

Exploring the Significance of Ethnicity in Contemporary Conflicts

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Abstract: In recent years, the international system has seen remarkable transformations in contrast to historical periods marked by nations involved in armed conflicts. Since the development of multilateral organisations and the recognition of globally accepted borders, the incidence of interstate conflicts has experienced a notable decline. Nevertheless, there has been a significant surge in the frequency of intrastate disputes, reaching an unparalleled magnitude. A significant proportion of present-day conflicts consist of intrastate wars, wherein a sovereign state becomes involved in acts of hostility within its own territorial boundaries. Although it can be contended that influential and burgeoning states with vested interests employ surrogate actors and engage in international interventions as a means to interfere in intrastate conflicts, however, upon careful consideration of the multitude of factors involved, it becomes evident that the key catalysts for the creation of intrastate conflicts are ethnic prejudices prevalent within states. The article aims to contend that ethno-nationalist conflicts served as the principal instigators of hostilities. It presents a comprehensive examination of the fundamental elements that contribute to interstate conflicts, as well as the distinguishing features of a recent war in contemporary political history primarily influenced by ethnic divisions. In other words, the piece aims to analyse the importance of ethnicity in contemporary conflicts and investigate various explanatory elements, such as religious ideologies, racial disparities, political dynamics, and economic and resource-related considerations.

Keywords: Ethnic, Intrastate Conflicts, Culture, Economic Resource, Racial, Tribal.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ethnic conflict refers to the antagonistic interactions that occur between distinct ethnic groups inside the confines of a single nation-state, sometimes characterised by pugnacity and/or internal insurrection. Throughout the annals of warfare, ethnic conflicts have consistently constituted a prevalent element within the realm of security studies and the domain of international politics. A significant number of countries throughout several continents, particularly in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and certain regions of Europe, have seen a multitude of ethnic wars (Collins, 2010). The political losses experienced by many countries can be attributed to internal conflicts arising from religious, social, and/or economic differences inside their respective country states. The issue of ethnicity in Sudan has played a significant role in the establishment of the two-state solution, resulting in the foundation of an independent sovereign state known as South Sudan in 2011. This development can be characterised as a religious and communal minority struggle.

In Europe, the dissolution of Yugoslavia was mostly attributed to religious factors and the emergence of nationalist sentiments, rather than being driven by an ethnic minority group akin to those found in African nation states (Williams, 2012). In addition, ethnic conflict encompasses not only the variations in cultural, religious, linguistic, racial, and tribal identities among social groupings, but also include additional factors that contribute to the escalation of these conflicts into violent and chaotic confrontations. This encompasses the organised allocation of resources by the government, which is influenced by the unequal distribution of socioeconomic classes, inadequate or unfair political representation, and territorial disputes over a specific resource (Humphreys, 2005).

In this article, I will argue that ethno-nationalist wars were the primary catalysts for hostilities in the late 20th and 21st centuries. This piece aims to provide an analysis of the underlying factors contributing to conflicts among states and the characteristics of a recent war in modern political history that is mostly driven by ethnic divisions (Williams, 2012). It will examine the significance of ethnicity in current conflicts and explore potential explanations, including religious beliefs, racial differences, political power struggles, and economic and resource factors. The study will also examine ideas pertaining to ethnic conflicts, shedding light on the cultural and ideological traditions that shape belief systems, the strategies employed by community leaders to mobilise their respective constituencies, and the subsequent competition for power and resources in order to establish governance. According to Wolff (2007), the article will examine the ethnic conflicts that have transpired in two African nation states, namely Somalia and Rwanda. It will analyse the potential factors that contribute to the increased probability of ethno-nationalist civil wars, evaluate the role played by the United Nations in these conflicts, and explore the influence of European colonialism on the construction of ethnic groups (Wimmer 2002).

To elucidate the magnitude of ethnic strife and its role in precipitating present-day conflicts. This paper will begin by examining the nature of conflicts that have occurred subsequent to the two significant global conflicts, commonly referred to as the World Wars, specifically focusing on the frequency of interstate wars following the year 1945. Numerous researchers and political analysts assert that there has been a notable decrease in interstate conflicts since the middle of the 20th century, particularly in the 21st century. The number of intrastate conflicts has significantly grown in terms of both civilian and military casualties (Collier & Sambanis, 2005).

