Political Prisoners in Peace Processes: The Case of Northern Ireland

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Abstract

This article focuses on exploring the essential role of political prisoners in peace processes. It discusses the participation of political prisoners in conflict resolution and their influence on political negotiations. The overall objectives of the article are to demonstrate that political prisoners are central to any successful peace process, and to argue for the importance of inclusive engagement of all parties to the conflict in peace negotiations. The article explores the contribution of Northern Ireland’s political prisoners to peacemaking efforts and the negotiation of the Good Friday Agreement. It starts with a brief history of political prisoners in Northern Ireland, and then examines their involvement in influencing the peace process and providing their political leaders with the support and legitimacy they sought in negotiating a peace agreement. The article ends with sharing lessons about political prisoners and their relationship to successful peace processes and negotiations.

Key words: conflict; political prisoners; negotiation; peace processes.
Introduction

In the field of negotiation and conflict resolution, ‘peacemaking’ refers to political and diplomatic efforts to bring together opponents and leaders of conflicting parties to negotiate an agreement and/or a settlement that would facilitate structures and workable formulas (i.e., peace agreements) to end violence and initiate a peace process where claims and national aspirations can be pursued through politics and negotiations. This is normally achieved with the support of an international third party through active diplomacy and mediation (Brand-Jacobsen & Jacobsen 2000). The Good Friday Agreement in Ireland with U.S. mediation, and the Oslo Peace Agreement in Israel/Palestine with Norwegian facilitation, are good examples of diplomatic third party interventions. Working through conflicting issues and negotiations with the parties and encouraging compromises embodies the ambition of mediators and their governmental and organizational sponsors such as the United Nations.

In this respect, Bernard Mayer (2000: 193) describes mediation as an approach to conflict resolution and a ‘powerful intervention tool.’ The significance of this tool, according to Mayer, lies in its ability to help disputants maintain their power over important issues in their lives and it also assists them in moving through a ‘difficult conflict process.’ A central component of peacemaking is the attempt to address the root causes of conflict and to ensure the support of national influential players for leadership efforts to negotiate an end to violence and repression. If this is overlooked, the narrow and hierarchical focus on conflict leaders may negatively lead to exclusion and alienation of significant non-state actors and their constituencies. In addition, a return to hostilities and violence may prove to be another dangerous consequence.
Therefore, Brand-Jacobsen and Jacobsen (2000: 241) warn that the problem that parties to conflict might feel left out and neglected if not invited to participate in the peace process is ‘real and may lead to destabilization and threats to the process by those kept outside.’ Hence, successful approaches to peace processes and conflict resolution take into account the consultation and the involvement of local leadership in negotiations. This, for instance, includes political prisoners, civil society and community actors, paramilitary organizations, and smaller political parties.

On the other hand, ‘peacebuilding’, which supports peacemaking, demonstrates a critical significance since it seeks to transform the mere absence of violence—negative peace—into positive and sustainable peace based on equal rights and justice for all communities involved (Galtung 1996: 104). In post-political agreement situations, peacebuilding processes attempt to address social and political injustices, human rights, traumas and healing, community dialogue, peaceful relationships, reconciliation, coexistence, and inclusive representative institutions. Depending on the political and social circumstances of the situation in question, peacebuilding can be driven locally, bottom-up, or officially, top-down. A combination of both approaches is also realistic as John Paul Lederach suggests (Lederach 1995: 33).

Before discussing peace processes and political prisoners in this article, it is important that some theoretical issues are clarified. The term ‘political prisoners’ refers to a large group of individuals who have committed acts of violence and armed attacks for political ends, and who have served long sentences in prison as a result. The human rights organization Amnesty International states that the understanding of political prisoners is connected with ‘any prisoner whose case has a significant political element: whether the motivation of the prisoner's acts, the acts in themselves,
or the motivation of the authorities.’

