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The Bottom Billion

Many prominent experts drawing on economic theories of civil wars believe that ethnic grievances serve as a cover for greed-driven motives and that they are so common they fail to explain the occurrence of civil violence. Yet, because this research tends to reduce such conflict processes to ethno-demographic measures based on individual interactions, it generally fails to capture the role of the state and group-level challenges to governmental authority. Indeed, ethnic groups that are excluded from access to state power, or are experiencing economic inequality compared to groups in other countries, are especially likely to hold ethno-nationalist grievances. Political exclusion becomes frustrating and conflict-inducing if other groups have recently lost political power. Group-level inequality operates in both directions, i.e. both poorer and wealthier groups are more likely to get involved in violent conflict than groups whose wealth lies closer to the country mean. Violent ethno-nationalist challenges to governmental power depend on many factors that operate alongside ethno-nationalist grievances, including organizational resources, political institutions, geopolitics and terrain, trans-border support and intervention. Power-sharing is the most obvious, but often imperfect, solution to ethno-nationalist conflicts, and may have to be replaced by partition in especially entrenched situations.

Reference


About the Author: Lars-Erik Cederman

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Ethno-nationalist exclusion and civil war

While it is hard to capture grievances directly, it is possible to identify situations in which ethno-nationalist violence might be especially likely. Whereby ethnically distinct populations are ruled by governments perceived to be foreign, the principle of nationalism is violated. Viewed as being profoundly unjust by those excluded from power, such situations bring forth collective emotions of resentment that can be exploited by rebel organizations to challenge the state. In such situations, the risk of violence increases substantially, as illustrated by the conflicts that brought down the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires in the early 20th century, and the European colonial empires during the second half of the same century. If subjected to ‘alien rule’, organizations claiming to represent excluded groups may attempt to challenge the government directly or indirectly by claiming a greater degree of autonomy or even independence.

Focusing on civil wars in sovereign states after the end of World War II, our research shows that groups excluded from influence over the executive, especially those whose power was recently reduced and entirely blocked, are much more likely to engage in civil violence than those that enjoy secure access to state power. Our new dataset Ethnic Power Relations (EPR), which emerged from a collaborative venture involving researchers at ETH Zurich and UCLA, provides information about the power status of all politically relevant ethnic groups around the world from 1945 and 2005. A simple tabulation of conflict probability for included and excluded groups shows, clearly, that access to power matters:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yearly Observations</th>
<th>Annual Conflict Probability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Included groups</td>
<td>8,314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluded groups</td>
<td>16,662</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>24,976</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table displays the number of years that groups experienced peace and outbreaks of conflict. Clearly, the annual odds of civil war for any group are very low, i.e. not much more than 1 in 170. However, an excluded group is about twice as likely to get involved in conflict as one that already enjoys access to state power (annual conflict probability of 0.71 percent rather than 0.32 percent). Furthermore, compared to included groups, those that experienced recent loss of power are almost 18 times more likely to experience civil war (which corresponds to a conflict probability of 5.7 percent). Controlling for other conflict-inducing factors and differentiating among the finer nuances of power access, Cederman, Wimmer and Min (2010) demonstrate that this is a robust result.

Horizontal inequality and civil war

In addition to political exclusion, the relative wealth of ethnic groups influences the probability of conflict. In these cases, grievances emanate from resentment linked to governmental neglect and backwardness, or, in the case of relatively affluent groups, frustration with having to support less effective parts of the state. The crux is that it is notoriously difficult to find data on relative wealth at group level. To solve this problem, our research team adopted a spatial approach that estimates regional income based on geographic data on economic wealth. Our most recent dataset, GeoEPR, offers a ‘bird’s eye view of ethnic settlements’ around the world that builds directly on the EPR dataset. Using the settlement areas as ‘cookie cutters’, we computed the relative wealth of ethnic groups since 1990. Measuring horizontal inequality as the ratio between the per capita income of the group and that of the country as a whole, the following illustration shows the estimate for Yugoslavia in 1990:

Here the conflict proneness of the groups included is shown as the red dashed line, and that of the excluded ones as the solid black line (for details, see Cederman, Gleditsch and Weidmann, 2010).