Comprehending the essence of intrastate conflicts holds paramount importance in the field of political science and the study of international security. Nevertheless, there exists a cohort of researchers and political analysts that express a critical stance towards the notion of current wars occurring within nation states. They contend that there is a lack of distinction between the characteristics of early wars and those transpiring in the present era. According to Kaldor (2007: 6), the distinguishing characteristics of contemporary conflicts, commonly referred to as "new wars," can be identified by examining their objectives, military strategies, and financial mechanisms in comparison to those of previous wars. However, it was recognised and acknowledged by global leaders that there has been a significant change in the nature of international warfare. In particular, intrastate conflicts have emerged as a conventional threat to international security, characterised by religious radicalization and the emergence of new forms of ethno-nationalist conflicts (Ban Ki-Moon, 2010).

2. ETHNICITY'S ROLE IN CURRENT CONFLICTS: EXPLORING CAUSES

According to Sadowick (1998), the apparent reasons of contemporary warfare in our global context are mostly associated with ethnic factors within nation states. These factors encompass religious beliefs, power dynamics, tribal issues, racial divisions, as well as economic and resource-related obstacles. The inquiry into the correlation between ethnicity and war holds significant importance in understanding ethnic insurgent organisations and global ethnic conflicts, resulting in the direct loss of millions of lives. Furthermore, it is worth noting that there are further arguments that delve into the topic. For instance, Wimmer et al. (2009) provide evidence suggesting that in the aftermath of the Second World War, around 75 percent of all conflicts were characterised as ethno-nationalist wars. In contrast, it might be argued that these conflicts had a significant, albeit indirect, impact on a larger number of individuals, resulting in the devastation of several lives. Combat fatalities are not the sole contributors to mortality during periods of armed conflict. The concept of "indirect deaths" encompasses the additional causes of death, including as sickness, starvation, and malnutrition, which often give rise to a significant number of fatalities in times of war (UCDP 2010, 1-2). The eruption of civil conflict results in significant suffering for a majority of innocent citizens, particularly women and children.

Hence, the issue that necessitates attention pertains to the manner in which ethnicity has emerged as a significant peril to global security. Various generations in our society have witnessed the perilous manifestations of global ethnic wars, predominantly occurring during the latter half of the 20th century and continuing into the 21st century. Northrup (1989) posited that ethnic conflicts are driven by the significant influence of group identities, hence offering a rationale for the occurrence of such conflicts. Group identities serve as a means of establishing connections among individuals and collectives that possess shared social, economic, and political objectives. In contrast, Rose (2007) posited that identities are often expressed and challenged through collective memories and ordinary cultural activities, such as parades, flag displays, language, clothing, religious practises, and public monuments. These practises symbolically bridge the gap between the past and present, and are observable in the symbolic landscape of a particular region (p. 2). This statement posits that the formation of ethnic cohesion is facilitated by the presence of shared social interests among group identities, such as religious beliefs, language, culture, economics, and political power dynamics.

3. EXPLORING ETHNIC CONFLICTS: BELIEFS, STRATEGIES, AND POWER

One explanation for ethnic conflict posits that the presence of several diverse cultures in close proximity to one another ultimately leads to the emergence of ethnic violence and state conflicts. An example of religious demographics in Sudan reveals that the northern region of the country is predominantly inhabited by Muslims, while the southern region is home to a minority population practising Christianity and animism (Williams, 2012). Prior to the attainment of independence by the country in 1955, following its liberation from the British Empire, the Al-Mahdi clan, which held a position of privilege and influence, made preparations to assert their own identities upon the Southerners (Kaufman, 2006). Consequently, a protracted ethnic war emerged between two distinct social groups characterised by divergent religious affiliations, notwithstanding their shared political territory. Conversely, the topic of religion presents a vast expanse of investigation. The question of whether religion is a significant factor contributing to civic unrest has been a subject of scholarly inquiry. This inquiry is prompted by the prevalence of continuing religious conflicts, such as those witnessed in the Middle East, as well as historical instances of religious warfare, such as those involving the Ottoman and Christendom Empires throughout the Mediaeval and early modern periods (Norris and Inglehart 2011: 55-133).