Thus, in the context of Northern Ireland, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) used an armed struggle, as they described it, to achieve a united Ireland and gain independence from British rule. On the other hand, Loyalist paramilitaries- loyal to the Queen of England and Britain- resorted to arms to defend and keep the political union of Northern Ireland with Britain. In other words, they both accepted the legitimacy of violence for political ends. In *Beyond the Wire*, Peter Shirlow and Kieron McEvoy (2008: 9-10) note that ‘historically, both Loyalists and Republicans viewed violence as the logical response to the denial of their respective rights.’

However, there is no shared understanding of ‘political prisoners’ and what they represent. As will be discussed later, the British government was reluctant to grant Republican prisoners a political status because of their paramilitary backgrounds, which led to further protests and hunger strikes. Also, victims of violence have viewed these individuals and groups simply as criminals and ‘terrorists’ because of their past and the violence they committed during the conflict. Victims’ representatives campaigned against the release of prisoners following the Good Friday Agreement. Some still seek to hold, for example, Republican ex-combatants accountable for what they see as criminal histories. The prisoners, on the other hand, argue that they were caught in a war situation and/or armed struggles, and hence, the violence they committed was motivated by political reasons and was not for criminal
ends. Hence, there has been an expectation on the part of prisoners that they should be seen as prisoners of war or political prisoners.³

Because of the political conflicts and the contexts of which they were a part, the appropriateness of the term ‘political prisoners’ will be accepted in the following arguments and subsequent discussions in the article.

Aims and Structure

Employing secondary and primary sources, this article aims to demonstrate the important role that political prisoners play in peace processes, and to argue that the inclusion of all parties to conflicts, especially ex-combatants and political prisoners, is significant in initiating and sustaining peaceful resolutions to situations of politically motivated violence and conflict. Also, this article seeks to contribute to the limited literature available on prisons and political prisoners in negotiation processes and conflict resolution.

The first section of the article will explore the history of political prisoners in Northern Ireland. The participation and engagement of political prisoners in peacemaking efforts and negotiations in the run-up to the Good Friday Agreement will be examined in the second section. The conclusion will offer a summary of the previous arguments and also draw some important lessons in relation to political prisoners, negotiations and peace processes.

For clarity reasons, all emphases and italics in quotations have been added.
Maze Prison: History and Background

The symbolic and famous prison that hosted the majority of political prisoners was called the Maze- as the British authorities refer to it-or Long Kesh, as the Irish Republicans call it. For the purpose of this article, the name ‘Maze prison’ will be used.

Life in the Maze was based on conflicting beliefs and ideologies, not only between Loyalist and Republican prisoners, but also between the prisoners and the prison authorities. Opened in 1976, the Maze prison was constructed as a modern fortress with high walls and watchtowers surrounding eight identical cell blocks, each in the shape of an ‘H’. Geographically speaking, the Maze is located near Lisburn, nine miles outside Belfast in County Antrim. Stressing the unusual nature of the place and its mixed population, James Hennessy, the Chief Inspector of Prisons of 1984, stated that the Maze was:

Totally dissimilar to the usual criminal recidivist population to be found in England and Wales. It consists entirely of prisoners convicted of offences connected with terrorist activities. (Wylie 1991: 91)

All paramilitary prisoners were brought into the Maze under the Northern Ireland Act of Terrorism, Emergency Provisions of 1973, but, of course, not everybody would agree that their activity was a form of terrorism. For example, Loyalists would see their activism as defence of their communities and Republicans would regard it as a legitimate struggle against British imperialism. The Act, however, did not differentiate between the two interpretations of the conflict. It stated that terrorism means the use of violence ‘for political ends and includes any use of violence for the
purpose of putting the public or any section of the public in fear.’ This legislation and the use of violence constituted the legal grounds for the trial of ex-combatants (Butterworths 1987: 102).

**Dirty Protest and Hunger Strike**

In 1978, many Irish Republican prisoners began their protests for seeking a political recognition as prisoners of war and challenging the criminalisation policy by prison authorities. They reportedly refused to wear prison uniforms, and following the rejection of their demands, they covered themselves with blankets. This soon became known as the ‘blanket protest.’ According to many observers, the rejection of wearing the prison cloths was a clear refusal to enter the prison system. The protest was crucially intensified and developed. Republican prisoners withdrew all cooperation and did not wash or clean their prison cells. This came to be known as the ‘dirty protest’ or ‘no-wash protest’ (McKeown 2001: 77).

