ASSESSMENT OF THE CIRCUMSTANCES UNDER WHICH ETHNICITY CAN BECOME A SOURCE OF CONFLICT: THE CASE OF NAGORNO-KARABAKH

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ABSTRACT

This article critically reviews theories which explain roots of ethnic conflicts. It is important to note that there are several theories analyzing conditions under which ethnicity is a source of conflict. They include theories, such as ‘primordialist, institutional, political entrepreneurs and an interethnic competition over resources and rights’. Another theoretical approach is the ‘conceptual framework’ proposed by Blagojevic to understand conditions for ethnic conflict (2009: 1). Blagojevic (2009: 1) argues that ‘ethnic conflict occurs when a particular set of factors and conditions converge: a major structural crisis; presence of historical memories of inter-ethnic grievances; institutional factors that promote ethnic intolerance; manipulation of historical memories by political entrepreneurs to evoke emotions such as fear, resentment and hate toward the “other”; and an inter-ethnic competition over resources and rights’. In this paper, Blagojevic’s conceptual framework is applied to the case Nagorno-Karabakh to explain causes of ethnic conflict.

Key words: ethnic conflict, conflict, root causes of ethnic conflicts

INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the 20th century, the number of interstate conflicts decreased, yet ‘1/3’ of all countries faced intrastate and civil wars (Esteban, 2012: 858). The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the collapse of colonialism caused internal conflicts throughout the world. These conflicts were called ‘new wars’ by Kaldor (2001: 1). Esteban highlighted that ‘many such conflicts involved violence along ethnic lines’ (2012: 858).

Conflicts along ethnic lines affect many countries, and they become one of the complicated issues in the agenda of the international relations for several reasons. First, the conflicts which have been termed ‘ethnic’ affect many countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, the Former Soviet Union, Africa as well as Asia and cause insecurities throughout the world. Conflicts in Kosovo, Karabakh, and Rwanda can be exemplified as conflicts ethnic in nature. Second, many civilians are usually killed during ethnic conflicts. Between 25,000 and 30,000 civilians perished by 1993 during the ethnic conflict between Georgians and Abkhazians in Abkhazia (Crawford, 1998: 3). During the ethnic conflict in Rwanda, the ethnic group Hutu ‘massively participated in the violence’ against the ethnic group Tutsi in 1994 (Bhavnani, 2006: 651). Ethnicity played a vital role as a source of these conflicts.

However, there are conditions, under which ethnic divisions do not provoke conflicts, and there are many multiethnic countries, such as Switzerland, where ethnicity is not a source of conflict. Although there are several language groups and religions in Switzerland, the country has effectively created political institutions to facilitate interethnic harmony among various groups (Cordell and Wolff, 2010: 5). Second example is Russians and Estonians in Estonia who do not fight each other because of their different ethnic identities (Cordell and Wolff, 2010: 5). These examples testify that ethnicity is not always a source of conflict. Circumstances under which ethnicity can become a source of conflict must be determined to elaborate preventive policies.

The goal of this article is to evaluate the conditions under which ethnicity can become a source of conflict. There are several theories analyzing conditions under which ethnicity is a source of conflict. They include theories, such as ‘primordialist, institutional, political entrepreneurs and an interethnic competition over resources and rights’ (Blagojevic, 2009: 1). Another theoretical approach is the ‘conceptual framework’ proposed by Blagojevic to understand conditions for ethnic conflict (2009: 1). Blagojevic (2009: 1) argues that ‘ethnic conflict occurs when a particular set of factors and conditions converge: a major structural crisis; presence of historical memories of inter-ethnic grievances; institutional factors that promote ethnic intolerance;
manipulation of historical memories by political entrepreneurs to evoke emotions such as fear, resentment and hate toward the "other"; and an inter-ethnic competition over resources and rights’. The major difference between Blagojevic’s ‘conceptual framework’ and other theories is that Blagojevic have combined the elements of the above mentioned competing theories to explain an ethnic conflict. In agreeing with Blagojevic this article argues that one condition is not enough to create an ethnic conflict and the latter usually occurs when several conditions combine with each other. These conditions include existence of historical animosities, important institutional changes, manipulation by leaders and competition over resources. The essay has the following structure. First, this article will determine key definitions such as conflict, ethnic conflict, and ethnic group. Second, the article will present Blagojevic’s ‘conceptual framework’ to explain the conditions which create ethnic conflict. Third, the presented ‘conceptual framework’ will be applied to the case of ethnic conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh to assess it. The case study tests Blagojevic’s ‘conceptual framework’ and shows that how ethnicity becomes a source of conflict when different conditions come together.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Before presenting Blagojevic’s ‘conceptual framework’ to understand conditions for ethnic conflict, it is important to determine what the term ‘ethnic conflict’ means. Cordell and Wolff (2010: 5) determine ‘the term conflict that describes a situation in which two and more actors pursue incompatible, yet from their individual perspectives entirely just, goals’. Cordell and Wolff (2010: 5) also mention that ‘an ethnic conflict is one particular form of this: that in which the goals of at least one party are defined in ethnic terms, and in which the primary fault line of confrontation is one of ethnic distinctions’.

