Are ethnic contenders greedy?

Ulrike Theuerkauf
Department of Government, London School of Economics and Political Science

Introduction

Unlike the expectations of many scholars and policy makers, the end of the Cold War did not lead to a rise of peace and political stability (Brown 1995). Although violent interstate conflicts had been increasing steadily in number since the 1970s (Hagler 2004) and have outweighed the frequency of war between states over several centuries (since the early 1960s [Hagler 2007]), it was not until the collapse of communism that people realized how big a residual war was prior to the stability of states and international security (Brown 1997). However, these hollow states, which are ethnically motile—that is, where ethnic cleavages are the central lines along which mobilizations for violent acts take place (Chen 2000)—deserve particular attention, as they represented nearly two-thirds of all violent interstate disputes within the last two decades of the 20th century alone (Gurr 1999).

Explaning ethnic violence

Since the late 1990s, the academic debate on the causes of civil war has been dominated by the justifications of armed ethnic grievance factors.

Grievance-based explanations of violent interstate conflict argue that ethnic violence is an expression of grievances about the under-representation of ethnic groups who feel that they cannot get the values they feel entitled to, as expressed in the distribution of power and resources among political actors (March and Olsen 1989). These ethnic groups that are represented in formal political institutions can affect the distribution of resources and power in their own favor (Festle 2005).

The three values of political representation

There are three distinct values of being represented politically, which is why political institutions that reduce the chances of political representation are frequently taken as critical factors: minority communities can be expected to increase the odds of ethnic violence.

I. The intrinsic value of political representation

Intrinsic values refer to the worth of objects and practices by themselves, i.e., objects and practices are intrinsically valuable if they are considered a valuable good per se (Etzioni 2000).

The argument that political representation is intrinsically valuable is based on the normative assumption that having "voice" in the political decision-making process is an intrinsically rewarding experience for all ethnic groups—ethnic groups want to make their interests heard and government to respond to them if they value their status as recognized members of a political community (Ebydolli and Norman 1994; Seid 2003; Wimmer 2002).

II. The first instrumental value of political representation

Objects and practices have instrumental value if they help achieve certain ends, i.e., objectives that are important independently of the objects or practices that help achieve them (Etzioni 2000).

The argument about the first instrumental value of political representation is based on the recognition that political institutions have an impact on the distribution of power and resources among political actors (March and Olsen 1989). These ethnic groups that are represented in formal political institutions can affect the distribution of resources and power in their own favor (Festle 2005).

III. The second instrumental value of political representation

The second instrumental value of political representation is based on the implication of the other two values discussed as described by Geddes (1989) and Stivers et al. (2002).

Political representation makes ethnic groups feel politically, economically, and culturally more secure, and increases the likelihood with which they can influence potentially harmful government policies.

A grievance-based explanation of ethnic violence

In sum, there are three distinct values of being represented politically, which is why political institutions that reduce the chances of political representation are expected to increase the odds of ethnic violence: ethnic groups who perceive that they cannot get the values of political representation they feel entitled to, are expected to develop anger and resentment which—under the “right” circumstances—can translate into violent action.