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Abstract

Why do amnesties that succeed in ending armed conflict fail to reduce—or even increase—societal violence in post-conflict communities? This study develops a Dual-Arena Theory of Post-Conflict Violence, arguing that transitional justice mechanisms operate differently across two distinct spheres: the Elite Arena of political violence and the Local Arena of societal violence. I focus on amnesties covering human rights violations (HRV amnesties), which represent the strongest incentive governments can offer armed actors to demobilize. While HRV amnesties reduce political violence by providing credible security guarantees to former combatants, they simultaneously increase societal violence by transmitting an impunity signal that erodes rule of law perceptions in local communities. These amnesties are not symptoms of weak states but strategic elite choices that satisfy international accountability norms in form while preserving impunity in substance. Using post-conflict data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program and transitional justice provisions from the Transitional Justice Evaluation Tool, I employ a Callaway-Sant’Anna difference-in-differences estimator to examine 68 countries that implemented HRV amnesties between 1989 and 2019. Results confirm the dual-arena trade-off: HRV amnesties are associated with sustained increases in homicide rates while simultaneously reducing conflict-related deaths. By contrast, truth commissions excluding human rights violations show no significant effect on societal violence while still reducing political violence. These findings reveal a previously unexamined cost of negotiated peace: the erosion of everyday security in post-conflict communities.