

Power Sharing and International Mediation in Ethnic Conflicts

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Introduction

“Self-determination” is the rallying cry of many aggrieved ethnic groups in every major region of the world.¹ In 1992, a study by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace identified more than sixty states with active subnational movements seeking self-determination: either their own sovereign state or a significant measure of minority (or majority) rights (Halperin, Scheffer, and Small 1992:123–157).² More than ever before, the lure of a homogeneous nation-state—our country for our nation—is viewed by many ethnic groups as an answer to their inability to coexist with others in a common state.

Most ethnic groups seeking to manifest their claims for self-determination through the creation of ethnically homogeneous nation-states will not be successful. U.S. political scientist Samuel Huntington has written that “the twentieth century bias against political divorce, that is, secession, is just about as strong as the nineteenth century bias against marital divorce.”³ When ethnic groups with deep enmities “can’t go on living together,” he adds, “they go on living together. They have no choice” (Huntington 1972:i).

Times have changed since Huntington penned his remarks; rightly or wrongly, aggrieved ethnic groups now perceive the creation of new sovereign states to give life to the principle of self-determination as an achievable alternative. Independence for the former Soviet republics, the breakup of the former Yugoslavia into five new states, the bifurcation of the former Czechoslovakia, and

the successful Eritrean struggle to separate from Ethiopia have given new impetus to those seeking an ethnic state. The depth of enmity in ethnic conflicts has also provoked reconsideration of the virtues of territorial integrity of states such as Sudan or Rwanda, where some observers have reached the conclusion that peaceful coexistence within the existing country will never be possible.

The bias against secession in international law and practice remains strong. The principle of self-determination, enshrined in Article 1.2 of the United Nations Charter, is still *not* equated in international law and practice with the blanket right of an aggrieved ethnic group to a separate sovereign state, as Max Kampelman has adroitly argued (1993).⁴ The determination of the international community to maintain the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, despite the brutality of the civil war among its three principal communities, attests to this fact.

Moreover, where secession has occurred, the new states invariably contain their own minorities; partition does not *solve* problems of multiethnic coexistence, it only rearranges the configuration of minorities and majorities. Although the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union carry ethnic names, all have their own minorities. In occurrences of partition, such as the violent dissolution of British India and the creation of Pakistan in 1947, the enmities generated by separation can continue for generations; formerly internal conflicts may be transformed to international conflicts but certainly are not resolved. In India and Pakistan today, the fruits of partition are doggedly persistent internal political violence and bitter and dangerous discord between the countries.

Although the bias against secession remains strong, disputants and the international community alike face a fundamental choice: allow partition and political divorce, or create new more viable structures for living together in a common polity. Until there is a significant change in the current bias against the dissolution of multiethnic states, the grievances of ethnic groups will have to be accommodated *within* the political institutions of existing countries. Moreover, given increasing codification of international norms on democratic forms of government as a fundamental human right,

subnational group demands should be accommodated within a *democratic* form of government.⁵

Despite the conventional wisdom that democracy is difficult, if not impossible, in societies with deep ethnic enmities, consistent application of the modern principles of self-determination and democracy requires new thinking about ways to better harmonize these principles and new ways for the international community to encourage parties to adopt practical and appropriate practices to regulate ethnic conflicts. There is an urgent need to discover and refine practices that contain the inherent fissiparous tendencies that can tear multiethnic states apart, that foster tolerant and beneficial cultural diversity, and that (ideally) do so within a democratic framework. Even when mature democracy is not likely in a short time frame—as it is not, in a large proportion of existing states—the international community can exert pressure on nondemocratic states to adopt practices that can prevent the outbreak of violent ethnic conflict and move toward democratic forms of government. Failure to encourage harmony among groups will only generate new claims for self-determination.

Whereas some multiethnic societies have a relatively good track record of mediating their intergroup conflicts, others—referred to as deeply divided societies—have at times experienced bloody struggles and, in the worst instances, forced assimilation, “ethnic cleansing” or forced expulsion, and genocide. Some deeply divided societies wracked by violence for decades appear to be successfully moving toward more peaceful intergroup relations, as in South Africa, Northern Ireland, and possibly Bosnia-Herzegovina. Others are not, as the continuing ethnic violence in Sri Lanka, Sudan, Rwanda, and a host of other places demonstrates. Finally, many states, such as India, have experienced mixed or ambiguous success at ethnic conflict management but have maintained a democratic system in spite of severe intergroup differences and very difficult socioeconomic circumstances. Certainly not all ethnic conflicts involve claims to territorial self-determination, but those left inappropriately managed often degenerate to this extreme.

