What the Instrumentalists Got Wrong? Ethnopolitical Violence, Ethnic Leadership and Ethnopolitical Conflicts

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Abstract

As per the instrumentalists, ethnic identity is not primordial and is based on ethnic elite's political and social construction. They argue that only because there are differences and inequality among the groups is not a sufficient reason for the emergence of a conflict between them. An ethnopolitical conflict would emerge when the elite of a particular ethnic group would make a concentrated effort to highlight this difference and rally the masses on it. The paper argues that Instrumentalist theory fails to explain the timing of politicization and mobilization of ethnicities. Questions such as how significant is the role of history? Could collective memory or history of past injustices generate ethnic mobilization? Why the masses believe and follow the ethnic elite? And why only at a certain time, the efforts of the ethnic elite to mobilize the masses are successful? Are raised and addressed using two case studies of ethnopolitical conflicts: Tamil-Sinhalese conflict, and the Rohingyia-Buddhist conflict. The key finding is that it is the ethnic elite that play the most significant role in shaping the conflict and whether it would get violent using a grievance based narrative and a sparking event.

Keywords: Ethno-political conflict; Conflict supportive narrative; Nationalists and nationalism; Rohingyas; LTTE.

1. Introduction

Unlike the primordialists who consider ethnicity to be a given, Instrumentalists argue that the ethnic elite play a significant role in defining and formulating an ethnic identity. For the instrumentalists, ethnic elite politically as well as socially construct ethnicity (Devotta, 2005). Ivan Siber (1997), for instance highlights the role of the ethnic elite especially before and during an ethnopolitical conflict arguing that the shape or form an ethnopolitical conflict might take is largely dependent on the ethnic elite and their decisions. As it is the ethnic elite who decide to either address the problem through engagement or create fear and hatred of the other (Devotta, 2005). Instrumentalists believe that the mere existence of difference between different ethnic groups is not a sufficient reason for the emergence of an ethnopolitical conflict. An ethnopolitical conflict arises, according to the instrumentalists when the ethnic elite not only point this out but also attempt to rally the masses around this agenda by highlighting this difference. This is exactly what Brass highlighted when he stated that whether it is a dispute over

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a piece of land or an economic interest, the clash of interest and the attempt to secure those interests translate into a competition that leads to a conflict (Brass, 1990).

What Instrumentalist theory fails to explain is why elites are not always successful in mobilizing and/ or politicizing the members of the ethnic group? What causes and drives their efforts in the first place? And why at times they succeed in their attempts while at other times, they fail? What could be the rallying point for the masses and why? Why and when masses listen and follow such calls for ethnic mobilization? Instrumentalists stress the role played by the collective memory or historical experience in this but could this be taken as a sufficient rallying point for the masses to respond and act on elite's call for ethnic politicization and mobilization? This paper attempts to answer these questions by critically examining two different ethnic conflicts namely Tamil-Sinhalese conflict in Sri Lanka, and the Rohingya-Buddhist conflict in Myanmar.

The paper employed the qualitative and historical analysis method to analyze ethnopolitical conflicts with particular focus on the instrumentalist theory of ethnopolitical conflict. It extensively used unstructured interviews with academics, and journalists in Pakistan, UK, Australia and Sweden. An empirical analysis of the available literature (books, newspapers, journals and documentaries etc.) was also conducted. The paper also incorporated data and information gathered from various sources such as government reports, official statements, speeches etc.

This paper has three parts: first part overviews the conceptual debate over the terms ethnic, ethnicity and ethnic conflict, what constitutes an ethnic or ethnopolitical conflict followed by a discussion on the instrumentalist theory of ethnopolitical conflict. In the second part, the case studies are discussed with particular focus on the above mentioned questions. The concluding section discusses the research findings and sums up the research.

2. Ethnopolitical Conflicts: A Conceptual Overview

Ethnic is derived from ethnos, a Greek word used to describe pagans, mainly the non-Jewish and non-Christian people (Hutchinson, 1996). DeVos describes ethnicity as the use of culture to identify a people and categorizing it between "us" and "them". As per Anthony Smith, ethnic groups are:

> Named human populations with shared ancestry myths, histories and cultures, having an association with a specific territory and a sense of solidarity (Smith, 1986).