By 1980-1981, the demands of political status and recognition were not met. A number of Republican prisoners decided to start a hunger strike through which they would starve themselves to death until their political objectives were met. The hunger strike began with a new tactic: the prisoners agreed not to embark on a collective hunger strike, they would instead go one after the other. In *Out of Time*, the former IRA hunger striker Laurence Mckeown (2000: 85) clarifies that the decision to undergo the hunger strike was made after consulting the republican leadership on the outside, and the idea of embarking individually on hunger strike was meant to put more pressure on the British government to achieve the desired results. Moreover, for further politicization of the conflict, the political wing of the Republican Movement Sinn Fein proposed the name of the first hunger striker Bobby
Sands as a Republican and nationalist candidate in the by-election for the Westminster constituency of Fermanagh/South Tyrone. Sands won a seat in the elections, gaining over 30,000 votes.

His election was a source of embarrassment for the British government as it raised questions of Sand’s legitimacy as an elected member of parliament. However, after sixty six days of being on hunger strike, Bobby Sands died for the cause of Irish Republicanism and political recognition of the conflict, and nine other IRA volunteers followed him. His death created a sense of frustration and anger throughout Ireland and received international reactions. Nonetheless, the Prime Minister at the time, Margaret Thatcher, regarded Sands’ death as ‘evidence of the political extremism of Irish Republicans who exploited their own lives for propaganda purposes’ (Wylie 1991: 105). Political status was, however, granted by the British government to both Loyalist and Republican prisoners after the tragic events of 1982.

The ‘dirty protest’ and the hunger strike were seen as significant periods in the conflict’s history. The prison itself was viewed as a site wherein criminalization was challenged and values of struggle maintained. To that end, prisoners organized their affiliated groups in a way that maintained the paramilitary structure which was in place outside the Maze. Political education and lectures were also provided. Bill Rolston (2007: 273) points out:

For Republicans, the experience of imprisonment was one of intense politicization. Rather than representing a hiatus in political development and activity, prison was seen as a site of struggle and resistance, where they honed their individual and collective political understanding and activity.
Why was the Maze prison viewed as a ‘site of struggle’ by Republican prisoners? Two explanations are suggested: first, the battle inside the Maze was seen as an extension of the broader Republican political struggle against colonial British rule in Ireland. Second, regardless of prison barriers, Republicans regarded themselves as IRA active volunteers, and thus they maintained their links with the leadership on the outside and continued to be committed to their cause in various forms and locations (McKeown 2001: 225). A similar question should be asked about Loyalist prisoners: why were they not active in seeking political recognition of their involvement in the conflict? There are also two explanations. Loyalist prisoners, unlike Republicans, lacked a tradition of imprisonment and nationalism that they could draw upon. Furthermore, the complex Loyalist relationship with the British state was problematic: their crime was, as they saw it, ‘loyalty’ to the very state that put them in prison. These factors shaped the thinking of Loyalist prisoners and undermined possibilities of organized protests (Shirlow et al. 2005).

However, despite being a place for conflict and unrest, the Maze was also a place where many people examined their violent involvement in the conflict and even questioned its value. In other words, they reflected on the situation and went through a personal transformation process. This led a large number of prisoners on the road to transformation and political change despite their confinement. What made this situation more significant was the fact that signs of this transformation began to appear inside the Maze in the contexts of interactions between the Loyalist and Republican prisoners. Billy McKee, an IRA former prisoner, provides an example of that internal change in behaviour among prisoners. He recalls that the Loyalists were based in the next Cage to Republicans and that they (IRA prisoners) ‘got on alright
with them. They were always asking for books, Connolly books, socialism and things like that. I used to give them extra copies of any books I had’ (Wylie 1991: 96). These personal journeys of transformation, and the changing political relations and reduced hostility between prisoner groups had reflected positively on the emerging Anglo-Irish peace process of the 1990s, to which this article now turns with a specific focus on the contribution of the political prisoners to peacemaking efforts and political negotiations before and during the period of the Good Friday Agreement.

