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Exploiting Ethnicity
Political Elites and Domestic Conflict by David Carment
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Self-serving and perceptive elites exploit ethnic conflict for their own benefit. In times of political and social upheaval, when insecurity prevails, ethnic leaders take advantage of uncertainty to consolidate their power and provide benefits to their groups. Two conditions exacerbate this process: democratization and diaspora support.

Ted Gurr argues that the so-called "Third Wave" of democratization, which swept through Africa and Eastern Europe in the 1990s, led to ethnic upheaval. It did so because institutional change created the opportunities for groups to more openly pursue their objectives. This argument challenges the prevailing idea that conflict emerges as a direct outcome of state collapse into anarchy, which is when the security dilemma tends to manifest itself.

Instead, I would argue that violent conflict is a crisis of legitimacy in which both state and society become arenas for open conflict, while at the same time, reform-minded leaders lose ground to ethnic nationalists through the electoral process. In Yugoslavia, the careful balance of power between Croats, Serbs, and Bosnians was torn asunder by self-serving bases of power controlled by ethnic elites. The net result of these elements was conflict between Serbs, who dominated Yugoslavia's weak political institutions, and the Croats and Bosnians, who moved to counteract the Serbs by attempting to wrest control and territory from the center.

Thus, an important condition for ethnic conflict to become violent is the relentless pursuit of ethnic goals under conditions of democratization, combined with the failure of reform-minded political leadership to anticipate and resolve disputes before they devolve into violence. Combined with the absence of the necessary skills and mechanisms to resolve disputes peacefully, ethnic leaders' exploitation of group differences for short-term political gains leads to radicalized politics and violent conflict.

Fueling Ethnic Violence

Aside from democratization, there are other significant factors that fuel ethnic conflict. Perhaps the most significant of these is support from diaspora communities. The transformation of the political arena into narrow bands of ethnic sensibility results in a situation in which leaders face a basic tradeoff in strategy. On the one hand, ethnic leaders must establish a power base that is broad and inclusive enough to fend off potential reform-minded challengers. On the other hand, in order to maintain support from extremists, leaders must demonstrate their unwillingness to compromise on fundamental security issues. Leaders generally reconcile these two strategies by lobbying for support from diaspora groups. But more often than not, these groups hold the most extreme positions on questions of ethnic survival. Their strength does not, however, threaten a leader's power base. Diaspora finance is thus a fundamental determinant of the success of ethnic elites.

Strikingly, diaspora remittances far outstrip Official Development Assistance. The World Bank estimates that in 2005, remittances reached an all-time high of over US\$230 billion. Another World Bank study indicated that post-settlement ethnic



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conflicts have a higher probability of reverting to war when a large proportion of the diaspora lives in the United States. The financial support of diaspora individuals, many of whom still cling to their ethnic prejudices, was found to be vital in supporting armed groups and precipitating this reversion to war. To be sure, not all remittances are directed towards fueling ethnic fires abroad. But the basic problem of fungible resources like financial flows is that, in the absence of complete information about who should be supported, benefits are often distributed indiscriminately.

Framed in this context, ethnic conflict can actually present positive attributes to ethnic leaders. For example, conflict plays a role in ensuring group cohesion. It also creates mobilization opportunities in which free-riders can be readily identified and punished. In this sense, conflict serves a functional and positive role for ethnic elites and their followers. Leaders will seek to generate ethnic conflict in order to increase cohesion among the group and bring themselves more power and influence. From the perspective of an ethnic leader, the long-term gains of territorial consolidation, enhanced political power, and increased ethnic homogeneity can be noticeably enhanced by a conflict that is contained within certain limits.

This argument implies that most conflicts are only superficially ethnic. In fact, conflicts are motivated by a number of factors, many of which are non-ethnic. These additional factors are often political and economic. Generally speaking, ethnic conflict refers more to the nature of the conflict than its root causes. To say that ethnic conflict arises because there are distinct ethnic groups is, at best, tautological. By themselves, ethnic differences are insufficient to guarantee political mobilization and inter-group violence.

As the Minorities at Risk project has demonstrated, groups tend to draw their potency and resilience from ethnic attachments, and then seek benefits on that basis. Identity becomes salient because it is invoked by ethnic leaders to mobilize support. Gurr also points out that although fear and frustration may form the basis for action, these emotions are not sufficient to create large-scale conflict. Domestic structures, the characteristics of rebel organizations, opportunities to mobilize, and the presence of incentives are also important determinants. Without resources and an increase in the expected payoffs of participation in violence, inequality and grievances are not sufficient to produce unrest. Violent ethnic conflict is the result of incentives and rational calculation; material benefits are essential to attracting participants.

Sri Lanka's Enduring Conflict

At first glance, Sri Lanka may not be an obvious example of how political and material benefits, rational calculation, and weak democratic institutions can prolong and intensify cycles of violence. Conflict in Sri Lanka has existed since the 1950s, and is not a consequence of the end of the Cold War or the break-up of empire. Nor does the conflict appear to suffer from the problems that have plagued other protracted ethnic conflicts, such as extensive third party intervention, save for a brief period of failed Indian engagement in the late 1980s. Sri Lanka's economic performance is reasonable and its human development record is improving. Yet the country still exhibits many indicators of failure: large-scale violence, armed and organized extra-judicial groups operating with impunity, and loss of control over territory and people. Since 1983, the conflict has claimed roughly 65,000 lives.

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