

The Effects of Ethnic Division on Democratization

In our modern world, the most just, equal, and free form of government is democracy. As such, it has a prevalence and attractiveness that makes it the first choice of nations with the opportunity to start anew. However, a key characteristic of democracy is majority rule and this concept has the potential to cause significant problems for states with ethnic divisions. How do such fundamental divisions affect the formation of a new democracy? The abrupt democratization of a socially divided nation causes more harm through civil conflict and violence than good through the expected equality and freedom.

This paper begins by explicating some of the scenarios in which failed states or overthrown states take steps toward becoming peaceful democracies but are instead embroiled in civil conflict. General factors contributing to this effect are then reviewed in order to provide the reader with a broader picture of the various possibilities of the situation. Finally, some probable solutions to resolving the conflicts of divided nations are discussed. Throughout the paper, the general term 'socially divided' nation is used to refer to a state that is home to two or more easily distinguishable groups of ethnic, religious, cultural, or linguistic nature.

SCENARIOS

The most common cause of civil conflict among large ethnic groups is the collapse or withdrawal of authoritarian rule. When the powerful governing body is no longer present, groups are free to compete with each other. Authoritarian rule has an interest in suppressing ethnic conflict because it must preserve its own integrity and strength through the unwavering support of a unified populace. But when it ceases to exist, for whatever reason, the formerly subdued ethnic divisions rise to prominence and incite conflict. Perhaps more accurately, the groups are compelled to compete with each other for their respective securities. Because the social groups are no longer contained by a central authority, they can be effectively viewed as unique states with an

obligation to provide for the security of their populations. The multiple groups each simultaneously vying for the power necessary to ensure their security results in the security dilemma. An increase in one group's security makes the other groups less secure¹. The prime example of this situation is the death of Tito and the subsequent breakup of Yugoslavia. The dissolution of the communist regime left the Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, Montenegrins, and Albanians to fight over the land and its borders as each sought to provide for the security of their own populations. The already strong dislike among the groups began to be compounded exponentially. Thus the brand new democratic states fell into a splintering conflict, instead of embracing strong minority rights and power sharing governments.

Likewise, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the introduction of democracy into the former socialist republics caused widespread unrest as nearly every individual ethnic group clamored for autonomy, secession, and independence. Ethnic nationalism effectively takes the forefront within a people's perception of their identity when civic nationalism declines. In addition to the conflicts resulting from the former socialist republics seceding from the “metropole”², most of the republics themselves have groups fighting for even more distinct new states, encouraged by their recent freedom from prior oppression. Clear examples of this can be seen especially in the conflicts of the Caucasus region embroiling states such as Armenia, Georgia, and Chechnya. In many cases, such demands can be satisfied by granting partial autonomy, but conflict often arises because, as enclaves made up of perfectly homogeneous ethnicities are virtually impossible, the majority group always has a vested interest in opposing this separation. For example, in 1979, seventeen percent of all Russians lived outside their home

1 Jervis, Robert. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton University Press, Princeton. 1976. 76.

2 Van Evera, Stephen. “Primed for Peace: Europe after the Cold War”. In Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller, ed. *The Cold War and After: Prospects for Peace*. MIT Press, Cambridge. 1991. 233.

republic, in the now successor states to the Soviet Union³. The metropole wants to hold onto the seceding territories occupied in part by some of its people. It has further reason to launch preventive wars against secession: a seceding region has an inclination to align itself with external enemies of the state that it is seceding from. This does not bode well for the metropole's sense of security. The scenario is compounded when neighboring states take an active role in scavenging the fractured remains of the collapsed or declining state.

The second version of this scenario involves the withdrawal of an authoritarian power. In most cases, as in that of Sri Lanka, the withdrawing ruler is a colonial power. When the British granted independence and left the island in 1948, tension between the Tamil minority and the Sinhalese majority mounted exponentially. The rights of the Tamils were no longer protected by the largely third-party British. Actions beyond the usual oppression such as state sponsored (Sinhalese) colonization and a law making Sinhala the single official language gave the Tamils reason enough to resort to militancy to secure themselves⁴. The democratic government has not been able to bring a peaceful end to the ongoing civil war in the country.