Influencing the Peace Process

The transition experienced by many prisoners was one of finding peaceful and political alternatives to the conflict. Therefore, when the official negotiations of the 1990s started, prisoner groups played a supportive role in the political leadership and in the negotiations of ceasefires. Prior to the IRA ceasefire of 1994, Republican prisoners had held intensive discussions among their members and leaders in the Maze about taking political steps to participate in the peacemaking and diplomatic process. They presented a document to the Republican movement that identified the Republican strategy for political transformation of the conflict. This document, adopted and endorsed significantly inside the Maze, was reportedly the basis for both the future negotiations by Republican political leaders outside the Maze and the coming IRA ceasefire of 1994 (McEvoy et al. 2004). In this context, Adrian Guelke suggests that ‘the suspension of hostilities is typically a precondition for the initiation of negotiations or, at the very least, the first item on the agenda if negotiations start in the absence of ceasefires’ (Guelke, 2008: 63). William Zartman (1989) also links political progress and ceasefires to the notion of ‘ripeness.’ This emerges when all sides of conflicts reach a ‘mutually hurting stalemate’, where all parties are affected.
by the continued violent conflict and therefore seek common grounds to manage it peacefully by means of conflict resolution.

The IRA ceasefire, however, broke down in 1996 and the state of ‘ripeness’ seemed to be distant, especially when the IRA military campaign was re-initiated. Many observers linked the breakdown of the ceasefire to the failure of the British government to act on the issue of prisoner release in the negotiation process. Prisoner release was considered to be vital to the paramilitary organizations, since they wanted to see their prisoners coming out of prisons as a result of these political developments (McEvoy et al. 2004: 651). Conflicting issues such as prisoner release can cause destabilization, breakdown of ceasefires and can lead to the collapse of an entire negotiations process if they are not managed well. In this regard, John Darby and Roger Mac-Ginty point out that while negotiations and peace processes provide a forum for antagonists to reach compromises, ‘the reality is often complicated by suspicion, continuing violence or tension, and politicking within camps’ (Darby & Mac Ginty 2008: 61).

On this issue of internal ‘politicking’, the former hunger striker Laurence McKeown explains the political position of the Republican prisoners’ camp in the peace process and in the negotiation phase of the Good Friday Agreement. He states in an interview:

The prisoners made it very clear that their release or otherwise should not be allowed to become a bargaining tool by the British government [in the negotiation process]. However, Republicans accepted that if there was an overall agreement then the release of all political prisoners would have to follow on from that agreement… Whilst Republican prisoners had no direct role in negotiating the Good Friday Agreement, they were of course kept up to date with all developments and regular delegations from Sinn Fein, including high-ranking members of the ANC [African National Congress] on one
occasion, went in [to the Maze] to meet with the prisoners’ leadership to brief them on the peace process.  

The situation of Loyalist prisoners was similar. Before the ceasefire of 1994, the Combined Loyalist Military Command (CLMC) visited the Maze to discuss the possibility of declaring a Loyalist ceasefire in order to provide an opportunity for exploring political solutions. The ceasefire was subsequently endorsed and supported by the majority of the Loyalist political prisoners. The person who publicly announced the ceasefire was Gusty Spence who was a Loyalist ex-prisoner and a political leader. The statement delivered by Spence read:

After a widespread consultative process initiated by representation from the Ulster Democratic and Progressive Unionist Parties, and after having received guarantees in relation to Northern Ireland’s constitutional position within the United kingdom, as well as other assurances, and in the belief that the democratically expressed wishes of the greater number of people in Northern Ireland will be respected and upheld, the CLMC will universally cease all operational hostilities as from 12 midnight on Thursday the 13th October 1994…. To our prisoners who have undergone so much deprivation and dedication with great courage and forbearance, we solemnly promise to leave no stone unturned to secure their freedom. (Garland 2001: 2) 