Handleman contends that the formulation of an ethnic group is a four steps or stages process. The first stage is when a people develop a sense of oneness and realize that they are different from other people. In the second stage, the group members start identifying themselves with their ethnic identity and communicate among themselves and with other as a group. This leads to common or group interests. The identification of group interests is the

third stage. The fourth and final stage is reached when an ethnic group develops socio-political institutions and is able to achieve territorial consolidation. To sum up, for an ethnic group to be identified as a distinct entity, it must have a name, a generally accepted and believed ancestry, collective memory of past glory, culture, solidarity and a geographic entity that the group calls its homeland (Smith, 1986).

According to Roger Brubaker and David Laitin an ethnic conflict is:

> … violence perpetrated across ethnic lines, in which at least one party is not a state (or a representative of a state), and in which the putative ethnic difference is coded by perpetrators, targets, influential third parties, or analysts as having been integral rather than incidental to the violence, that is, in which the violence is coded as having been meaningfully oriented in some way to the different ethnicity of the target (Brubaker & Laitin, 1998).

Taking Brubaker and Laitin's (1998) approach further that in such a conflict "at least one party was not a state. Murer (2012) argued that in such conflicts, the other side is also defined in ethnic terms and not as a state. This is the reason why Murer states the Chechen conflict was described as the Russian versus Chechen conflict and not Chechens struggling for independence against Russia, the state (Murer, 2012).

When exactly the ethnic identity of an individual and a group becomes important? When exactly the group members identify themselves with their ethnic identity? According to Vamik Volkan, individuals are more likely to relate to their ethnic identity and ethnic group when the group is under threat:

> … under conditions of threat individuals become more defined by their large group identities to the point where it may far outweigh any concerns for individual needs, even survival (Murer, 2012).

There is no universally accepted explanation of what causes an ethnic or ethnopolitical conflict. One of the most comprehensive and elaborative theory of ethnopolitical conflict is the instrumentalist theory. The Instrumentalists contend that ethnicity is a social and political construction of the ethnic elite. Paul Brass stated:

> Ethnicity is the study of the process by which elites and counter elites within ethnic groups select aspects of the group's culture, attach new value and meaning to them, and use them as symbols to mobilize the group, to defend its interests and to compete with other groups (Brass, 1979).

Brass frames the ethnic competition as a clash of political interests. According to him, whenever the interest of ethnic elite especially between elite of the dominant or centre-based ethnic group conflict or collide with the interest of a peripheral ethnic group, be it political, social and economic

interest or a collective of all, it would culminate into a competition resulting mostly in an ethnopolitical conflict.

Instrumentalists argue that the mere existence of socio-political differences and imbalance between two groups would not result in a conflict. It would arise when the ethnic elite frame this difference or imbalance as a reason for a group's suffering and use this to mobilize the group members against it. Brass points that if such a situation arises between local elite or elite of the peripheral area and the center based or national elite, (possibly the central government) it leads to a serious competition to achieve and preserve their socio-economic interests (Brass, 1990). Again the role of the elite is important to make sense of how far both the politicized and mobilized masses would go and the shape such an ethnopolitical conflict would take in future (Brass, 1990). If the elite decide to mobilize the group members, it needs to frame their demands in such a way that it is reflective of the people's sentiment and as per Brass must reflect or at least appear to be reflective of the larger group interests (Gagnon, 1994).

Considering the key role that an ethnic elite play in the different stages of a conflict, Ivan Siber argues that the root causes of most conflicts lie in competing political and economic interests. The contextualization of these root causes is dependent on the elite (Siber, 1997). This point is further highlighted by Nedegwa. According to Nedegwa, in such a situation the future shape of the conflict would depend on the policy adopted and option and choices made by the elite. Rene Lemarchand augment this point while discussing the Hutu-Tutsi conflict:

> The crystallization of group identities is not a random occurrence; it is traceable to specific strategies pursued by ethnic entrepreneurs centrally concerned with the mobilization of group loyalties on behalf of collective interests defined in terms of kinship, region or ethnicity. …clearly, one cannot overestimate the part played by individual actors in defining the nature of the threats posed to their respective communities, framing strategies designed to counter such threats, rallying support for their cause, bringing pressure to bear on key decision makers, and, in short, politicizing ethno regional identities… (Lemarchand,1996).