Furthermore, Cordell and Wolff describe numerous features that characterize ethnic conflicts. These features of ethnic conflicts include the followings. First, ethnic groups often claim that they face many deprivations due to their ethnic identity in spite of real objectives of conflicting groups. Second, ethnicity is used as a tool to mobilize groups having the same identity. Third, parties use deliberate violence to achieve their objectives. Fourth, ethnicity plays a crucial role in these conflicts (2010: 5). As mentioned by Cordell and Wolff an ethnic conflict is associated with ethnicity, and the latter plays a crucial role in these conflicts. The article agrees with Cordell and Wolff, because there is not any theory which claims that ethnic differences is the only cause for an ethnic conflict. Ethnic distinctions obviously play a vital role in ethnic conflicts, but they do not usually create ethnic violence unless there are several conditions. The conditions that create ethnic violence will be evaluated in this essay.

Providing that Cordell and Wolff determine an ethnic conflict as a conflict between ethnic groups, it is necessary to clarify what an ethnic group is. Tilly mentions (1991: 574) that ‘an ethnic group is a set of people who publicly claim a common origin and kinship that distinguishes them from other members of the same population’. The essay will use Tilly’s definition, because ethnic groups have distinctive features that make them different than other groups. Smith (1986: 22-31) described these distinctive features of ethnic groups in his book, and he mentioned six important features which include: ‘a collective name; common origins; shared historical experiences; a common and unique culture; an association with a specific territory and a sense of community’.

BLAGOJEVIC’S CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

As mentioned earlier ethnicity is not always the root of ethnic violence between groups unless there are several conditions. Different theories compete to explain the conditions under which ethnicity can become a source of conflict. Each theory has its own approach to explain the root of ethnic violence. These theories include ‘primordialist, institutional, political entrepreneurs, and an interethnic competition over resources and rights’ (Blagojevic, 2009: 1). According to the primordialist argument, ethnic violence occurs when ethnic groups have ‘ancient hatreds’ about each other and an ethnic conflict is a result of historical animosities and ethnic hatreds (Blagojevic, 2009: 5; Kaufman, 2001: 2-3). The institution argument claims that ethnic conflict takes place when there are crucial institutional changes in a multinational state with many ethnic groups (Blagojevic, 2009: 8). Ethnic groups fight each other when political leaders manipulate them in order to achieve their political goals or maintain their power over resources according to the argument of ‘political entrepreneurs’ (Blagojevic, 2009: 9; Kaufman, 2001: 6). ‘Competition over resources’ is the last argument which claims that ethnic violence occurs when ethnic groups start to compete for limited resources and rights (Blagojevic, 2009: 11). Although the above mentioned arguments are widely debated theories in the academic literature, none of them has a solid empirical foundation to explain ethnic conflict.
In spite of competing arguments of the above mentioned approaches, Blagojevic has elaborated ‘a broader conceptual framework’ that combines elements of these theories to explain roots of ethnic violence. His approach can be called another theory to explain ethnic conflict. Blagojevic (2009: 2-3) argues that ‘ethnic conflict occurs when a particular set of factors and conditions converge: a major structural crisis; presence of historical memories of inter-ethnic grievances; institutional factors that promote ethnic intolerance; manipulation of historical memories by political entrepreneurs to evoke emotions such as fear, resentment and hate toward the “other”; and an inter-ethnic competition over resources and rights’. Different to other theories summarized earlier, Blagojevic’s ‘conceptual framework’ is a more comprehensive argument which explains ethnic conflict and its roots based on empirical evidence. Furthermore, his argument demonstrates that ethnic violence occurs when several conditions interact with each other different to other theories. This also means that all above mentioned theories must come together to explain ethnic conflict. His conceptual framework can be easily applied to understand ethnic conflicts throughout the world. Blagojevic (2009: 13) empirically supports his ‘conceptual framework’ by applying it to explain an ethnic conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this essay, his framework will be applied to the case of ethnic conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. This application will let evaluate Blagojevic’s framework. At the same time, it will help explain conditions for ethnic conflict.