In another scenario, instead of an imperial power departing, an intervening foreign power overthrows the existing government of a state and attempts to impose and establish a democratic government in order to serve its own interests. The 2003 Iraq invasion by the United States serves here as the chief exhibit. The occupying force removed the national cohesive force of Saddam Hussein and began to install a democracy that gave the formerly oppressed majority Shi'a the reigns of power. In the same manner as was described before, Saddam's sole authority had ensured a false equilibrium and peace among the three major ethnic groups: Sunni, Shi'a, and Kurds. And so, along with the freedom of democracy has come conflict and violence as ethnic

3 Van Evera. "Primed for Peace: Europe after the Cold War". 234.

4 Wikipedia. "Origins of the Sri Lankan civil war".

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Origins_of_the_Sri_Lankan_civil_war. 12 Mar 09.

divisions occupy the forefront of politics. In particular, the reversal of the holders of the dominant power has been an especially potent source of animosity between the Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. The Sunni feel wrongly deposed and the Shi'a feel the need for revenge for past oppression. The Kurds see an opportunity in the weakness of the new state for further autonomy or independence of Kurdistan. Whether the enormous and long term effort of the United States to honestly pacify the religiously and ethnically divided violence has established a viable democracy in Iraq remains to be seen.

The final scenario deals again with an imperial power and the consequences of its departure. Oftentimes, the colonial borders that are drawn by these ignorant powers with little respect to genuine ethnic divisions become the root of intense conflict when these territories gain independence and must resolve their internal disagreements⁵. Historically hostile tribes are compelled to create a single government together simply because that was how their land was chopped up. This almost always results in the violent civil wars that have plagued especially Africa since its nations' independences in the mid 1900's. In the case of Rwanda, the replacement of the existing Tutsi monarchy with the majority Hutu democratic republic reversed the century-old class system and sparked violent power struggles. Both the Tutsis, motivated by their long term tradition of control and recent ousting, and the Hutus, motivated by a desire for retribution for past oppression, felt that they had the right to hold power over the other. The rapid removal of the imposed order that had held the elites in power left Rwanda with a vague plan for a democracy and an inexperienced set of new leaders to ensure it. The seemingly irreconcilable conflicts between numerous ethnic groups across Africa suggest the necessity of a great (and violent) remapping of the continent.

5 Although the situation he describes is not colonial, Michael Brown goes even so far as to suggest that borders of states of the former USSR were “*deliberately* designed to maximize ethnic complications”. Brown, Michael. The International Dimensions of Internal Conflict. MIT Press, Cambridge. 1996. 16.

FACTORS

Several notable variables either contribute to or lessen a collapsed state's tendency toward social conflict. The most easily understood of these is the effects of the geographical distribution of the various groups in a country. In some instances, a substantial blending of groups leads to greater tensions between them. For example, in the Yugoslavian conflict between Serbia and Croatia, pockets consisting of a majority of Serbians within Croatian borders sought to define themselves as autonomous. The region of Krajina went so far as to declare their region a distinct entity and sought to align or even merge with the geographically separate Serbia⁶. These enclaves of settlement, which only occurred as a result of natural movement within the former unified state, often make drawing contiguous borders impossible. Without clear lines to distinguish the various ethnic groups, it becomes much harder for each to provide security for its respective discontinuous populations. This situation can also be observed in Israel's settlements throughout the West Bank of Palestine. It is a daunting task to provide security for all of the Israeli citizens within these trans-border areas. In order to accomplish the task, a sizable military presence is required, which obviously increases the tension and chances for violence. Conversely, nations that contain largely distinctly separated ethnic groups have a fairly easy time organizing a separation. For instance, Czechoslovakia, which had greater than 85% homogeneous ethnicity in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia, underwent a peaceful “Velvet Divorce” after the end of communist rule in the country⁷. Because the two social groups were already situated in distinct regions, a mutual division could be peacefully negotiated.

A similarly straightforward catalyst of ethnic conflict stems from national leaders. If a

6 Wikipedia. “Breakup of Yugoslavia”. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breakup_of_Yugoslavia. 12 Mar 09.

7 Wikipedia. “Dissolution of Czechoslovakia”. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dissolution_of_Czechoslovakia. 13 Mar 2009.

recently collapsed state does manage to pull together a new government from the ashes, it is inevitably much weaker than the first and is usually incapable of exerting the solidifying power necessary to keep the ethnic divisions suppressed. In order to remain afloat, the new ruling elites must take a side with one of the social groups. In the Yugoslavian example, the Serbian leader, Slobodan Milosevic, supported and encouraged Serbian nationalism and unity in order to consolidate his own political power. This aggravated the violent friction in the area as he sought to achieve a homogeneous Serbian population in Serbia through ethnic cleansing. Leaders of socially divided states who entertain selfish motives are obviously not conducive to the creation of peace.

