**John Torpey** 00:00

Hi, my name is John Torpey, and I'm director of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Welcome to International Horizons, a podcast of the Ralph Bunche Institute that brings scholarly expertise to bear on our understanding of a wide range of international issues. Today we examine recent developments in politics and conflict in Africa. In order to explore those developments we're fortunate to have with us today is Zachariah Mampilly, whom I will refer to as Zack with his permission, who is the Marxe Endowed Chair and Professor of International Affairs at the Baruch College of CUNY. He's recently held a fellowship from the US Holocaust Memorial Museum to study the role of civil societies in response to armed conflict in several African countries. He previously taught at Vassar College, Columbia University and UCLA. He received his PhD in political science at UCLA, which I think means he got his PhD in the Ralph Bunche Hall at UCLA, making a connection between us before he ever knew that, and he's been a Fulbright visiting research professor at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. Thanks so much for joining us today, Zack Mampilly.

**Zachariah Mampilly** 01:21

It's great to be here, John.

**John Torpey** 01:23

Thanks. I really appreciate you taking the time. I know it's the end of the semester, everybody's pretty busy. So let's talk a little bit about the research that you did with this fellowship at the Holocaust Museum basically addresses the role of civilians in the face of mass atrocities. Can you tell us about your approach and what you found in that research?

**Zachariah Mampilly** 01:47

Sure. So with the Simon Scott Center at the Holocaust Museum, as well as a number of partnership organizations, based in Sri Lanka, that Dalam Center for Policy Research in South Sudan, the Sudd Institute, and in Congo, the Congo research group, we engaged on a two year study of the role of civilians in civil society during episodes of mass violence and mass atrocities in particular. I think the starting point for the larger project was a paper that I had written a couple of years ago on the behavior of civilians living under the control of the Tamil Tiger rebellion in that country, and really wanting to understand how do civilians engage with violent actors, especially in the face of actors who may be interested in orchestrating large scale mass atrocity episodes. And what we sort of found in the paper was that the civilians actually possess agency in ways that are often not particularly visible, but deeply meaningful.

**Zachariah Mampilly** 02:54

And so if you think about, you know, how civilians are often portrayed during a civil war, or during the genocide, the overwhelming image that comes to mind is that of the passive victim; when civilians are, are essentially reduced to bodies that are acted upon by forces that are larger than them. And if they have any agency at all, it is the agency to flee the situation all together. And so when you hear narratives around the Holocaust, or the one genocide around civilians, by and large, the most prevailing narrative is that the individual who fled the violence, right. But the sort of empirical starting point that we wanted to examine both in the paper and then eventually in this larger Holocaust Museum project, was that the vast majority of civilians are unable or unwilling to leave the context in which they are existing. So if you think about ISIS in Iraq and Syria, something like a million people lived in Mosul under ISIS. And very importantly, we shouldn't presume that that means that they endorsed ISIS in any way or that they were happy that ISIS had taken over their town. It's just that for a variety different reasons, whether attachment to property, or that people are too elderly to leave, or that it's just really hard to to abandon everything that you have in the world and flee that many choose to stay. And they choose to push back against violent actors in often very subtle, but no less meaningful ways.

**Zachariah Mampilly** 04:26

And so what we try to do in the report is to explore this dynamic in multiple countries in multiple locations within each of these countries relying on our partner organizations in a very collaborative and I think regenerative process, in order to uncover the very diverse ways that civilians try to intervene into episodes of mass violence and to alter the trajectory of those episodes in substantive ways.

**John Torpey** 04:52

It's fascinating and important research that raises, for me at least, lots of questions about the directions this could all go in, and it's reminiscent of questions that perhaps are more familiar from my own research background about what people did in response to the Nazis, for example. Who stood up, and who did what Germans called civil courage, who stood up for Jews who were threatened or those kinds of things. And so I wonder if you could get into this in greater depth and just talk a little bit about how this might apply in elsewhere in Africa or, indeed elsewhere in the rest of the world?