The task of ethnic conflict management is to create terms of intergroup coexistence that are consensual rather than coercive

(Esman 1994:2). Successful regulation of conflict in a multiethnic society occurs when the predominant pattern of intergroup dispute resolution is based on bargaining and reciprocity; unsuccessful regulation is evident when conflict degenerates into violence. A central challenge of managing ethnic conflict in the current era is to promote practices that successfully regulate competing group claims within a democratic framework—that is, those that allow for ongoing, nonviolent bargaining by peoples who share a common state that offers regular, free, and fair elections, accountability and transparency, and security and human rights for its citizens.

In what ways can systems of democratic government be structured to ameliorate the destructive potential of ethnic conflicts? In what ways can group self-determination be meaningfully practiced without the creation of new sovereign states? How compatible are successful conflict-regulating practices in multiethnic societies with democratic norms of mass participation and competitive elections? How can the international community better promote management of ethnic conflicts and democratization simultaneously, without working at cross-purposes?

Many policymakers and scholars alike believe that broadly inclusive government, or power sharing, is essential to successful conflict management in societies beset by severe ethnic conflicts. Broadly interpreted, *power-sharing political systems are those that foster governing coalitions inclusive of most, if not all, major mobilized ethnic groups in society*. In severely divided societies, the chances of achieving representation of *all* political factions is inherently limited; even when some representatives of all major groups are included in governing coalitions, invariably there are other contending political leaders who claim to represent the group and refuse to share power with their ethnic adversaries. Thus, power-sharing political systems, particularly in the most deeply divided societies, are inclusive of *generally legitimate representatives of all groups*. Decision making is based on a consensus that transcends groups through coalitions that are widely inclusive. Consensus or near-consensus decision making is differentiated from majoritarian forms of democracy, in which decisions are taken for the entire

society on the basis of the preferences of a minimum winning majority (Rae 1969).

The term *power sharing* has been defined by scholars such as Arend Lijphart as a set of principles that, when carried out through practices and institutions, provide every significant identity group or segment in a society representation and decision-making abilities on common issues and a degree of autonomy over issues of importance to the group. Lijphart's principles of power sharing—known as “consociational democracy” (derived from the Latin term *consociatio*, to associate in an alliance)—is pathbreaking in its differentiation of coalescent democracy from majoritarian democracy (Lijphart 1977a:25).

Scholars differ over whether the *consociational* power-sharing approach—in which groups are represented as groups (usually through ethnically exclusive political parties), in essence as building blocks of a common society—leads to better conflict management than the *integrative* (or pluralist) approach, in which practices seek to foster political organizations that transcend ethnic group differences. The integrative approach sees as ideal the creation of pre-election coalitions between ethnic parties or (less common) the creation of broad multiethnic parties on the basis of interests that transcend ethnic identities, such as region or common economic interests. Traditionally, pluralism also relies on the forces of economic interaction to help create social cleavages that crosscut ascriptive identity. The preeminent example is the crosscutting pattern of democracy in the multiethnic United States, best described in Seymour Martin Lipset's 1960 book *Political Man*.

In addition, preeminent scholars of the politics of multiethnic societies differ on the scope of the term *power sharing*. Some, such as Lijphart, argue that the consociational approach to power sharing encompasses a wide variety of practices and instances. Others, such as Donald Horowitz, argue that the consociational approach is more narrow in meaning and that many cases of consociational democracy cited by consociationalists (such as Malaysia or Lebanon) are in fact not consociational but integrative. Lijphart contends that the integrative approach is essentially majoritarian and that integrative

mechanisms encourage majority representatives to behave moderately and with sensitivity toward minorities, which are still excluded from real political power.

Thus, the power-sharing debate revolves around the following central question: Which broad approach best manages conflict—one that essentially sees ethnic groups as building blocks of national politics in multiethnic states, or one that purposefully encourages the formation of political blocs across group lines? Consociationalists suggest that conflict management is best promoted by accommodation among ethnic group leaders representative of their communities through cooperative problem solving in postelection coalitions. Critics of the consociational approach—such as Horowitz (1985)—argue that the likelihood of violent conflict is reduced more effectively by institutions and practices that create incentives for the formation of preelection coalitions and that encourage intragroup competition rather than intergroup competition. Ideally, integrative mechanisms would lead to multiethnic parties or organizations that transcend narrow communal interests.

A central theme of this book is that the concept of power sharing encompasses both consociational power sharing *and* integrative power sharing, a point that is more fully developed in chapters 3 and 4. Both the consociational and the integrative approaches to ethnic conflict management seek to promote governing coalitions that are broadly *inclusive* of all ethnic groups in a deeply divided multiethnic society—the hallmark of power sharing—but advocates of these approaches sharply disagree over when and how such coalitions are formed and which specific institutions and practices better manage ethnic conflict. For this reason, power sharing should be interpreted as encompassing both approaches; the different types of institutions and practices for promoting democratic ethnic conflict management can be assembled and arranged in many different ways.

