Making Peace with Referendums: Cyprus and Northern Ireland

Peace negotiations in conflict cases are not always easily resolved. In the wider context of Conflict Studies, it is of paramount importance to engage lively in conversation with the complex nature of negotiations for cases that have experienced violent conflict and ethnic division. Not only does the conflict-ridden community itself have the capacity to shape the negotiation process, but it is also possible for the negotiator themselves to impact opinions and shape perceptions either positively or negatively. Nonetheless, when the process itself is hindered from the rest of society, and the conflict in case is put into popular vote with a simplistic 'yes' or 'no', the outcome of such a vote can be different as compared to more open, transparent, and visible negotiations for the rest of society.

Joana Amaral's Making Peace with Referendums offers a compelling and insightful argument on why referendums are not a favourable tool in addressing certain cases that have historically experienced conflict, rivalry, and ethnic violence. It is a useful contribution and addition, first to the wider study of conflict analysis, and secondly, to studies pertaining to Cyprus and Northern Ireland, both in the comparative sense, but also as independent cases. The usefulness is highlighted in how Amaral notes both the differences and the similarities in both referendums, while exploring the literature on peace negotiations and referendums. Conversely, this book also explores the differences in how negotiations took place, what different outcomes emerged from the Good Friday Agreement and the Annan Plan respectively, and how and why support at a local and communal level was different in each case study.

The central argument put forward in the book is that referendums work best when negotiations become an inclusive process, incorporating a wide range of

diverse stakeholders: from government to civil society and other political actors. When such a process is rather 'secretive' (p. 4), then referendums, according to Amaral, are often 'rejected by popular vote despite strenuous political negotiations' (p. ix). The author therefore explains the antithesis observed in the cases of Northern Ireland, whose Good Friday Agreement put an end to violence and reformed the model of governance on the one hand, and in Cyprus, whose Annan Plan ultimately failed to engage with the rest of society on the other. To this end, the theoretical foundations of the book discuss the definitions of 'the outcome of peace negotiations' (pp. 1-15) and then look at the literature on the political audience as both a recipient and shaper of the negotiation (pp. 16-30), highlighting the causal relationship of how the negotiator can affect the audience's decision during referendums.

In structuring the argument, therefore, Amaral expands on the theoretical puzzles in the first two chapters, including detailed literature debates on referendums and peace agreements. Chapter 3 offers a generic account on each case study respectively. It briefly walks through the timeline of events and key political figures that have shaped the conflict, in a bid to provide a coherent background on how the differences at community level led to conflict and violence that brought political instability and ethnic (in the case of Cyprus) and religious (in the case of Northern Ireland) division. This chapter is also particularly important, as it provides a strong base for understanding the peace process itself and what each proposed peace plan entailed by expanding on the conceptual approach of the author in the research design process (p. 43). Even more important is the elaboration on the author's methodological approach, which draws accounts from notable leadership figures within the political and civil society spectrum, researchers, experts, as well as journalists, who were all observers and/or participants in the peace processes. Data was collected through archival and media research, and semi-structured interviews.

Furthermore, Chapters 4 and 5 look at the Annan Plan and the Good Friday Agreement respectively. Amaral explains that the book itself, while not addressing each plan in a chronological order, begins with the case of Cyprus due to how the research itself was conducted. For the reader, this is particularly important, as Chapter 4 first highlights the failures of the negotiation process, including the political differences at communal level, and hints on the 'secretive' nature of the process itself. whereas Chapter 5 presents the experiences drawn from the agreement in Northern Ireland, and what the settlement means for its model of governance, the

political establishment, and the people themselves. Chapter 6, therefore, compares both case studies, or 'experiences', as the author describes them. It offers an overview of the different mediation strategies and the impact these have had on each community respectively, while building on the perceptions and divisions within political parties that either supported or rejected each proposed peace plan. This enables the author to clearly identify the peace referendum spoilers and supporters, making it easier for the reader to follow the argument. Chapter 7 clearly demonstrates how different it is for negotiations to be concluded by leaders alone, instead of putting an agreement to the popular vote. Amaral emphasises that the peace process must be inclusive throughout if a proposed solution to conflict disputes require the public's consent. As the author explains, 'the context must be prepared for the referendum experience' (p. 132). The conclusion itself offers the author's reflections on the case studies and the wider literature on peace negotiations and referendums, reaffirming the opportunities, risks, and challenges of putting complex conflict questions to the popular vote.

The analysis offered in this book is rather promising. The author demonstrates extended knowledge derived from a concise, qualitative methodological approach, utilising open and accessible archival resources, as well as engaging with key and politically active figures across a wide range of actors, including political party representatives, civil society organisations, campaigners, and interest groups. Not only does the author cross-reference the sources used and back them up with additional secondary reading, but the ability to deliver to the reader a clearly constructed argument is noteworthy to say the least. A particular aspect that would be welcome, and which would perhaps reinforce the central argument even more, would be the examination of more statistical data derived from the referendums, as well as the wider public perception of how society feels at a communal level post-referendum. Although I agree with the author's good use of existing quantitative studies to first extract data and then identify how the public was informed or disinformed (p. 48-49), perhaps additional remarks would offer richer and even more captivating insights. It must be noted, of course, that the author also recognises that additional research is required to fully grasp the role of peace referendums 'as an extension of the political process of peace negotiations' (p. 139). As such, this book is also a great attempt at fostering dialogue on additional theorisation and reflection on what factors may ultimately shape peace referendums.

All in all, Joana Amaral's Making Peace with Referendums offers a holistic account that paints a vivid image for the reader to understand with great ease the core argument, which is that inclusive peace processes often yield more settlements to disputes. On the contrary, restricting the diversity of stakeholders involved, while also lacking in visibility and transparency throughout the negotiation process does not yield positive outcomes. Thus, referendums in those cases do not procure a 'yes' vote. What should be equally considered, however, are the political motives behind negotiators, and political and media elites, in shaping public perception towards a 'no' vote, in that regard. Therefore, Amaral's critical insight, throughout both case studies, helps the reader identify how peace referendums on a potential agreement for conflict disputes may either exacerbate divisions or bring forth a new future for conflict-ridden communities, depending on how the process itself is mediated not only between negotiators, but also between the negotiator and their respective community.

Petros Petrikkos