The most effective tool the elite use to achieve their objective is a group narrative based on collective memory. The Yugoslavian case is a prime example Milosevic contextualized the development that were taking place at the time with certain historical events. This resonated with the Serbian collective memory. In retrospect, one can see how Milosevic crafted his narrative by rather manipulating the sense of injustice that the Serbs as a group had based on the collective memory of the past events and using this to justify his actions and demands during the Yugoslav conflict. This brings to the attention of the researchers the significance of a narrative as a tool that the elite use to justify their demands and polarization of the ethnic group.

What is a narrative? Bruner's defines it as:

Social constructions that coherently interrelate a sequence of historical and current events: they are accounts of a community's collective experiences, embodied in its belief system and represent the collective's symbolically constructed shared identity (Bar-Tal, 2014).

It has been argued that within this larger and all-encompassing master narrative, providing justification to the actions of an ethnic group during an ethnic conflict hence can also be called a conflict supportive narrative, a number of sub-narratives exist. Bar-Tal analyzing the role of narratives is several ethnopolitical conflicts such as Rwandan, Bosnia etc. argues that all conflict supportive master narratives have eight points or elements: "First, the master narrative justifies involvement in the conflict and the course of its development and at the same time, discrediting the goals of the other side as unjustified and unreasonable. Secondly, it delineates the dangers that the conflict constitutes to the security-threat to its cherished values, identity, and territory. Thirdly, it delegitimizes the opponent. In essence, delegitmization denies the adversary's humanity and serves as a psychological permit to harm the rival group. Fourth, in contrast to the opponent, the master narrative presents a glorified image of the in-group. Fifth, it presents the in-group as the sole victim of the conflict and the opponent. Sixth, it encourages patriotism, which is essential in order to mobilize people for achieving its group goals, especially for violent confrontations with the rival-including readiness to make the ultimate sacrifice life. Seventh, it emphasizes the importance of maintaining unity, by ignoring internal discords and disagreements, in the face of an external threat. The eighth and final theme consists of the desire to live in peace, as the conflict situation inflicts suffering and losses" (Bar-Tal, 2014). One must also be cognizant of the fact that the basic objective of a conflict supportive narrative is to provide a justification of a group's action through a narration of what has happened to it and might happen and not to provide an objective assessment of historical or contemporary developments (Bar-Tal, 2014).

This is why, such narratives only highlight certain issues and developments and ignore or down play developments that does not gel properly with the overall narrative. If an event or incident is too well known, often one finds an explanation, justification or a subjective interpretation of it in conflict supportive narratives.

One must keep in mind that it is not that the elites suddenly bring out things that the group members are unaware of until then and suddenly start believing it when the elite bring them out. These grievances and past events on which grievances are based are part of the collective memory of the group. What the elite do is to contextualize these grievances and link them with the contemporary developments. Milosevic and the Bosnian conflict is a case in point. For whatever historical inferences Milosevic was making were based on

Serb masses historical memory and interpretation. What Milosevic and by extension all ethnic elites do is to provide a context and the link between past and present. Hence, it is argued that conflict-supportive narratives evolve and are not static. Narratives absorb new elements and information. This new information is used to perpetuate the sense of enduring injustice towards the ethnic group. Joshua Smith points that people have four types of fears: physical, political, socio-cultural and economic (Smith, 2006). Once these are highlighted, and the group members are told that their physical, economic, socio-cultural and political well-being and interests are threated and the elite justify this by pointing to certain contemporary development, the group members would be more inclined to respond positively to such a call. To further strengthen their cause, elite link this with the group memory of historical injustices (actual or perceived) and create a sense of enduring injustice among them.

