF and the Hutu-controlled government. Regrettably, even with the cries of “never again,” genocide and conflict continue to plague the world stage.

A more recent example is the Ethiopian conflict which took place mostly in northern Ethiopia, bitterly dividing the country, leaving thousands dead and forcing more than two million people from their homes.² The conflict between federal and regional forces that began in November 2020 and lasted for two years has pushed tens of thousands of refugees into neighboring Sudan, leading to a humanitarian crisis with all parties involved committing horrific atrocities against humanity. On November 2, 2022, the federal government and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (T.P.L.F.) signed a peace agreement that has paved the way for post-conflict reconstruction. Measures involving acknowledgement, accountability, forgiveness, and reconciliation are key in breaking the cycle of ethnic and political violence that has gripped Ethiopia.

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How do we deal with the debris of a nation's past so the undertow of emotions and its memories do not keep us stuck in the quagmire of history? Never through continuing strife, conflict and war. It will only be cleared away when forgiveness enters these relationships in some political form.

Forgiveness in a political context is an act that joins moral truth, tolerance, empathy, and a commitment to repair fractured human relations. This calls for “a collective turning from the past that neither overlooks justice nor reduces justice to revenge, that insists on the humanity of enemies even in their commission of dehumanizing deeds, and values the justice that restores political community above the justice that destroys it.”³ In her book, *The Human Condition*, Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt commented: “Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover, not unlike the sorcerer's apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell.”⁴ Both Arendt and Shiver understood the importance of political forgiveness—especially in the healing of nations—for without it, the same wars would be fought repeatedly.

A political forgiveness process recognizes the importance of justice, reconciliation, and healing as part of post-conflict “reconstruction” in countries that have experienced forms of protracted violence and civil wars. Political forgiveness is a process that focuses on the healing of anger and intolerance toward one another and fosters empathy and forgiveness. It is a process that involves all parties to a conflict, where people make a commitment to one another to stop hostility, move on from the past, and rebuild their communities—and indeed nations. Each aspect of the political forgiveness process builds and supports the other actions of political forgiveness. It includes the healing of individuals, communal relationships, and the pursuit of a just order on a national level. At any given point, one aspect of the process may have greater prominence, yet all of them come up for repeated attention as the relationship becomes more secure. By providing a structure for people to work toward mutual understanding and actions that foster healing among individuals and groups, the renewal of social trust and political harmony is restored.

Steps in a Political Forgiveness Process

As we begin Step 1 and Step 2 in a political forgiveness process we are, in a sense, setting the table by creating the space for a vulnerable and honest conversation to take place. This is where the parameters of how parties will work together are determined. Firm boundaries are set, expectations discussed, and a safe container created. This is also the time where people make commitments to one another, including a willingness to engage in a healing process. In the safety of this container people can begin to engage and talk openly about what their separate truths are and what divides them. Once the table is set and everyone has agreed on the details, people can move forward.



Step 1: Stop Violence

To begin the process, people commit to stopping all forms of violence and reject any plans for revenge.

Step 2: Bring All Sides Together

All parties demonstrate a willingness to deal with underlying issues openly, to respect and to address the competing identities and narratives. This begins to set the stage for all sides to begin to take responsibility and recognize their role in the legacy of violence.



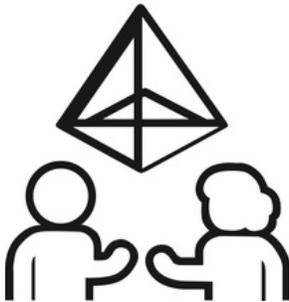
Step 3: Engage in understanding the separate “truths” and what divides people from one another

After some basic instruction on forgiveness, participants engage in a dialogue process that focuses on questions about one’s “truth” and helps to construct a historical memory for those involved in the process, which can now include a healing narrative.



Step 4: Changing Mindsets

Participants learn necessary skills needed to help them see their situation differently by developing a new way of thinking. In this step people engage in a deeper understanding of how to apply the principles of forgiveness to the political arena. One gains a deeper sense of the power of forgiveness through hearing forgiveness stories, which demonstrate how forgiveness can help change perceptions. This includes the ability to reframe the situation and to create a new narrative of recognition in which people accept one another as legitimate political partners and take responsibility for their role in the legacy of violence.



Step 5: Co-creating a new future

All sides participate in writing a new chapter for the narrative that all parties can commit to. There’s a strong healing component through mourning of losses, and forgiveness. This also supports the possibility for three different levels of reconciliation to take place:

- Developing minimal social exchange
- Developing a working trust
- Deepening relationships beyond trust



The political forgiveness process cycles repeatedly through Steps 3, 4, and 5, on a deeper level of reconciliation each time. This offers an opportunity to discuss new issues as they arise, and ideally move from minimal social exchange through developing a working trust, and finally deepening relationships.

What makes political forgiveness distinct from other processes such as mediation, peacekeeping, or reconciliation is that political forgiveness builds a structure to surface and contain the deep undercurrent of emotions that inevitably arise during this process, and provides a healing mechanism for these powerful emotions to be resolved once and for all. Until these emotions are addressed and released, it’s likely violence will continue to rear its ugly head. Indeed, high emotions and deep division are a direct result of oppression, dehumanization, and polarization and the stoking of grievances, hatred, and the need for revenge. Political forgiveness is the only peacebuilding process which consciously supports participants in expressing their strong emotions which ultimately can lead to a transformation of the conflict.

AN EXAMPLE OF A POLITICAL FORGIVENESS INTERVENTION:

Healing Hate in America: A Political Forgiveness Intervention Program for Reducing Political Polarization

No established democracy in recent history has been as deeply polarized as the U.S. Pernicious polarization is the division of society into mutually distrustful political camps in which political identity becomes a social identity.⁵ It is a worldwide phenomenon. The process itself can tear countries apart, leading to the rise of an “us versus them” mindset, eroding institutional and behavioral norms, and incentivizing politicians to pursue their aims outside traditional means. Many democracies around the world have grappled or are grappling with the difficulties posed by pernicious polarization. Pernicious polarization makes good-faith efforts to tackle social problems such as public-health crises harder and bad-faith efforts to turn them into political gain easier. At worst, an erosion of trust in democratic norms and political institutions can end in political violence and civil war.⁶

The “Healing Hate in America” project is a three-stage political forgiveness intervention involving dialogue, forgiveness, and reconciliation training. The purpose of the intervention is to foster an increase in forgiveness and empathy and decrease anger and intolerance leading to a decrease in political polarization.

- Phase 1 begins with some basic instruction on forgiveness, and then engages participants in a dialogue process that focuses on questions about one’s “truth” and what a healing process can look like.
- Phase 2 involves more active learning that involves storytelling about how people have been able to forgive and impact a political forgiveness process. Participants will learn how to build a new narrative that will support bridging the divide and gain a deeper understanding of what political forgiveness is about and how it helps the healing of society.
- Phase 3 focuses on bridging the divide through reconciliation as a means of communal healing and builds on the previous two phases. Participants will discuss how the process of political forgiveness can help bring people closer together by developing a working trust, making agreements, and reconciling with one another.

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