**Zachariah Mampilly** 05:39

Yes, I think that obviously the Holocaust itself is a hugely important event. We've seen a lot of political scientists and historians that have tried to shed light on the kinds of examples that you're referencing. Evgeny Finkel, for example, just a couple years ago, released a book called “*Ordinary Jews*,” which look at how, you know, Jews were living in pretty dire circumstances try to resist their persecution by the Nazi forces. And so I think we are trying to be a part of a larger research agenda that is really centering in the question of civilian agency under such moments of duress. And what we find is actually really interesting, for example, one of the common tendencies in this kind of research is to frame this as fundamentally a moral question, and to view those who choose to stand up in the face of such brutal forces as being driven by some logic or by some sort of ethical or moral imperative. And that I think, is certainly true, right, for at least some part of the civilian population.

**Zachariah Mampilly** 06:49

But I think surprisingly, what we actually uncovered in our research in South Sudan, in Sri Lanka and in Congo is that the vast majority of people who are surviving under such harsh conditions are operating according to much more instrumental logics; they are simply trying to survive and in the context of survival, adapt and devise very novel strategies through which they may have influence over armed groups in ways that don't rely on any sort of moral suasion. So for example, in the case of Eastern Congo, one of the things that the Congo research group, who was our local partner in that country, uncovered during the wars in Congo in the early 2000s and in 2010s, was that one of the key actors who intervened into those conflicts was actually the business community. And they chose to get involved in the Eastern Congolese War, not because they were moved by some sort of higher power, but rather because the war itself was starting to affect their economic interests. And this was a very interesting part of the report that the Congo research group released, as part of this larger project, is that they were able to trace the evolution of the business community.

**Zachariah Mampilly** 08:09

So initially, the business community was actually funding some of the armed groups who were operating in Eastern Congo and causing all of this misery. But then, as the International Committee started putting pressure and placing sanctions and other threats of prosecution on leaders of armed groups and their supporters, it was an opportunity for the business community to pivot away from supporting the armed groups to actually try and to persuade them to put down their weapons. And again, they didn't do this because they had some sort of moral awakening. But rather that they started to understand that the conflict dynamics had shifted from a situation in which war was profitable for them, to one in which the sustenance of the war would actually start to have very negative impacts on their economic interests. And so, this is not a nice narrative of people coming to enlightenment in rejecting their previous ways, but a rather I think, much more honest depiction of how civilians in these contexts are forced to make often very difficult choices. But importantly, from a policy perspective, can be persuaded to do things that are in the interest of the larger society.

**John Torpey** 09:22

Well, you ended up exactly where I wanted to go next, which is the policy question; the policy implications of what you've done. So, as it happens, I was listening last night to a psychologist from Amherst College named Katherine Sanderson, who has just written a book about why do people stand up for others - I've forgotten exactly the title - but, you know, it's this question of civil courage again. And her sort of main takeaway point, I guess, was that this is all about social norms. Whether people behave well or perhaps not so well in moral terms is really kind of a function of the prevalence of certain social norms, or the kind of reactions that people will get from the people that are around specific times when these kinds of events take place. So, I wonder, can one intervene in these kinds of situations in policy terms to promote better outcomes?

**Zachariah Mampilly** 10:32

Yeah, that's a really tricky question. I think one of the things that we took on explicitly in the report was the role of the donor community in these sorts of situations where civilians are confronted with mass atrocities. And the literature on it is actually quite mixed, so we were trying to assess a couple different hypotheses; one that looked at the international community's involvement as fundamentally positive, and other that said that international donors, international NGOs can actually play a negative impact on these types of dynamics. And the outcomes of the case studies were not conclusive one way or the other. What we saw is that in certain situations there are positive things that the international community can do. But that often the mechanisms through which they intervene in these conflicts are faulty. So for example, one of the most interesting things I think we found across all three cases, is that when we asked each of the partner organizations to define civil society, they have a different understanding of what civil society was, from how international donors perceive what is civil society. So if you've ever spent time in Eastern Congo, or South Sudan or Northern Sri Lanka, where which were our three research sites, you will notice that there's a massive prevalence of international non-governmental organizations. And the fundamental inclination is to view them as a stand in for local civil society. And most of them rely on funding from the international community in order to to engage in their activities.