The future of the peace process, however, was placed in doubt when some prisoner groups from the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF), representing the largest Loyalist paramilitary groups, withdrew support for the political negotiations in 1998. Understanding the dangerous consequences of such withdrawal and the threat it represented to the entire political process, Northern Ireland Secretary of State Mo Mowlam decided to meet with UDA and UFF prisoners
in the Maze prison to discuss their demands and participation. This was seen as a political gamble given her senior position in the British government and the fact that the prisoners had been always determined to have their political status recognized. Mowlam succeeded in persuading the prisoners to re-affirm their support and commitment to the negotiation process. Two hours after the meeting, the political representatives of the UDA and UFF prisoners reportedly announced that they were re-joining the negotiations with the agreement and backing of their prisoner leadership.\textsuperscript{5} In conflict resolution situations, one of the greatest services mediators provide is not only facilitating participation but also building a momentum for an inclusive process. In this case, Mowlam played an important role in mediating the prisoners’ grievances as well as sustaining their co-operation.

The engagement and the inclusion of all local and political players, especially prisoners groups, contributed to the birth of a historic peace agreement in 1998, namely the Good Friday Agreement (known also as the Belfast Agreement). The agreement was extraordinary and hugely significant in putting an end to thirty years of political violence and hostilities. As Thomas Abraham (1999: 3) observes:

One of the most remarkable events of 1998 was the signing of the Belfast Agreement. It was arrived at after a long and arduous process of negotiations, and promised to bring to an end one of the world’s longest running conflicts. At the time, it was hailed as a triumph for the process of conflict resolution through democratic negotiations rather than through the power of the gun.
The peace agreement acknowledged the importance of political prisoners to the peace process. The prisoner release, for example, was integrated into the Good Friday Agreement, which states:

Both governments [British and Irish] will put in place mechanisms to provide for an accelerated programme for the release of prisoners….Any such arrangements will protect the rights of individual prisoners under national and international law. Prisoners affiliated to organizations which have not established or are not maintaining a complete and unequivocal ceasefire will not benefit from the arrangements. The situation in this regard will be kept under review.  

The governmental approach to the release initiative employed the conditionality policy. Paramilitary organizations who have not committed to a ‘complete and unequivocal ceasefire will not benefit from the [release] arrangements.’ Armed groups, however, who signed up to ceasefires and the peace process, would have their prisoners released. In his analysis of the dynamics involved in conflict resolution processes, Guelke (2008: 66) elaborates that the opposition to offering concessions in peace negotiations to groups who have not fully repudiated political violence is generated normally from fears, or beliefs, of conferring a ‘measure of legitimacy upon them that is not warranted.’

Nonetheless, the question that emerges in this context is: why the political prisoners have gained a significant position in the peace process and negotiations in Northern Ireland? A number of reasons can be drawn. Firstly, the prisoners enjoyed great support within their local Republican and Loyalist constituencies because they were seen as individuals who were willing to take a stand for the rights of their people to freedom and equality, and as defenders of their communities. In turn, the support of
the prisoners provided a vital and much-needed *legitimacy* to the political leadership in their attempt to promote and negotiate nonviolent alternatives. As previously discussed, internal consultations among the prisoners added momentum to the peace process. Secondly, the prisoners’ endorsement of political solutions helped the ‘hard-liners’ to pursue pragmatic politics in the peace process and encouraged compromises (Cox et al. 2000: 102). Thirdly, linked to the second point, there seemed to be an acknowledgment among the official parties that if a peaceful solution to the conflict was to be reached, it had to include the people who were militarily involved in the conflict, meaning the paramilitaries and political prisoners. Mowlam’s meeting with the Loyalist prisoners in the Maze and her statement afterwards lends validity to this analysis. ‘If you want progress, you are not going to get it if you don’t have talks [with all actors]’, she stated.7

Fourthly, as it will be illustrated further below, the prisoner early release scheme constituted a confidence-building measure and a motivation for Loyalist and Republican political representatives to participate actively in the negotiation process, which led to the Good Friday Agreement. According to many theorists and practitioners of conflict resolution, building trust and good faith between parties is of key importance in negotiations ‘to end violent political conflicts’ (Darby & Mac Ginty 2008: 76).