According to Blagojevic’s ‘conceptual framework’, all multiethnic societies are prone to some degree of conflict, and the latter essentially derives from historical animosities and ethnic hatreds (2009: 3). When there are important institutional changes in these multiethnic societies, previous institutions do not work anymore, and new institutions which face political transition create uncertainty for future of ethnic groups (Blagojevic, 2009: 3). As Lake and Rothchild (1996: 43) describes this situation, ‘when ethnicity is linked with acute social uncertainty, a history of conflict, and fear what the future might bring, emerges as one of the major fault lines along which societies fracture’. Blagojevic (2009: 9) calls this situation ‘a perfect condition’ for political leaders and elite in order to mobilize ethnic groups to achieve their political objectives. When political leaders mobilize ethnic groups in accordance with their ethnic identities, this creates ‘ethnic intolerance and competition over resources and rights’ and provokes ethnic violence (Blagojevic, 2009: 11). The article of Bowen (1996: 3) confirms that ‘ethnicity becomes nationalism when it includes aspirations to gain a monopoly of land, resources, and power’ and the rise of nationalism quite often leads to an ethnic violence. As Blagojevic’s argument mentions, ethnic violence happens when different conditions proposed by four major theories interact with each other. These conditions include existence of historical animosities and ethnic hatreds, important institutional changes, presence of manipulative leaders and competition over resources.

Accordingly, this article is in line with Blagojevic’s ‘conceptual framework’, and it argues that an ethnic conflict take place under the existence of historical animosities and ethnic hatreds, important institutional changes, presence of manipulative leaders and competition over resources due to the following reasons. First, each major theory which has already been described has limitations to explain different conflicts. As Jalali and Lipset writes, ‘given the variety of ethnic conflicts and their dynamic and fluid qualities, no one factor can provide a comprehensive explanation’ (1992-1993: 600). The widely debated theories in the academic literature explain a specific case, but these theories have problems to explain all ethnic conflicts. Furthermore, the limitations of major theories are visible while reviewing Kaufman’s book. For example, Kaufman applies primordialist argument to explain the ethnic violence in Serbia in his book. On the one side, Kaufman (2001: 4) mentions that an ethnic violence in Serbia is a result of ‘ancient hatreds’ between Muslims and Serbians that dates back to the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. On the other side, Kaufman (2001:4) shows that the roots of ethnic violence in the South Caucasus and Balkans were 1990s. This contradiction shows that primordialist argument has limitations to explain ethnic violence. Kaufman describes similar restrictions of other theories too. The widely known theories which have already been summarized have neither empirical foundation nor they can accurately explain ethnic violence. Second, one factor or cause can not explain ethnic violence as most ethnic conflicts have more than one cause. Third, Blagojevic’s argument more accurately explains ethnic conflicts than other theories, and it is empirically supported and testable theory. Application of Blagojevic’s ‘conceptual framework’ to the case of ethnic conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh provides convincing empirical evidence which testifies that an interaction of several conditions causes ethnic violence between groups.
THE CASE OF NAGORNO-KARABAKH

