

Families of the Missing: A test for contemporary approaches to transitional justice. Simon Robins. USA and Canada: Routledge, 2013. Pp. 264. US\$140 hardback.

Families of the Missing is a must-read for anyone engaged in the theory or practice of transitional justice. In a ground-breaking ethnographic study based on interviews with the families of the Missing in Timor-Leste and Nepal, Robins advances a new way of thinking about periods of post-conflict transition. Considering information put forward by the families, Robins critically assesses contemporary transitional justice mechanisms both as remote from the victims and contributing to the perpetuation of the systemic violence which engenders conflict in the first place. Whether or not readers agree with Robins' analysis (or indeed, are willing or ready to hear it), it undeniably opens space for dialogue and reflection on transitional justice practices.

Robins points out the problems associated with comparative studies, but puts forward a compelling case for investigating the transitional systems in the two countries. The violence in Timor-Leste took place under Indonesian occupation between 1975 and 1999, with many people missing now for 35 years, and had UN-led transitional justice mechanisms in place at the time of writing. Nepal, in contrast, has yet to enter into processes of transitional justice. Despite calls for such systems since the conflict's end in 2006, few concrete actions have been taken towards their implementation. Yet there are strong similarities between the cases as well, including widespread poverty and inequality, and the societies' deeply traditional outlook characterised by enduring spiritual beliefs and local-level systems of justice.

Through his primary data and an extensive literature review, Robins builds up a strong argument in favour of victim-centred transitional justice processes. These processes, he makes clear, would appear very different from contemporary transitional justice models. Rather than being based in a discourse of universalism, legalism and human rights (concepts which are often removed from the reality of victim's everyday lives), such processes would take the all-important local context into account. This context manifests in the victims' status in society, their relationships, and local practices of accountability and justice. Victims themselves would identify the form which reparations would take dependent upon their contemporary concerns and desires.

Based on the information articulated by the families of his study, Robins determines that needs rather than rights drive victims' understandings of transitional justice. Victims see their needs as primarily social and economic, as compared to the political and civil rights represented by contemporary transitional justice systems. In addition to answers about the death of their missing relative and the return of the body for ritual purposes, victims primarily seek from the state a restorative process which returns dignity to them (which will enable them to properly function within their community), and the economic means to survive.

In its call to put victims at the centre of transitional justice, the book also aims to enable victims' mobilisation. Instead of being merely passive recipients of systems they do not relate to, victims have the possibility to heal their own wounds, and also become critical players in the construction of lasting peace (16). In such a system, the *process* of assisting victims

becomes as relevant as its end goals (37). Conversely, if victims are not effectively and meaningfully included in the post-conflict transition, they can become instigators of future violence. This potential stems from the victims' feelings that neither the fighting nor their personal loss have fundamentally affected the structural inequalities which initially fuelled resentment, discrimination and violence. Only when such systemic inequalities have been addressed can post-conflict societies ever aspire for true positive peace.

As well as presenting a robust challenge to contemporary transitional justice mechanisms, the book provides a critical insight into a highly vulnerable group. The families of the Missing number among the most marginalised people in the two societies under consideration. Their marginalisation stems in part from systemic exclusion and discrimination which pre-dated and exacerbated conflict (for example, discrimination against women, indigenous peoples or *dalit* in Nepal) but also from the social stigmatisation of victimhood and the fragile economic state of many victims deprived their principle breadwinners. In particular, wives of the Missing can be marginalised both by their communities and their families due to their status as neither wives nor widows, adding a strong gendered narrative to the victim experience.

Rather than only interviewing activists of the cause of the Missing (who often reside in urban centres) as other researchers have done, Robins and his colleagues traversed the two countries to visit participants in their homes, including in remote villages (22). As a result, the book contains the voices of people who have never before formally spoken about their experiences as families of the Missing. Although Robins cites these voices on a fairly regular basis, he often uses a single citation as representative of broader feelings among the victims. Given the rich qualitative data he collected, and the singular opportunity the book provides to give resonance to these voices, even more inclusion of participants' citations would have been appreciated by this reviewer.

Through its substantial quantitative and qualitative research, the book challenges the processes of transitional justice (or lack thereof) in Timor-Leste and Nepal. Yet the case studies serve to underline Robins' critique of transitional justice mechanisms as they currently exist around the world. He urges a reconsideration of the processes in order to put victims at the centre of any attempt to redress past conflict, restoring to them both the agency and dignity denied by the pre-conflict structures of discrimination and by their post-conflict status as victims. This book deserves to be read and digested by anyone involved in the transitional justice space in the hope that it will inspire a critical appraisal of current systems.

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