Fifthly, as Mckeown points out from his experience in the Maze, the prisoners played an important role in the peace process because if the prisoners had opposed the Good Friday Agreement then it would have been very difficult for the political leadership
on the outside to implement the agreement provisions. Also, potential opposition from the prisoners would have proven likely to mean less local support to the agreement and, hence, undermined its success.

It is all these factors that made the contribution of political prisoners to the political negotiations and the peace process effective and influential. Their positive and supportive role in the peace process has been recognized by both observers and government officials. On his visit to Belfast during the negotiations phase of 1995, former American president Bill Clinton seemed to encourage a stronger participation in the peace process by political prisoners and former combatants as they were seeking alternatives to political violence with their leaders. He stated in a public speech that those who renounce violence and take their own risks for peace are ‘entitled to be full participants in the democratic process. Those who do show the courage to break with the past are entitled to their stake in the future.’ Furthermore, Michael Page (1999: 95) analyzes:

Many important paramilitary strategies originated from the prisons. Most importantly, the prisoners from both the Loyalist and Republican wings of the Maze prison have been widely credited with having had an influential role in the peace process.

However, there are still those who disagree with the legitimacy of political prisoners and hence reject their role in conflict resolution. Their argument points to the previous acts of violence and atrocities that prisoners committed in the course of the conflict. A criminology approach based on ideological reasons is generally
proposed by some victim groups and observers as the best means by which to deal with political violence. In other words, offenders should be punished for their past and put, or remain, in prisons with long-term sentences regardless of, or because of, political violence and circumstances (Page 1999). There is also a social dimension which involves the role of memory in conflict and peace processes. In the case of Northern Ireland, Brian Gormally (2011: 6) explains, for example, that political prisoners and former combatants provide ‘the visible concentration’ of everything people feel about the conflict, and hence, they attract large controversy and attention.

While understandable, focusing exclusively on political prisoners as a source of conflict and violence is limiting because it fails to recognize the complex relationship and the connection between the broader roots of the conflict and the suffering caused as a result.

**Lessons and Conclusion**

The experiences of the Republican ‘dirty protest’ and hunger strike, and Loyalist alienation and feeling of betrayal by the British state (since their only crime, as they saw it, was connected to loyalty to the ‘British Crown’), are exceptional circumstances which the prisoners had to endure. Identity, loyalty, political recognition, affiliation and national struggles had been also central to the prisoner cause. Through exchanging books, intense conversations, deep thinking and personal reflection, many prisoners were able to humanize each other and cultivate a deeper understanding of other prisoner individuals and groups. This transformation journey of understanding and reaching-out reflected positively on the subsequent success of conflict resolution efforts. Maintaining links and participation in the outside diplomatic developments and continued consultations with political leadership had
been a key in the prisoners’ positive contribution to the negotiation process which produced the Good Friday Agreement.

It is important to note that a similar prisoner experience has been witnessed in other conflict situations. For instance, Palestinian political prisoners in Israeli prisons played a crucial role in negotiating a comprehensive ceasefire between the Palestinian militant factions and the Israeli army in 2003. This ceasefire agreement opened-up the opportunity for re-launching political talks between the Israeli and Palestinian leadership. Marwan Barghouti, the Secretary General of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO-Fatah) in the West Bank and a political prisoner, mediated the ceasefire terms with other prisoner leaders and paramilitaries from inside Israeli jails. Acknowledging the prisoner engagement in negotiation efforts, the well-known Israeli newspaper Haaretz comments that ‘many have known for some time that, from his Israeli jail cell, Barghouti is trying to lead the process of getting the Palestinian opposition factions to agree to a truce.’\textsuperscript{10} This was agreed in return for an Israeli commitment to engage in a genuine political process which would bring an end to Israeli military occupation and facilitate the establishment of a Palestinian state.