Another factor that increases tension is the addition of small bands of fanatics to the situation⁸. These non-mainstream groups promulgating their extremist views both incite others to take the same stances and also increase the general perception of the seriousness of the ethnic conflict at stake. Particularly in Iraq, the actions of suicide bombers and radical sects tend to downplay the simple peace that most of the nation's citizenry probably desires.

Finally, the balance of power between the two or more ethnic groups plays a role in determining the inclination to civil conflict. Most conducive to violence is the middle ground between the scenario where one group has the clear superiority and the scenario where there are two quite evenly matched groups. In the former situation, the smaller ethnic minorities pose no security threat to the majority, and thus it usually has little problem providing adequate social rights and representation to these groups. Peace is also more easily promoted in the latter, when two divided groups nicely balance each other's ambitions and attempts to subjugate the other. But when there is a disparity in this type of balance, a state is much more prone to violence because the majority can assume control of the democracy and deny the rights of the minority, which it

8 Posen, Barry R. "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict". *Survival*. Vol. 35. no. 1. Spring 1993. 36.

views as a legitimate threat.

SOLUTIONS

Having understood the capacity for violence in these situations and some of the more significant factors at work, the question presents itself: what can be done to promote peace in a newly democratic and ethnically divided nation? One method is to examine the cases of success. Many deeply socially divided countries have managed to establish viable democracies through power sharing. In Switzerland, grand coalitions and the federal council ensure that control is shared and adequate representation is enforced. Likewise, in Belgium and Ireland, the governing coalition must consist of both major parties⁹. It seems then that these types of governments are best suited for providing the rational playing field necessary for opposing ethnic groups to resolve differences through compromise. However, power sharing systems are notoriously difficult to design in the first place. They require both sides to make concessions, perhaps even weakening their perceived security, in order to reach a middle ground. As Professor Van Evera noted in lecture, fundamental compromises of this type can often only be achieved with a strong commitment from the founding elites that their nation will not be spiral into ethnic tension and competition. Yet in new democracies, leaders like this are hard to come by because a politician is not popular if he is perceived to hold the interests of others above those of his constituents.

Another lesson for a newly democratized state is that measures ensuring and protecting broad rights of the minority are essential. In the best case, they should be enshrined in the state's founding documents, as the Bill of Rights amended the Constitution of the United States. This kind of guarantee, if enforced, serves as a foundation and baseline respite for minority groups in a socially divided state whenever proportional representation does not rule in their favor.

⁹ Wikipedia. "The Troubles". http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Troubles. 19 Mar 2009.

Obviously, if minorities are treated with a fair level of respect, they are much less likely to resort to violence to obtain this respect or to pursue secession by force.

The previously mentioned case in which a foreign power takes on the task of democratizing another state provides a rare look at what must be done to establish a viable government in an ethnically divided nation. The creation of a democracy from scratch is theoretically possible, but it requires an enormous investment of time, money, and force. In some sense, the goals of this effort can be viewed as the active introduction of the natural conditions required for a sustainable democracy. These requirements, a large middle class and a high literacy rate, must be brought about in the society artificially, along with the other traditions and institutions necessary for a strong democracy, such as a public education system, a judiciary, and free press. These, then, constitute some of the most important objectives of a newly democratic state if it has not already attained them.

In the end, the only truly practicable solution to conflict within socially divided nations is often partitioning. Both the fact that cultural identities are notoriously difficult to erase and the general approval in the international community of self determination encourage splitting. Indeed, there were only 51 members at the United Nations founding in 1945¹⁰. Currently, it has a membership of 192 countries, but there still exist many times that number of distinct ethnic groups in the world. If the potential for violence among cohabiting ethnic groups is so powerful and inevitable, it seems that this number is slated to keep on increasing as the world splits into more and more countries. Is there a limit to this phenomenon that seems to be a trend toward national ethnic homogenization? At some size, the disadvantages of having a tiny nation will outweigh the advantages of having one's own "culturally uniform" independent state and prohibit

10 United Nations. "Growth in United Nations membership, 1945-present".
<http://www.un.org/members/growth.shtml#1940>. 3 Mar 2009.

further division.

Thus, it can be clearly seen that the abrupt democratization of socially divided nations puts enormous pressure on the groups to fend for themselves, protect and band with members of their own identity, and become violently antagonistic towards other groups. Additional factors including demographic geography, motives of elites, the effects of radicals, and the balance of power contribute to the resulting conflicts. But in truth there are many steps that can be taken to minimize these effects and promote a peaceful settlement. As there will undoubtedly be many such situations in the world, the international community should make it a priority to understand them entirely in order to avert lasting harm.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

17.42 Causes and Prevention of War
Spring 2009

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.