According to Huntington, the theoretical perspective on conflicts arising from religious and civilizational differences is not only valid, but also fundamental in various aspects. According to Huntington (1993, p. 2), the perception of the relationship between God and humanity varies significantly across individuals from many civilizations, leading to contrasting perspectives on the nature of existence in the world. Therefore, individuals who share the same nationality but hold divergent religious convictions, such as Muslims and Christians, often encounter significant challenges while attempting to undergo religious conversion. These difficulties can be attributed to what Williams (2012, p. 266) refers to as "religious communal" or "sectarian" disputes. This viewpoint is supported by several perspectives, including those of Shia and Sunnis, as well as Catholics and Protestants, which can potentially give rise to ethnic tensions (Mitchell, 2006, pp. 99-132). Religion is often seen as a social phenomenon in certain regions, characterised by its resistance to political influence and the democratic process, making it difficult to alter or regulate. This phenomenon is observed in instances of global unrest, such as the emergence of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, Boko Haram in Nigeria and West Africa, and Al-Shabab in Somalia. These ethnic conflicts are often driven by religious ideas.

Consequently, it can be argued that religion emerged as a fundamental cornerstone of human civilisation (Arjomand, 1993). Moreover, the enduring conflict in the Middle East can be attributed to divergent religious beliefs, as evidenced by the ongoing hostilities between Shiite and Sunni factions, the tensions between Jews and Muslims, and the struggles faced by Christians in their quest for survival. These instances highlight the significant impact of ethnicity and identity discourse on conflicts within both nation states and multicultural societies worldwide. Contrary to this viewpoint, there exist divergent perspectives asserting that religion, in isolation, is not the sole cause of conflict. Rather, it is contended that other political factors have a significant role in exacerbating religious and ethnic conflicts. Fearon and Laitin (2003) argue that ethnic conflicts are mostly instigated by poverty and economic disparity. Moreover, the UN DESA report presents a case study on the ethnic conflict between the Cassis and Mamprusis in Ghana. The report elucidates how the presence of ethnicity disrupts peace and stability within a particular region when a certain group is systematically deprived of power and resources, particularly in relation to their land ownership and the legitimacy they attach to it. Consequently, these marginalised groups resort to violent means as a means of defending their social needs (UN DESA, 2001, p. 16).

The fundamental human requirements give rise to profound societal issues, as the allocation of land and resources becomes non-negotiable and inflexible. The occurrence of ethnic conflict can be attributed to the lack of fundamental needs, as argued by Burton (1990). If we define ethnicity as a collective of individuals who share cultural origins, racial identities, religious beliefs, a common language, or a sense of belonging to such a group (Cambridge Dictionary, 2013), then it is evident that ethnicity plays a significant role in contemporary conflicts. It aims to explore the importance of ethnicity in these conflicts, and it unequivocally concludes that ethnicity is closely intertwined with the lethal conflicts witnessed in the world today.

An additional form of elucidation pertains to the theoretical frameworks surrounding ethnic conflicts. Political scientists and anthropologists engage in the examination of ethnic conflicts, seeking to understand their underlying nature. Additionally, they investigate the factors contributing to the political collapse or disintegration of governments. Political scientists and sociologists engage in ongoing debates over various schools of thought. The initial perspective in examining the origins of ethnic conflicts is attributed to proponents of primordialist explanations (Horowitz, 2004). This particular

theoretical framework posits that ethnicity possesses a primal nature, with the existence of familial legacy being attributed to traditional beliefs, biological similarities, and geographical proximity. Geertz (1973) posited the concept of "the assumed givens of social existence" (pp. 259-260). The term "givens" in this context denotes the notion that ethnic affiliations are innate, stemming from profound connections that bind individuals together, while simultaneously creating divisions with those outside the group due to cultural disparities such as religious convictions, linguistic variations, or racial distinctions based on colour or territorial and geographical origins (Geertz, 1973).

4. AFRICAN ETHNIC CONFLICTS: SOMALIA AND RWANDA

During the period of ethnic cleansing in Rwanda, the mainstream media and political elites perceived the genocide as an unavoidable conflict, attributing it to deep-rooted animosity known as "ancient hatred," as argued by primordialists (Toft, 2003). The presence of an established social split gives rise to the conflict, which is mostly rooted in deep-seated animosity stemming from religious, cultural, social, racial, and/or geographical disparities, rather than being centred around political and economic issues. In contrast, the aforementioned ethnic conflict hypothesis has been largely dismissed due to its simplistic nature and failure to address the underlying cause of the issue.