From this brief example in the Israeli-Palestinian context and Northern Ireland prisoners’ experience, there are some significant lessons to learn in terms of political prisoners and processes of negotiation and peacemaking. Firstly, official leaders in conflict situations are not capable of delivering political change and progress without the active support and involvement of other important local and national players. As previously discussed, Loyalist and Republican ceasefires of 1994 were brokered
through negotiations with the political prisoners and their military organizations. In addition, the Palestinian leadership needed the facilitation of the 2003 ceasefire agreement from the political prisoners so they could explore again political solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In reality, the inclusion and involvement of these influential actors in peace processes legitimatize negotiation initiatives and neutralize the threats of political violence. Secondly, the assumption that political prisoners and ex-combatants are ‘removed’ from the reality of the conflict by reasons of proximity and prison bars, and therefore have no role to play in political developments is invalid. These individuals remain relevant and central to the dynamics of the conflict and its core claims, and also to its political resolution. Former political prisoner McKeeown, for instance, made it very clear that high-level delegations of Sinn Fein and Republican understood that it was necessary to visit the prisoners to consult and brief the Republican prisoners on the negotiation process. Reflecting some of their main agendas, the statement of the CLMC for the Loyalist ceasefire also promised ‘to leave no stone unturned’ through political and negotiation processes to secure prisoner freedom.

Thirdly, combined with other political steps, the release of political prisoners is a workable confidence-building measure in peace processes and mutual risk taking between the main parties to the conflict. In situations of politically motivated violence, prisoner release helps armed factions to recognize the benefits of peace negotiations to resolve the conflict. In addition, it grants them incentives to consider the possibility of declaring a ceasefire and entering the negotiation process. Equally importantly, in negotiations phases, prisoner release also encourages political actors to engage, or remain engaged, in the peace process. The return of the UDA and UFF
political leaders to the peace talks following the agreement of their prisoners is a good example of this vital relationship. Furthermore, prisoner release supports reciprocity principles and demonstrates good will. Commenting on the critical issues of trust and good faith in peace processes, Mayer (2000: 207) notes:

Trust is built by incremental and reciprocal risk taking. As people make tentative concessions or share important data and receive reciprocal concessions and information, confidence is built and resolution promoted.

Fourthly, one of the final lessons is that the engagement of political prisoners in negotiation and peace processes can take two forms. The first is indirect, which mainly involves internal discussions and consultations between prisoner groups about appropriate political strategies. The second is direct, which includes voicing support for political leadership and its efforts to negotiate a diplomatic settlement. This direct support from prisoners grants critical legitimacy to political leaders and their role in facilitating transformation and democratic transitions. Critically, these two types of engagement facilitate a third significant agency which successful peace processes struggle to embody, namely the wider community’s acceptance of peace processes and subsequent negotiated settlements. Without a strong grassroots acceptance of political agreements, it is unlikely that these agreements will be sustainable. Furthermore, David Bloomfield illustrates that the strength of bottom-up approaches to conflict resolution exists in their ability to facilitate societal engagement and interactions between people which can help them ‘define the terms of their future coexistence’ (Bloomfield 2006: 27).

In conclusion, it is undeniable that the past of many prisoners and their previous acts of violence have created human pain and suffering for victims.
However, given that conflict situations have many layers and causes which contribute to its eruption and/or escalation, political prisoners are likely to be victims of broader structures that give rise to initial violence and injustice. This is why a deeper understanding of the root causes and dynamics of violent conflicts is central to conflict resolution approaches. This is not to justify the harm and pain inflicted through political violence, but it is rather to acknowledge the wider context of situations of politically motivated violence and the positive role that political prisoners can play in peace processes and negotiations when they are given both an opportunity and recognition.
Notes

   http://www.amnestyvolunteer.org/aihandbook/ch3.html#Politicalprisoners

2- See http://victims.org.uk/s08zhk/

3- BBC report (1998). “When is a criminal a political prisoner.”
   http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/special_report/46095.stm

4- Interview with Laurence Mckeown on 25th of July 2013 at Coiste Republican ex-
   prisoners organization in Belfast, Northern Ireland.


6- Good Friday Agreement (1998). P. 30,
   https://www.dfa.ie/media/dfa/alldfawebsitemedia/ourrolesandpolicies/northernireland/good-friday-agreement.pdf


8- Bill Clinton’s speech to the employees and community of the Mackie Metal Plant,

9- Interview with Laurence Mckeown on 25th of July 2013 at Coiste Republican ex-
   prisoners organization in Belfast.

References


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