To sum up the discussion, in the wake of a political or socio-economic dispute, the ethnic elite play the most important role in the politicization and mobilization of the ethnic group. For this, elite use a carefully crafted narrative that combines a group's historical memory of injustices (real or perceived) and why and what is happening at the moment is nothing but a continuation of the historical injustices resulting in a sense of enduring injustice among the masses. They key here is the presence of a dispute at the time when such a call to politicization and mobilization is made by the ethnic elite. If such a situation does not exist, a group's collective memory of past injustices alone could not materialize into ethnic politicization and mobilization.

3. Case Studies

In this section, the author will test our theoretical understanding using two different case studies. These case studies are the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict in Sri Lanka, and the Buddhist-Royhingyia conflict in Myanmar. The purpose of this section is not to provide a detailed historical overview of each conflict but analyze the issue in the broader sense within the confines of the conceptual understanding we developed in the previous section and whether the argument the author has developed and presented about the timing and the presence or otherwise of a sparking or triggering event. The reason for the selection of these two case studies is that they represent distinct phases within a larger ethnopolitical conflict spectrum. On the one end is the Sri Lankan case that focuses on the post LTTE phase where Tamils are generally viewed as potential enemies yet the Tamils have not turned violent. This means that the conflict is in the latent stage. On the other hand, Myanmar represents the other side where a rape resulted in a large scale ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya Muslims. An individual act when viewed through the historical animosity towards them resulted in a violent ethnopolitical conflict. It is an active conflict.

3.1 Case Study 1: The Tamil-Sinhalese issue in Sri Lanka

For well over a quarter of a century, Sri Lanka went through a bloodied phase in its history (Bajoria, 2020). Sri Lanka was plagued with a violent ethnopolitical conflict between two rival ethnic groups: Buddhist Sinhalese (in majority) and the Hindu Tamils (in minority). In this endless wave of violence almost a 100,000 people lost their lives. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) although was not the only Tamil group in the war against the Sinhalese dominated center yet over the years emerged as the formidable enemy and spear headed the Tamil struggle against the state of Sri Lanka. LTTE, arguably the most effective, daring and sophisticated terrorist organization in the world with its own air, naval and land arms, a large support base both at the regional and international level, during most of its history operated as a regular army and its leader enjoyed almost god like status. it took a ruthless and beyond all limitations military campaign to kill the top leadership of LTTE and finally achieve victory against the LTTE by the Sri Lankan army in 2009 (Zeb, 2012).

The Sri Lankan conflict has its root in the colonial era. During the colonial rule, Tamils were considered closer to and favored by the British. This sense among the Sinhalese resulted in the emergence of the Sinhalese nationalism. The tables were turned against the Tamil when Sri Lanka gained independence. Being in majority, the Sinhalese took the helm of affair in Colombo and established the government. The Tamil felt sidelined and discriminated against. A number of Sri Lankan legislations were taken as intentionally making Tamil marginalized according to the Tamil nationalists. This gave rise and further intensified the tension between the two ethnic groups. Over the years several groups emerged and riots broke out with violence increasing as the time passed. 1983 was the watershed year when a civil war broke out between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. It continued till 2009 in one way or other and only ended when the Sri Lankan army finally waged a ruthless campaign against the LTTE successfully eliminating the top LTTE leadership including Parbakaran and clear their strongholds (New York Times, 18 May 2009). According to independent estimates, in this five-month long campaign (Jan-May) almost 70,000 civilians were allegedly killed by the Sri Lanka army, almost 30,000 were reportedly internally displaced and an unspecified number of people were arrested and manhandled by the Sri Lankan army in various camps. A number of experts go to the extent of using the 2009 Sri Lanka army's campaign against the LLTE as a text book case study of how not to win an insurgency.