For policymakers, the debate among political scientists over approaches to power sharing, and indeed the very scope of the concept itself, may seem rather academic—filled with terminological exegeses, and irrelevant to the hard day-to-day decisions that must be made in dealing with contemporary ethnic conflicts. On the

contrary, the power-sharing debate is critical to policy making. The fundamental policy principles and specific policy recommendations that emanate from these two basic approaches to successful ethnic conflict management in a democratic framework—such as the type of electoral system that parties to a conflict should be encouraged to adopt—are starkly different. Understanding the differences and formulating appropriate policies may spell the difference—for disputants and international intervenors alike—between successful ethnic conflict management and costly violent confrontation.

Successful interventions in ethnic conflicts, such as in Namibia, have been premised on a much better understanding of the underlying ethnic dynamics of a given situation than unsuccessful ones, such as in Somalia. In the former case, a clear set of constitutional principles for the conflict's outcome resulted in a political arrangement on which all parties could eventually agree. In Somalia, the United Nations had no clear vision of what kind of post-intervention Somali state should be created, and so the various factions were permitted to wallow in their differences. Surely one of the many elements of successful international intervention is having a clear sense of an appropriate outcome.

When faced with the vexing problems of ameliorating ethnic conflicts in multiethnic societies within a shared political framework, policymakers should focus on the following questions: What approach to power sharing (consociational or integrative) offers the better hope for ameliorating a given ethnic conflict, and which specific practices should be adopted? What are the pitfalls of power-sharing practices, and under what conditions does power sharing succeed or fail? Is power sharing based on elite accommodation inherently undemocratic? Under what circumstances should the international community urge or even coerce parties to ethnic conflicts to share power? If they do so, then how and at what point in the stages of escalation and de-escalation of ethnic conflict should power-sharing practices be encouraged?

This book does not endorse a simple model or set of detailed prescriptions to guide policymakers as they address the questions posed above. Instead, the book provides a general summary of the

contemporary scholarly debate over power-sharing approaches and mechanisms and examines some recent (post-World War II) experiences with power sharing. The book offers a typology of democratic conflict-regulating practices that serves as a menu of options from which policymakers might choose as they confront the complexities of any given ethnic conflict. Finally, the book addresses a number of issues that arise when would-be conciliators of ethnic conflicts are confronted with the vexing problems of international intervention to encourage ethnic enemies to resolve their differences within a shared state and a minimally democratic framework.

Although much of this book is a summary and reconfiguration of recent scholarship on ethnic conflict and power sharing, the intent is to cogently present the analysis for consumption by policymakers and to contribute to the existing literature by addressing a heretofore unaddressed question: Under what conditions, and in what manner, should the international community promote power sharing as a means to prevent, manage, or resolve violent ethnic conflict? With this objective in mind, Alexander George has argued that generic knowledge and comparative empirical analysis can inform decision making, but it cannot substitute for detailed knowledge and practical experience with any given situation (1993a:19–29). This dictum certainly applies to the question of when the promotion of power sharing may or may not be an appropriate response to ethnic conflicts.

In an era in which ethnic conflict poses *the* central challenge to international peace, the significance of the power-sharing concept is clear: if ethnic groups can fulfill aspirations for self-determination *within* the boundaries of existing states by embracing appropriate democratic conflict-regulating practices, violent conflicts to create ever-more, ever-smaller homogeneous ethnic states can be forestalled. Even when democracy is unlikely, some of the practices identified in this book can be encouraged. In short, the principle of self-determination need not be such a vexing issue in international law and practice. As Ralph Steinhart suggests, when ethnic groups can exercise real influence in the affairs of multiethnic states, “the right of self-determination will be deemed protected *pro tanto*.”

[Conversely,] the systematic exclusion of identity groups from the state would constitute a violation of the norm” (1994:30).

Power sharing, if defined broadly to encompass a wide range of practices that promote meaningful inclusivity and balanced influence for all major groups in a multiethnic society, is a potential answer to ethnic conflict management in many contemporary situations—such as in South Africa’s current five-year interim government of national unity. But power-sharing practices are likely to have conflict-mitigating effects only if the disputants arrive at them through a process of negotiation and reciprocity that all significant parties perceive as fair and just, given their own changing interests and needs.

Equally, there are pitfalls in power-sharing agreements that may be premature, based on unrealistic expectations, agreed to with ill intent, or simply built on too narrow a foundation. The failed power-sharing pact in Rwanda (the 1993 Arusha Accord), brokered by the international community but never fully implemented before the country degenerated into genocidal ethnic strife, is a stark reminder of the limits of such agreements when ethnic relations are highly volatile and enmities simply run too deep.