Another explanation is the Isaaq genocide of the Somali Republic, alternatively referred to as the Hargeisa holocaust, which denotes a methodical and government-sanctioned eradication of the Isaaq clan (Jacobs, 2023; Ingiriis, 2016). In the late 1980s, the government of Siad Barre was held accountable for a significant genocide that resulted in the lamentable execution of more than two hundred thousand innocent civilians from the Isaaq clan (Reinl, 2014).

The government carried out the genocide against the Isaaq clan, primarily with the intention of eradicating the Isaaq people. In the Somali context, one can posit that the manifestation of animosity and preconceived notions is intertwined with the instrumentalist viewpoint of ethnic conflict theory. Advocates of this perspective contend that such conflicts emerge as a result of individuals and groups seeking to advance their own self-interest and get economic benefits (Fenton, 2003, p. 77). Siad Barre hailed from the Darood dynasty and, during his tenure, over 70 percent of the high-ranking military personnel in his government were affiliated with his own clan. Within the framework of his government, the prominent ministries, such as finance, foreign affairs, and security, are under the supervision of those who share a common lineage with the leader. Consequently, non-Darood clans in Somalia who expressed scepticism about the resource and power-sharing policies were stigmatised as unpatriotic. The aforementioned perspective advocates for the prioritisation and pursuit of political and economic objectives aligned with the Darood clan. The Isaaq clan played a significant role as an opposition faction within the state, while Siad Barre and his clan subscribed to the notion that eliminating the Isaaq would secure the ongoing political supremacy of the Darood clan.

Fenton (2003) argues that while individuals may perceive these distinctions as inherent, it is important to recognise that they are shaped by cultural and social factors, as well as influenced by geographical location, language, and collective historical background (p. 81). The term "culturally and socially moulded" suggests that ethnic conflict, regardless of its manifestation as violent or nonviolent, is not an inherent or unavoidable phenomenon. Rather, it arises due to factors such as social inequality, issues related to political representation, and disputes over land, power and economic resources. These factors activate the underlying social divisions, rather than the divisions themselves being the sole cause of ethnic conflicts.

The Somali civil war, which commenced early 1990s, was commonly depicted by the global community and the mainstream media as an inexorable ethnic conflict that emerged from tribal distinctions. According to Mary Harper (2012), clans have a tendency to fragment into smaller sub-clans, which in turn continue to fracture further. In some cases, this process results in the formation of small family groups that identify themselves as distinct clans, each with its own unique name. Despite the emphasis placed on tribal distinctions by journalists and political commentators, it is important to note that the Somali people perceive themselves as descendants of a shared progenitor known as the 'Somal', a mythical figure considered the father of the Somali people (Putnam and Noor, 1999). Moreover, an overwhelming majority of the Somali population adheres to the Islamic faith, with no presence of non-Muslim populations residing within the district or any other region of the nation. According to Kemp and Rasbridge (2004), individuals that share the same race, language, culture, social conventions, and values are also known to exhibit similarities. If this assertion holds true, and the Somali civil war is indeed unrelated to ethnicity, what then is the underlying issue faced by the Somali population? The response to this inquiry is straightforward and pertains to the instrumentalist perspective, which elucidates the enduring tribal disputes in Somalia.

Nevertheless, Fenton argued that such disputes do not arise from deep-rooted animosity or a certain ethnic subgroup in which the majority of human activities are structured around familial ties. According to Fenton (2003), certain experts in the field of ethnic conflict. The concept of the Somali tribal conflict entails an abrupt eruption of hostilities among several Somali clans and sub-clans. The primary factor contributing to the prevailing turmoil of the ethnic conflict, as well as the occurrences of terrorism and piracy, can be attributed to the perceived inequities perpetuated by the ruling communist party and the consequential dominance of political and tribal factions. According to Harper (2012), Siad Barre's dictatorship may be understood as a covert manifestation of his own Darod clan's dominance, and the dynamics of clan politics ultimately led to his downfall (p. 12). In this instance, the Somali ethnic conflict mostly stems from political and economic disparities that emerged during the formation of Somali unity in 1960, rather than being rooted in ancient animosities as often portrayed by primordial theorists, politicians, and international journalists.