**Zachariah Mampilly** 12:09

What we saw consistently across all three cases is that from the perspective of locals in these communities, they did not consider them to be civil society actors. And they did not perceive them as playing a fundamental role in shaping the outcome of the conflict one way or the other. Instead, they pointed our attention towards traditional leaders to business leaders, as already mentioned, in the case of Eastern Congo, to informal groups, to a whole set of actors who are often completely overlooked by the international community because they do not meet the standards of what we consider to be legitimate non-governmental organizations. And that even where non-governmental organizations were trying to intervene into these conflicts, because of the legal and economic restrictions on their behavior, they would rarely take positions that would challenge power holders within these societies.

**Zachariah Mampilly** 13:06

So in the case of Sri Lanka, for example, almost all of the NGOs that were receiving funding from international donors did not want to be perceived as being hostile to the Sri Lankan state. Right? Because they fear that if they criticize this Sri Lankan government too openly, then they would be kicked out of the country altogether. So instead, the kinds of activities they engaged in would always foreground to the question of reconciliation. Now, the problem, of course, is that they're talking about reconciliation at a point that the government is actively engaged in mass killings of the minority community. And instead of speaking out against those mass killings, or helping the victims of those mass killings, flee the situation or deal with the situation that they're confronted with, the NGO is running workshops on ethnic reconciliation. So over and over in the reports, what we saw from our country researchers, who were all based and from the countries that they're writing about, was this disconnect between what the international community thinks they're doing in these situations, and who the actual relevant actors are on the ground, who are actually intervening on behalf of civilian communities facing episodes of mass atrocities.

**John Torpey** 14:22

Right, so I guess I want to move now to somewhat more empirical questions or, you know, concrete cases. You were recently quoted in an article in The New York Times that was addressing the kind of ways in which a number of African countries were going through experiences of leaders, dictators, abusing their positions in government to thwart the will of the people. And you have particularly been paying a lot of attention to the situation in Sudan. I wonder if you could talk about that. I mean, Sudan a few years ago and South separated, it was a kind of shining moment, it seemed the popular will sort of being vindicated. And pretty much since then it's been a downhill story. So I wonder what you could tell us about what's been going on in Sudan, South Sudan?

**Zachariah Mampilly** 15:29

Sure. For about 10 years now, I've been working on social movements and popular movements in Africa and elsewhere. I've been paying particular attention to a number of African countries than amongst those. And I think it's a pretty fascinating story. It's pretty complicated to summarize, but I think the way that I try to understand it is that these periods of disruption that have been going on in both Sudan and South Sudan are long term historical processes. Right? If we look at kind of the post colonial history of Africa, we have seen potentially three such moments in which the entire political system has come into question. This was the the sort of anti colonial period of the 1940s and 50s, which really led to the decolonization of most of Africa by the early 1960s. These were periods of tremendous uncertainty and ferment at the grassroots level, that eventually led to the expulsion of all the European powers from the African continent. Then again, in the 1980s, and 90s, sort of towards the end of the Cold War, when African countries were subjected to some very harsh economic conditions due to the so called debt crisis of the time, you had a similar kind of outbreak, a protest; actually beginning in Sudan in 1985, that led to, again, a major process of transformation across African countries. This time, of course, the Europeans were gone but most of Africa in the 1980s were under various forms of authoritarian rule.

**Zachariah Mampilly** 17:16

And so you had these large scale protest movements, that eventually led to, by the 1990s, the majority of African countries adopting some form of democratic governance. And I would suggest, and then we argued in our 2015, book, "*Africa Uprising*", that currently we're living through a third such period that we trace to a series of protests that breaks out in Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa in the mid 2000s. Initially, these protests start to break out in different African countries but are not particularly successful. And then, of course, by the early 2010s, with the so-called Arab Spring, which mostly takes place in Africa, you start to see a huge number of African countries experiencing these large scale protest movements.

**Zachariah Mampilly** 18:01

Sudan was part of this third way. So that in in early 2010s, partially related to the break away of South Sudan, from Sudan, you had a group of activists in Sudan in Khartoum, who wanted to not only allow the South to break away and form its own country, but wanted to overturn the government in Khartoum itself. Which To be clear, was always the original intention of the founder of the Southern secessionist movement. He actually never spoke of secession. He would always talk about democratizing Sudan in order to make it a more inclusive country that would welcome Southerners into its national imagination, right. That didn't happen. Of course, we know that South Sudan broke away. But these activists in Sudan really wanted to carry forth his vision, the vision of John Garang, and transform Sudan into a multiethnic, multiracial, inclusive democracy.