According to media reports, more than 70 percent of the displaced people were able to return to their homes soon after but continued to face number of problems. In few instances, Army took over and used their homes. Apart from this large scale killing another issue that made headlines was the issue of war-widows. According to independent estimates, almost 40,000 war widows were reported to be present in the Tamil areas. These war-widows needed support at

several levels as they suffered materially as well as psychologically. On the one hand they lost their husbands and other close relatives, they also lost their source of sustenance, on the other hand, they suffered by the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among other psychological issues. Such issues leave the country polarized. As one analyst described it:

> While the South and East Sri Lanka celebrated this as victory, in the north the mood was grim, with a profound sense of loss: lost husbands, children and siblings, the denial of basic human rights and continuous threat, first, to stay in line with the LTTE's agenda (many were forcibly recruited by the LTTE) and now (allegedly) indiscriminate targeting by the security forces (Zeb, 2012).

As per the Tamil sources, despite the decisive defeat of the LTTE, the centre continues to treat the Tamils in the northern part of the country as enemies and are denied basic human needs. They are deprived of their human rights and of their right to worship as most of their places of worship have been destroyed and their religious symbols desecrated. Tamil sources repeated allege that rape is used as a tool to repress and dishonor the Tamils and that the Sri Lankan army and the Sinhalese dominated center is taking every measure possible to reengineer the region. If all this is not enough, the Tamil sources lament that the sense of victory among the Sinhalese community is so great that they believe that whatever is happening to the Tamils is what they deserved and refuse to see all this through a humanistic and reconciliatory lens. To be fair with the Sri Lankan government, the Tamil nationalist narrative post 2009 completely ignore several positive developments that have taken place since then but this is exactly how conflict supportive narratives are created and disseminated. Tamil nationalists especially among the Tamil diaspora allege that a Tamil genocide is taking place in Sri Lanka since 2009. This is a misplaced accusation but what is true is that the distrust and sense of betrayal is mutual. The election victory of Mahinda Rajapksa's SLFP is a case in point (Johansson, 2020). If one scrutinizes his political campaign, one would know that it centered around the accusation that the then government has betrayed the national interest to the proxies of the erstwhile LTTE. Despite the above, one has not seen the resurgence of ethnic violence in Sri Lanka despite the presence of Tamil nationalist elements and a narrative based on grievance against the center.

3.2 Case Study 2: Buddhist-Rohingya problem in Myanmar
For a very long time, Myanmar was under the global attention due to its dictatorial regime yet with the turn of the century, it started to inch towards some sort of representative government which was generally considered a positive development. In 2012, it once again became a topic of global discussion for all the wrong reasons. As per media reports, a Buddhist woman Ma Thida Htwe was allegedly raped and murdered by a Rohingya Muslim. This individual act by a criminal minded person who happened to be a

Rohingya Muslim triggered a reaction that sparked an ethnopolitical conflict between the Buddhists and the Rohingyas in Myanmar resulting into an ethnic cleansing of the Rohingyas. It started from the state of Rakhine but spread like a fire into other parts of Myanmar especially the Northern and central part of Myanmar with intensified violence taking place in the cities of Lashio and Meiktila. The intensity and brutality of the ethnic violence was so great that within a short span of time more than 200,000 people were displaced and an unspecified number of people were killed and injured in the state of Rakhine alone. Since then the Myanmar army and other security forces have been alleged for crimes against humanity including but not limited to gang rapes, killing of unarmed civilians and ethnic cleansing. Several sources including independent human right groups and analysts believe that the Myanmar government has adopted and following a state-policy of mass-killings of the Muslim Rohingya community. In response, several militant groups Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) prime amongst them have emerged on the scene with the stated objective of targeting the Myanmar security forces in reaction to their mass-assassination of the Rohingyas (BBC, 5 September 2017).

Although the current wave of Buddhist violence against the Rohingya is arguably the most serious and lethal one, the fact remains that this is not the first (BBC). One could locate the source of this hatred and animosity between the two communities to the clashes that took place between the two in the 1930s. This resulted in the creation of Doh Bama (We Burma) nationalist movement. With the emergence of Doh Bama, the Buddhist nationalist became strong. During the second world-war the ethnic rivalry was further intensified as both groups represented the two extremes of the spectrum. When the Japanese occupied Burma during the WW-II unlike the Buddhists who supported the Japanese invasion and occupation of Burma, the Rohingyas sided with the British. The third development that expanded the ethnic difference between the Rohingyas and the Buddhist was the Rohingya insurgency that the Rohingya started against the newly independent state of Burma. The primary aim of this insurgency was to cut-off from Burma and join the then East Pakistan (Amza, 2017). The insurgency lasted for almost seventeen years.