In order to assess the above presented ‘conceptual framework’ proposed by Blagojevic, it will be applied to the case of ethnic conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia and Azerbaijan are post-Soviet countries in the South Caucasus, and these countries were part of the Former Soviet Union before its disintegration (Shafiyev, 2007: 59). Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region was created by the Soviet authorities within the borders of Azerbaijan while determining between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Yamskov, 1991: 644). Both ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis lived together in Nagorno-Karabakh before the breakout of the ethnic war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over this region in 1991 (Shafiyev, 2007: 59). The relations between ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis living in Nagorno-Karabakh worsened in the 1980s (Yamskov, 1991: 639). When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, both Armenian and Azerbaijan declared their independence, an armed conflict started between these countries (Shafiyev, 2007: 59). Rieff (1997: 119) writes that about 25,000 people perished during this ethnic conflict. About 610,000 Azerbaijanis are still displaced internally (Kuburas, 2011: 43).

The collapse of the Former Soviet Union is the important institutional change that created a condition for rise of ethnic conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh (Hughes and Sasse, 2001: 1). The historical animosities existed between ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis, but these historical animosities were frozen during the Former Soviet Union (Hughes and Sasse, 2001: 29). However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, new political institutions did have enough abilities to contain historical animosities (Hughes and Sasse, 2001: 29). Political leaders also played an important role in manipulating historical hatreds between Armenians and Azerbaijanis (Kaufman, 1998: 30). As a result, ‘competition over resources and rights’ strengthened, and the latter caused the ethnic war between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Yamskov, 1991: 640).

EXISTENCE OF HISTORICAL HATRED AND ANIMOSITIES

In general, most scholars consider that Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a result of historical animosities between ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis (Kuburas, 2011: 44). This means that the primordialist argument may be applicable to explain Nagorno-Karabakh ethnic conflict. While reading about historical roots of the conflict, it is visible that there were many historical inter-ethnic clashes between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in the history. Cornell (1999: 3) writes that historically Nagorno-Karabakh has been a disputed territory between ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis. In addition, as Armenians suffered from Turks in the history, and Azerbaijanis have Turkish origins and language, Laitin and Suny (1999: 147) mention that ‘hostility felt toward one people is transferred to another’. Most bloody ethnic clashes between ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijan date back to 1918, when both countries established their independent states after the fall of the Russian Empire (Cornell, 1999: 7). Both countries were annexed by the Soviet Union in 1920, and the policies of the Former Soviet Union prevented these countries from an ethnic conflict (Cornell, 1999: 8).

However, existence of historical hatreds and animosities are not enough for ethnic violence to take place according to Blagojevic’s ‘broader conceptual framework’ (2009: 15). Therefore, this article also applies the institutional argument to show how institutions lost their ability to prevent historical inter-ethnic hatreds in Nagorno-Karabakh from becoming an ethnic violence as a result of institutional change.

AN IMPORTANT INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

As mentioned earlier ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis were peacefully living in Nagorno-Karabakh before the late 1980s when both countries were part of the Former Soviet Union. Hughes and Sasse (2001: 1) mention that ‘many potential nationalist, ethnic and regional conflicts in the Former Soviet Union were kept dormant under communism’. All internal ethnic and territorial disputes in the Former Soviet Union were forcefully prevented from becoming a violent conflict (Hughes and Sasse, 2001: 1). It is important to highlight that historical hatred and animosities existed between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, but the policies of the Former Soviet Union ensured peaceful relationships between ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis living in Nagorno-Karabakh (Hughes and Sasse, 2001: 29). Taking this into consideration, the collapse of the Soviet Union was an important institutional change which created an uncertain and instable condition for ethnic Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh (Hughes and Sasse, 2001: 29).
POLITICAL MANIPULATION

As mentioned earlier the fall of the Soviet Union was an important institutional change which created not only an uncertain situation for ethnic Armenians living in Nagorno Karabakh, but also emerging institutions lost their ability to manage inter-ethnic emotions. It was a favorable condition for political leaders, media and elites to manipulate public opinion by reminding the animosities from the past. Kuburas (2011: 45) writes that political leaders both in Armenia and Azerbaijan played a vital role in manipulating hostile emotions to mobilize ethnic riots in the 1990s during an uncertain period on the eve of the fall of the Soviet Union. For example, leaders in Armenia declared that Azerbaijani identity in Karabakh was created by the Soviet Union and therefore, Karabakh must be amalgamated with Armenia (Kuburas, 2011: 46). In addition, leaders in Azerbaijan also played an important role in the escalation of the conflict. The pogrom of Armenians was perpetrated in Sumqayit city of Azerbaijan in 1988, and local leaders use this pogrom for their own objectives (Kaufman, 1998: 27). Thus, political manipulation raised the ethnic emotions and animosities.