**Zachariah Mampilly** 18:57

And they [John Garang movement] tried pretty much from 2012 to 2014, to spark a large scale uprising of the sort that we saw in neighboring Egypt or Tunisia and elsewhere on the African continent. But they were largely repressed by the very brutal regime of Omar Al Bashir, who was Sudan's long standing dictatorship. This changed a couple years ago, I think, as most of your listeners probably know. So that had a successful uprising that broke out many of the same activists who had been involved in 2012-2014. were involved in the 2019 protests that eventually led to the fall of the Bashir government.

**Zachariah Mampilly** 19:36

And so it [the revolution] has been a kind of up and down process. So you have these moments in which the country gets a lot of attention, such as the break away of the South, or the overthrow of Bashir, but they're usually followed by setbacks and in these moments of setbacks, it's very easy totake a pessimistic view about whether or not the revolution was successful. And what I would suggest is that we need to increase our time horizons, right? Most protest movements don't achieve their outcomes in a year or two. If we looked at something like the US civil rights movement in 1961, you might declare that it had failed - despite the fact that activists have been mobilizing for civil rights since the 1950s, and really the 1940s - when trying to decide whether or not the movement has succeeded in 1961, if you would say that it failed, only to do say, "Wow, that was tremendous progress they achieved by 1965". It's a decades' long process.

**Zachariah Mampilly** 20:36

And wherever Sudan is right now, it is in a very difficult phase, the revolution was successful, but the military, they clearly said that they would not leave power. So currently, you have this very complicated arrangement in which the military and civilian leaders share power in a transition government. The military seems to have somewhat of the upper hand in terms of this temporary arrangement, and so situation does look quite difficult. But, I think what has been really important to acknowledge about the protest movement in Sudan is that they have learned a lot from previous failures, and they have made a number of choices; most explicitly be unwilling to leave the streets whenever they feel that their vision is not being advanced in ways that have put pressure on the military component of the transition government.

**Zachariah Mampilly** 21:31

So I am what I would say cautiously optimistic. I don't think the story is over; Sudan has been struggling with the Covid pandemic. Obviously, the international community has not been particularly supportive of the democratic forces in that country. There are still pretty severe sanctions on the government, you know, even as those are being negotiated by the Trump administration. But I think fundamentally, what I took away from my visits to Khartoum was a fundamental belief that people are not willing to let things go back to the way they were. Once you have experienced life, without the long standing dictator. Sudan is a very young country. Most young people in Sudan, have lived under a single president their entire lives. But once they started having these conversations around 2012-2013, imagining what Sudan could be without Bashir in power, I think it's almost impossible to put the genie back in the bottle as it were. And I don't believe that even if the military tries to usurp power from this transition government, that they will be allowed to do that by the Sudanese population. So I remain cautiously optimistic, even as I will acknowledge that there are certainly very, very real challenges ahead.

**John Torpey** 22:51

So does your cautious optimism extend to the rest of the continent? I mean, I know it's, in some ways crazy to ask a question about Africa as a whole, it's such a diverse place, which is, I think, often forgotten when we think about it. But at some level, people like you get sort of seen as experts on the whole continent, even though it sounds like you have a particular regional focus to your work. And, of course, there is the larger issue that relatively poor places tend to be not highly correlated with democratic forms of politics. And so, things are improving in Africa; poverty has been reduced and was reduced, at least before the pandemic in significant ways, advanced by the Sustainable Development Goals, and those sorts of things. And the disease burden of African countries has changed very much because of its relative economic improvement. But, how do you see the sort of picture for Africa in the next decade or so?

**Zachariah Mampilly** 24:02

Yeah, I mean, first I will definitely acknowledge Africa, it's 55 countries. I don't have any capacity or any desire to position myself as an expert on Africa, per se. But let me speak as a non-expert. I think part of my interest in Africa is driven by my interest in humanity. Africa is going to be the largest portion of the human population in our lifetimes; it is on track to be over 2 billion people It is the youngest continent already, it is growing at a tremendous pace, almost every major issue that we are dealing with as a species is already a pressing urgent issue in the African context - when we're talking about climate change, or capitalism or inequality. All of these things are already crisis level on the continent. And so I will speak as a human, not as an African expert, that we need to be paying attention to what's happening on the continent. And I prefer to be optimistic about it. Because if it doesn't work in the African context, it's not going to stay in Africa, It's going to be of concern for our entire species.