This was the historical baggage that was used by the Buddhist elite when Ma Thida Htwe was raped and murder by a Rohingya Muslim in 2012. Masoeyein Mandalay Buddhist monastery's senior abbot and the key ideologue of the 969 movement, Ashin Wirathu framed this incident as a new addition to a long list of crimes committed by the Rohngiyas against the Buddhists in Myanmar. He used this incident to achieve two objectives: one, project the 969-movement as the sole protector of the Myanmar's Buddhist community; second, frame this incident as a continuation of Rohingya crimes against the Buddhist community and the state of Myanmar. He utilized the collective memory of the Buddhist community and linked the past with the present (the rape and murder of Ms Htwe) and alleged that the Rohingya

never accepted the reality of Myanmar and never integrated with the society and state of Myanmar. This, according to him was due to the reason that the Rohingyas were conspiring to make Myanmar an Islamic state. The tool that they are using, Ashin Wirathu argued was their "terrible birth rate." The hatred and contempt against the Rohingyas grew so strong in Myanmar that once a torch bearer of human rights, peace and a symbol of resistance against tyranny, Aung San Suu Kyi repeatedly refused to raise her voice against the Rohingya persecution by the Buddhist in Myanmar (Keane, 2017).

4. Conclusion: Research Findings

This research aimed at finding an answer to the puzzle: what leads an ethnopolitical conflict violent? We believed this question is important to address as there are several ethnic groups around the globe living and coexisting without any problem and there are several that have issues but those issues and difference does not translate into violence. This led the author to explore the question how, why and when an ethnic conflict turns violent? Once it was realized that all ethnopolitical conflicts do not turn violent, it was decided to explore what leads to violence and what tools and strategies are followed and adopted in it? After an overview of different ethnopolitical conflicts both active and latent, two case studies were selected to study more extensively to see if there is a pattern and whether some criteria can be worked out to make sense of this. Our first research finding is that all ethnopolitical conflicts undergo a process from emergence to violence. We argue that this process involves three stages: stage one is ethnic awaking where ethnic identity is invoked. The second stage is when this ethnic awareness and identity is politicized by the elite. The third and final stage is when it turns violent.

The second research finding is that that the ethnic elite play a decisive role in the process. Yet their role is dependent on how effectively they employ the available tool. In this process, they use a certain tool to achieve these levels. The most effective of these tools is a narrative of enduring injustice against the ethnic groups that resonates with the members of the ethnic group. The third research finding is that the masses would only respond to the elite call of politicization and ethnic mobilization when a sparking or triggering event has taken place (Brown, 2001). The elite then manipulate this with the historical memory of grievances towards the ethnic group and develop a victimhood mentality among the group members and that they are facing an enduring injustice that requires some action and response.

According to the author the primary reason that the two cases discussed above were at different levels is due to presence or absence of either a leader who is able to manipulate a triggering and/ or sparking event or a triggering or a sparking event itself. After the LTTE defeat, the Tamil went through a worst phase yet did not turn violent because there was no leader who could built on this so while enough reason for turning violent existed but no leader was present to lead the ethnic group. In Myanmar, Ashin Wirathu played this role

and was able to provide the leadership to the Buddhist ethnic group against the Rohingyas by manipulation of a sparking or triggering event i.e., the rape and murder of a Buddhist women Ma Thida Htwe by a Rohingya Muslim. In this case, both leadership and a triggering event existed.

Based on these research findings, this research concludes that the leadership of the ethnic group plays a key role in the politicization of the ethnic group. Whether politicized ethnic group would turn violent or not is also dependent on the ethnic elite. And that the most important tool that the ethnic elite use for this objective is a carefully crafted conflict supportive narrative highlighting the collective memory of injustices the group suffered over the year. However, this tool can be used to achieve this objective only if a triggering or a sparking incident/ event has taken place.

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