

Book reviews

CONFLICT AND RESOLUTION: PEACE-BUILDING THROUGH THE BALLOT BOX IN ZIMBABWE, NAMIBIA AND CAMBODIA

GRIFFITH, Allen 1998

New Cherwell Press, Oxford. 337pp

(Allan Griffith, who had been foreign policy adviser to Australian prime ministers or over 30 years, completed this book as Visiting Fellow of Oriel College, Oxford, shortly before his death in November 1998)

The conjunction in the title of this book has not just been inserted as an attention-catching novelty. The book is indeed about both conflict and resolution. In each of the three case studies it is not only the peace process that is described and discussed, but also the preceding conflict process. The serious cause and urgent purpose of each of the conflicts are taken into consideration. The actions and reactions of the involved people and leaders are related in a clear and well-documented way. The extended and complicated series of happenings are organised into insight-promoting units. The author makes very good use of his skills of selecting details and choosing descriptive as well as thought-prompting words. Enough detail is included to give the reader a penetrating sense of what happened. Apposite key words appear in chapter and section headings.

The thinking, searching reader will find more in the three conflict stories than just introductions to the discussions of the subsequent peace processes. Each conflict can be seen as representative of other conflicts with similar or comparable objectives.

This wider significance is implied by the author's key word descriptions of the three conflicts. In Zimbabwe it was a politico/military struggle over self-determination. In Namibia it was a politico/military struggle for independence. And in Cambodia it was a struggle for a modern polity.

In the chapters concerned we are reminded about indigenous peoples, who had maintained their cultures for centuries, and about foreign colonisers, who barged in with their delusion of superiority and their mindset of domination. Our memories are refreshed with regard to the backgrounds of Africa's liberation conflicts — settlers who opportunistically unsettled politico-socio-economic situations, and then foolishly resisted any change to undo the changes they had inflicted; African leadership who exhibited remarkable reticence and responsibility by generally refraining from using violence; various groups of the people of Africa who eventually lost their patience and opposed their oppression more and more violently. We also get an insight into the complexities of the Cambodian background — a great empire and civilisation, a unifying language, different religious traditions, geographic regions of differing fertility, subordination, occupation and protection by close or more remote neighbours or foreigners, aspirations of independence and freedom.

When the author, and the reader, have given so much attention to the conflicts and their contexts, both local and global, the peace processes can be studied much more fruitfully. The need for patience during a protracted process can be recognised. Reasons for to-and-froing or even renegeing can be understood. Attempts to devise plans towards approaching and reaching the objectives of a conflict can be better appreciated.

Readers will undoubtedly be able to accumulate useful learnings from the chapters (of each case study) dealing with pre-negotiation developments, the negotiation process itself, and the eventual implementation of an outcome. Especially valuable, however, is the author's comparative analysis of the three case studies in terms of what is called the democratic legitimisation package. When a conflict is waged to change an illegitimate government into a legitimate one, the package usually has to include a cease-fire, a transitional government, and an internationally supervised election. These elements, together with the whole issue of legitimisation, are duly focused on in the comparative analysis. Significant inferences are drawn and recommendations are made with regard to the entire peace process. A reviewer should resist the temptation, however, to say too much about such gems. It is the privilege of the readers to discover all the insights and ideas they can integrate into their existing expertise.

That is why this book can be strongly recommended. Each reader should definitely be able to learn surprising new lessons, or enhance lessons previously learnt. What we find will in the first instance be related to peace-building through the ballot box, but may also be of much broader significance. Reading this book will increase anyone's knowledge of fellow human beings, who are acting according to their political, cultural and national patterns of thought. And, more specifically, it will improve our insight into democratic legitimation, which is not only relevant in the struggles of ethnic, cultural or national groups, but also in the everyday life of community groups, workplace groupings, associations and families.

Jannie Malan