**Zachariah Mampilly** 25:21

So that's how I sort of think about it in terms of trying to look towards Africa, not to tell Africans how to get through these things, but what can we learn from their experiences on the frontline of these human crises. How are they dealing with climate change? How are they dealing with the dark sides of capitalism? How are they dealing with the rise of inequality? Africa has seven of the 10 most unequal countries in the world. I think we need to be paying attention to what's happening in African societies in a way that certainly in the West, we just do not. So I am optimistic, because I think that there is a lot that can be learned. And I especially pay attention to these social movements and these African activists, because I think they are confronting situations that are going to become more normal, even for those of us who think that we are protected in the West.

**Zachariah Mampilly** 26:18

One of the very problematic issues with say, for example, the Trump Presidency is that, people keep making these analogies that Trump is like an African dictator. And I think that's, that's a deeply problematic analogy, because in many ways we have it worse in the United States. When I see African civil society, when I see African social movements, I see individuals who understand the nature of the threat that they confront, who are fully aware of how to push back against very, very repressive forces. And I think what I've seen in the US over the past four years is that people are floundering. The only approach that Americans have towards a Trump-like figure who may just be a more permanent feature of our common future is to treat them as an anomaly; to view the current political and economic crisis as a function of a single man. And I think what we've seen in many African contexts - that was the tendency in the 80s, and 90s - but if you talk to African social movements, and African activists like I tried to, they have a much more systemic and much more global analysis of the forces that they are confronting. So that it's not really just about, say, Yoweri Museveni in Uganda, but rather about what's Uganda's broader position within the international economic and political circles. Because the reality is Yoweri Museveni will not live forever. He you know, he's trying his darndest right now to repress the opposition, to crush social movements in that country, and he may succeed, or he may be able to steal one more election, one more term in office, because he is supported very heavily by the United States who relies on Museveni to fight the war on terror in the Horn of Africa. But he is not long for this world.

**Zachariah Mampilly** 28:09

And when I talk to people in Uganda and elsewhere, it is a greater reckoning with how they have arrived at this larger situation that they confront. That's not simply about Museveni, but about how Uganda itself is often subjected to these larger economic and political forces in ways that work against the interests of ordinary Ugandans. And as I was trying to say, I would say work against the interests of humanity generally. So I feel like they're having these conversations. And, I don't want to in any way to romanticize their power, or suggest that they've figured it out, but I think that being able to have an honest conversation about where you are is promise, right, is reasons for optimism. And I'm hopeful that from them, those of us in the West, especially can learn about what it means to reckon with these real political and economic challenges that we are confronting, and thus far, seem unable to, to address.

**John Torpey** 29:09

Well, all of those are good reasons for us to have had you on the podcast and to hear those kinds of insights about how to think about our own situation, as well as that of Africa. I wanted to come back to what you said. You said something about Africans confronted crises and of course, there's one major crisis that's on our minds, and presumably on theirs as well, and that, of course, is the coronavirus crisis. I wonder whether you could say a little bit about how Africa is faring. I mean, early on, or relatively early on, I recall the suggestion of some observers of African developments, suggesting that the Africans might come out of this relatively well simply because of a point that you made in your last response which was that Africa is the youngest population - relatively speaking - on the planet. And that relatively speaking young people come through a coronavirus infection better than older people. So I wonder whether that scenario has played out to your knowledge? And, how is the virus affecting Africans?

**Zachariah Mampilly** 30:29

Yeah. So, to go back to something that you mentioned earlier, it's a huge continent, with many different countries, with very distinct forms of governance. And so we're seeing huge variation in terms of how COVID is playing out, that is much more about national level factors than it is a continental binding. So, yes, in some ways Africa's demographic spread - specifically, the fact that it has such a young population - has meant that there seems to be far fewer deaths associated to COVID than we've seen in other major regions of the world, even when compared to say, countries have similar economic development like India, African countries seem to be experiencing less of a crisis from from the COVID virus.