Other risk factors related to ethno-nationalist grievances and beyond

Needless to say, not all excluded or unequal groups resort to arms. Generally, the larger and more powerful the group, the more likely rebellion becomes, although this effect may decrease for very large groups, since they can often impose their will without resorting to violence. Ethnic minority rule, as illustrated by Saddam Hussein’s Iraq or the Tutsi governments in Burundi, is an especially unstable arrangement, since their lack of legitimacy has to be compensated by military domination that is likely to spawn even more grievances (Cederman, Buhaug and Rød, 2009).

Furthermore, the influence of ethno-nationalist grievances is by no means limited to political and economic marginalization. It can be assumed that grievances increase as the state’s control of the territory in question decreases. Opposition to the government’s policies typically emerges in peripheral areas far from the capital and in rough terrain, as illustrated by the Assamese, Chechen and Kurdish insurgencies in India, Russia and Turkey.

Moreover, wherever ethnic groups can count on support from ethnic kin in neighbouring states, as is the case with the Albanians in Macedonia or the Kurds in Turkey, the risk of internal conflict increases as well. While this effect is not automatic, this project has shown that outside groups are more likely to get involved in cases where the excluded ethnic groups are relatively large in relation to the dominant group(s).

Finally, it should be borne in mind that civil wars are also caused by several factors not directly linked to grievances. Many conflicts of this type start for ideologically-based reasons and have little or nothing to do with ethnic-ity or nationalism. Moreover, ethno-nationalist grievances do not exclude the possibility that such conflicts are also partly driven by a more generic logic, such as natural resources and wealth mostly unrelated to ethno-nationalist problems.

Why It Matters

It may seem that the issue of grievances and violence is merely academic. Yet, very much as successful medical treatments hinge on proper diagnosis, conventional methods of conflict resolution depend directly on how the causes of conflict are analysed. If ethno-nationalist claims were both ubiquitous and irrelevant for conflict, and possibly even used as smoke-screens by greedy warlords, then there would be little reason to take them seriously. Instead, it would make sense to focus on ways to prop up weak governments and to help them improve their counter-insurgency campaigns. In fact, some state leaders do not even recognize that they are dealing with ethno-nationalist challenges. Instead, they have been keen on following former US President George W. Bush in referring to belligerent minorities as terrorists regardless of their political programme.

In view of our findings, however, it would seem that such policies are likely to be ineffective, and possibly even counter-productive, especially in the long run. The best way of breaking the cycle of violence driven by political exclusion is to include groups that have been badly treated by their governments and to give them a real stake in their country’s future. Indeed, some of the most intractable and damaging conflict processes in the current world, such as the Israeli-Palestinian civil war, are to a large extent about political and economic injustice. It is very unlikely that such conflicts will ever be resolved if the claims of marginalized populations are not taken seriously.

Of course, inclusion through power-sharing can be extremely fragile and often fails, especially in a climate of acute mistrust, and may even provoke renewed violence. In some cases, partition may thus be the only way to satisfy competing ethno-nationalist claims. Yet, such an option should be seen as a last resort and should be invoked according to clearer legal and practical criteria than is the case today, or it will risk triggering new conflicts through moral hazard. Regardless of the mix of policies advocated, we should leave the attempts to trivialize, or even criminalize, grievances to ruthless state and rebel leaders.
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<th>Annual Peace</th>
<th>Civil War outbreak</th>
<th>conflict probability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Included groups</td>
<td>8 314</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluded groups</td>
<td>16 662</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>0.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluded &amp; downgraded groups</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>24 976</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>0.58%</td>
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Lessons Learned
• Claims that ethnic grievances are omnipresent and unrelated to the outbreak of civil wars rest on shaky foundations.
• Ethno-nationalist grievances are not purely individualist phenomena that can be measured through ethno-demographic measures such as diversity and polarization, but require analysis of the relations between ethnic groups and governments.
• Ethnic groups are likely to get involved in violence particularly if they are excluded from executive power or are much poorer or wealthier than the country average.
• Violent ethno-nationalist challenges to governmental power depend on many factors that operate alongside ethno-nationalist grievances, including organizational resources, political institutions, geopolitics and terrain, trans-border support and intervention.
• Power-sharing is the most obvious, but often imperfect, solution to ethno-nationalist conflicts, and may have to be replaced in part especially in entrenched situations.

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