‘COMPETITION FOR ECONOMIC RESOURCES AND RIGHTS’

Lastly, the ‘inter-ethnic competition for economic resources approach’ must be combined with other conditions for understanding ethnic violence between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Blagojevic (2009: 19) writes that the disintegration of the Soviet Union and democratization increased unemployment in the Former Soviet Union countries. Yamskov (1991: 640) mentions that the economic cause of the ethnic conflict is the growing rate of unemployment in Azerbaijan by compared to Armenia. Ethnic Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh believed that there was a high unemployment in the region due to purposeful discriminative policies of Azerbaijani authorities towards ethnic Armenians (Yamskov, 1991: 640). As a result, ethnic Armenians started to compete for economic resources and rights. Furthermore, ethnic Armenians also raised an issue about the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh (Kuburas, 2011: 50). Newly emerged political leaders exacerbated this situation (Kaufman, 1998: 30). As a result, the tensions between ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis resulted in an ethnic war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Ultimately, the case of Nagorno-Karabakh testifies that an ethnic violence takes place when different circumstances and factors combine with each other. These conditions include the presence of historical animosities, important institutional change, presence of manipulative leaders and competition over resources. As mentioned in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh the fall of the Soviet Union created an uncertain and unstable condition for ethnic Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh. The disintegration of the Soviet Union was an important institutional change which created a favorable condition for the ethnic conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. At the same time, existence of historical hatreds and animosities between ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis increased historical emotions. As case study shows, all ethnic conflicts were forcefully prevented from escalation by the Soviet authorities. However, after the fall of the Soviet Union, new institutions became lost their abilities in order to tackle inter-ethnic hatreds and animosities. Simultaneously, new political leaders appeared after the collapse of the Former Soviet Union who manipulated historical animosities. Lastly, competition over resources and rights increased which led to ethnic violence. The case study testifies that ethnic violence takes place when different circumstances and factors combine with each other as argued in the ‘conceptual framework’ developed by Blagojevic. Furthermore, the case study supports the major argument of this essay.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this article assessed the conditions under which ethnicity can become a source of conflict. Before starting to assess the conditions which create ethnic conflict, the article clarified key definitions such as conflict, ethnic conflict, and ethnic group. Secondly, this article presented several theories analyzing conditions under which ethnicity is a source of conflict and it agreed with Blagojevic’s conceptual framework of for understanding the conditions of ethnic conflict. In agreeing with Blagojevic’s theoretical framework this paper argued that ethnic conflict takes place under multiple conditions. These conditions include an important institutional change, presence of manipulative leaders in the power and inter-ethnic competition over resources and rights. Historical animosities in multiethnic societies make these countries prone to conflict. When there is an institutional change and presence of manipulative leaders in these multiethnic countries, inter-ethnic competition over resources and rights intensifies. The combination of these conditions leads to ethnic violence. Blagojevic’s conceptual framework was also applied to the case of ethnic conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabakh to assess it. The case of Nagorno Karabakh
empirically assessed Blagojevic’s conceptual framework and showed the role of multiple conditions in creating ethnic conflict. The paper is in agreement with Blagojevic’s theoretical framework due to the following reasons. Firstly, Blagojevic’s conceptual framework explains ethnic conflict more accurately than other theories, because it has a broader approach. Secondly, it is easily applied to explain different ethnic conflicts. Thirdly, the other theories have both limitations and contradictions to explain ethnic conflict. The other theories do not explain ethnic violence when they are applied to cases. Since ethnicity becomes a source of conflict under several conditions, those experts working in the field of conflict management and resolution need to find comprehensive solutions to deal with ethnic conflicts.

REFERENCES