**Zachariah Mampilly** 31:16

But as you said, I think that there's there's massive variation that we always have to pay attention to when we talk about Africa; Africa is 55 countries. And in some places like West Africa, you have pretty strong forms of governance, especially in the public health space, because they have a history of successfully dealing with other types of pandemics. 2014 and 15, there was a large outbreak of Ebola in several West African countries, there was a lot of concern that this pandemic was going to spread across West Africa and into other parts of Africa and potentially around the world. And, you can compare, say, for example, Liberia, a very small country that is struggling to deal with the legacy of war, that has a very weak economy, that relies very heavily on donor funding, with say Nigeria, which is Africa's largest economy, has a very robust military has, you know, pretty sophisticated public health institutes.

**Zachariah Mampilly** 32:18

Initially, the fear was that it [Ebola] was going to spread from countries like Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone, these smaller, weaker countries, and then when he gets to Nigeria, that's when we're going to face a major crisis, because how can Nigerians deal with Ebola, right? And when we actually saw is that the answer was very well! The Nigerian military got involved in the Ebola response, that they were able to isolate, a few cases of Ebola that actually came into Nigeria very quickly. There were some deaths, but it never led to this sort of doomsday scenario in which Ebola spread rapidly through very densely packed cities in Nigeria, that just did not happen. It was a major public health victory.

**Zachariah Mampilly** 33:03

And we know that a number of African countries actually do have this capacity. And so, you know, there's huge variation. And I mentioned this variation, because I think one of the difficult things with talking about COVID in Africa is that, as a number of African commentators pointed out, that in the early days of COVID, there was a lot of doomsday discussion around how badly Africa was going to be hit by the COVID pandemic in ways that haven't actually been borne out by the data. And I think a big part of that is that many African countries do have this capacity for dealing with pandemics, they're more able to do very basic, simple things that we can't do here in the United States, like wear masks, like maintain social distancing. Because I think they have this experience of pandemics that has taught people in Africa that these are real, serious issues that have to be dealt with in a serious fashion, and that it's better to listen to science, than to turn these into purely political struggles as they have been turned into in the United States.

**Zachariah Mampilly** 34:08

That being said, I think that there are a number of countries in the African context that have not adequately reported how seriously the population has been affected by COVID. So even as I want to give credit to those African countries that have dealt with this in an urgent and serious fashion, I'll point out countries like Tanzania, and Sudan, countries that I've spent time in, where, you know, it doesn't seem to me that the government is doing much. In Tanzania, under the leadership of Magufuli, he was a COVID denial or denialist in the early days of the pandemic. I have friends who live there, they tell me that they believe the virus is spreading and the government is doing very little to respond to it. I think this is also related to the fact that Tanzania has become a much more authoritarian country over the past few years. And then this is consistent with how many authoritarian countries not all, sometimes deal with uncomfortable facts; like the fact of the current pandemic spreading through their population without any efforts by the government to implement measures that would help ensure the health of the population itself.

**Zachariah Mampilly** 35:19

So, I think the picture is very, very mixed. And I think it's important for us to really pay attention to people on the ground who have a better sense of what's happening to understand the larger political dynamics. And, ultimately we can hope that the stories saying that Africa has largely escaped the worst of the crisis are true, but I think that we need to really trust the science about what's happening here, and real data, because I think that's been strikingly missing from from from the debate around Africa and COVID, at least in the West so far.

**John Torpey** 36:00

But that was indeed the focus, at least one of the foci of our previous guests, Sam Clark, an epidemiologist and sociologist from Ohio State, who's been working in international context with the former CDC Chairman Tom Frieden. But it was precisely about improving the data gathering abilities of places that had less robust statistical infrastructures and that sort of thing in order precisely, of course, to be able to try to improve the public health situation of those countries. So, as far as your comment, I think it's maybe the big takeaway here is to remember that Africa is a very diverse place, with many different kinds of situations and orientations and capacities. I think that's been enormously helpful.

**John Torpey** 36:58

So I want to thank Zack Mampilly of Baruch College for sharing his insights on what's going on in Africa at the moment, and particularly with regard to his own recent work, especially on Sudan. And want to thank Hristo Voynov for his technical assistance. That's it for this episode of International Horizons and we look forward to having you with us next time. Take care. Thank you all. Thanks, Zach. And keep well.

**Zachariah Mampilly** 37:33

Thank you very much.