The Somali people held the belief that their colonial divisions were inconsequential due to their cultural nationalism rooted in religious and moral convictions, emphasising the imperative for all Muslims to join as a cohesive community of brothers and sisters. Moreover, it has been argued by Lewis (1980: 147-161) that the Somali people possess a multitude of factors that have the potential to foster national unity and facilitate the formation of a cohesive nation-state. The Somali issue primarily pertains to an ethnic problem, specifically tribal in nature. However, it is important to note that the political representation by the media, international experts, and local politicians does not accurately reflect the actual situation on the ground. In accordance with the instrumentalist perspective on ethnic conflict theory, proponents say that such conflicts arise from the pursuit of self-interest and economic gain (Fenton, 2003, p. 77). Nevertheless, the enduring civil unrest among the Somali population arose as a result of governmental and economic injustices, leading to a complex and persistent interplay of religious, proxy, and clan ethnic disputes.

The case of Rwanda serves as an additional illustration of the significance of ethnic issues within current conflicts. The Amnesty International Report of 2014 highlights that the genocide that occurred in Rwanda in 1994 led to the tragic loss of approximately one million lives, encompassing individuals of all genders and age groups (Amnesty 2014). Some political scientists contend that the Rwandan ethnic conflict, which involves the Hutu and Tutsi tribes, can be attributed to a longstanding animosity between these distinct groups in the region, particularly in Rwanda and Burundi (Geertz, 1973). Nevertheless, there exists a substantial body of individuals who hold contrasting viewpoints and challenge the aforementioned reasoning. Destexhe (1995, p. 37) argues that the identification and separation of Hutu and Tutsi as distinct ethnic groups is not feasible due to their shared language, culture, traditional taboos, and geographical proximity. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that the Hutu-Tutsi ethnic struggle, which escalated into a horrific genocide, cannot be dismissed as unrelated to the divergences between the Hutu and Tutsi communities, mostly instigated by Hutu political elites.

In the context of Rwanda, it is worth noting that the national army, predominantly composed of individuals from the Hutus clan, actively endorsed and participated in a violent and fatal campaign targeting the Tutsi minority. This reprehensible act resulted in the tragic loss of numerous innocent lives, with a particular emphasis on women and children (Seltzer et al., 1999, p. 17). Contrarily, it can be argued that the process of colonisation in Rwanda played a significant role in the establishment and organisation of occupational divisions between the Hutus and Tutsis, ultimately leading to the emergence of ethno-nationalistic tensions (Human Rights Watch, 2006). However, the contemporary ethnic conflicts in the international system have presented a significant challenge to the global community due to the substantial influx of refugees and the consequential impacts propagated by the mainstream media (Woodhouse et al., 2005, p. 106). The primary objective of the United Nations is to address and reduce instances of violence between states, including disputes inside states. Regrettably, ethnic conflicts have emerged as the predominant catalyst for civil wars in modern human history, as indicated by the Human Security Report (2005: 152).

5. CONCLUSION

This study has provided a thorough examination of the significance of ethnicity within contemporary intrastate conflicts on a worldwide level. The attributes of ethnic conflicts have been elucidated, with particular attention given to the recognition by notable international figures, such as the former Secretary General of the United Nations, regarding the extensive ramifications of intrastate wars on worldwide tranquilly, refugee crises, religious extremism, and the exacerbation of food insecurity and impoverishment (Ban Ki-Moon, 2010). The primary focus of this study was to examine the correlation between contemporary warfare and many factors such as ethnicity, religious convictions, tribal hostilities, power dynamics

influenced by ethnicity, racial disparities, and class disputes (Sadowisk 1998). This discovery was obtained by an analysis of multiple theories on ethnic conflict and their subsequent application to various examples of ethnic conflicts seen worldwide. The theories being examined include the primordial perspective, which posits that ethnic conflicts are primarily motivated by deep-seated animosity that originated in ancient eras (Geertz, 1973), and the instrumentalism theory, which associates conflicts with factors such as materialistic desires and perceived injustices (Fenton, 2003). The United Nations plays a crucial role in addressing and reducing instances of ethnic violence, with its primary goal being the promotion of global peace and stability.

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