

Calming Ethnic Conflicts: The Role of the form of Government

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Abstract: This article discusses the causation between forms of government, on the one hand, and ethnic conflicts on the other. This topic has received little attention in political science. The article gives a critical review of academic discussions on the relationship between ethnic conflicts and forms of government. How to calm ethnic conflict through the combination of institutions that represent ethnic groups' interests and provide peaceful ethnic dialogue? Which institutional design prevents ethnic conflicts? Prevention and resolution of ethnic conflicts are the functions of political institutions in a multi-ethnic society. Calming ethnic conflict could come from both an institutional and a non-institutional manner. The form of government is the institutional mechanism for managing ethnic conflicts, along with the decentralization of power and the electoral system. Empirical and theoretical observations show that ethnic conflict is more likely to happen in parliamentary systems than presidential ones, but other political institutional arrangements are important too. The authors present arguments for supporting this conclusion.

Keywords: Ethnic conflict, form of government, presidential system, parliamentary system, conflict resolution.

1. INTRODUCTION

Modern scholars are convinced that institutional design affects ethnic conflict and creating risks for its occurrence (Kudryashova 2020). Empirical observations show that the correct choice of the form of government, the form of political decentralization, and the electoral system help to manage ethnic conflicts. This article analyzes academic discussions about how the form of government affects the likelihood of ethnic conflict in a multi-ethnic society. Is the form of government a mechanism for managing ethnic conflicts in ethnic-divided societies? Is the form of government a way of ethnic conflict resolution? Which form of government (presidential or parliamentary) leads to calming ethnic conflict? These research questions are addressed in the article.

2. METHODS

To establish the causation between political institutions and ethnic conflicts, we used a combination of methods. Since political institutions are the focus of our attention, we rely on the achievements of the neo-institutional approach. We use empirical databases on ethnic conflicts and the available results of empirical analysis obtained by some authors.

We interpret the data obtained from open sources to analyze the hypothesis about the influence of the form of government on ethnic conflicts. First, we use "Minorities at Risk" (MAR) dataset, which tracks 284 politically-active ethnic groups throughout the world

from 1945 to 2006 – identifying where they are, what they do, and what happens to them. MAR focuses specifically on ethnopolitical groups, non-state communal groups that have "political significance" in the contemporary world because of their status and political actions (Birnie 2016).

Second, we concern 'Ethno-Embedded Institutionalism Dataset' ('EEI Dataset' for short) presented by U. Theuerkauf (2012). That database has been compiled as a new dataset on institutions and ethnic civil war specifically for the purpose of research.

Our theoretical conclusions are based on our comparative study of empirical results obtained in published open studies by other authors.

In our study, we compare the empirical results obtained by analyzing the causation between political institutions and ethnic conflicts. We compare empirical data and results of different comparative research to study the interaction between government and ethnic conflicts.

The study of the relationship between political institutions and ethnic conflicts faces numerous methodological difficulties. Political science still has not found the answer to many questions: how to operationalize ethnic conflicts, what are the components and indicators of ethnic conflicts, etc. To solve these methodological problems, we propose to focus on the study of the causation between form of government and ethnic conflicts.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One dispute regarding the academic debate of whether the presidential or the parliamentary system is

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preferable concerns calming and resolving ethnic conflicts, and particularly which form increases the risk of violent ethnic conflict [Theuerkauf 2013]. Some authors stress that presidentialism has virtue in ethnically divided societies: “presidential systems are superior in reducing conflict” [Saideman *et al.* 2002]. “Ethnic groups are more insecure, and thus most likely to engage in violence and preemption, when they cannot block policies that might hurt them. The division of powers between president and legislature allows each to serve as a check on the other, even when the same party dominates both branches. Parliamentarism, on the other hand, can be quite threatening to minority groups if they cannot get significant representation and especially threatening if one party tends to gain control with no need for coalitions. In presidential systems, the parties in the assembly may choose which of the president’s policies they will support. Ethnic groups may be safer in presidential systems because there are more points within the system to block unfavorable actions” (Saideman *et al.* 2002: 111).

In contrast, other political scientists insist that presidentialism is risky. This group also stresses that a parliamentary form of government seems most suitable for ethnically divided societies (Lijphart 1991). However, the empirical analysis shows their arguments are exaggerated (Saideman *et al.* 2002).

The role of ethnicity in the functioning of political institutions has been studied by several authors. Among the most important books in theoretical and methodological terms are the works of A. Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies. A Comparative Exploration* (Lijphart 1977) and D. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Horowitz 1985). Two main conceptual approaches to solving the problem of “ethnicity and institutions” are presented in the literature: the theory of liberal community or a consociative approach, and the theory of centripetalism or the integration approach. (Horowitz 2014). Proponents of a consociative approach believe that a multi-ethnic society needs a parliamentary system, since it has a collegial decision-making mechanism. Proponents of the centripetal approach advocate for the presidential system, indicating as its advantages the provision of group consent and reconciliation by the president.

Is there a connection between the government and ethnic conflict? Will empirical analysis methods help answer this question? In political science, a series of empirical studies has been carried out to establish a

connection between the form of government and ethnic conflicts.

According to the results of a study by S. Saideman and colleagues (2002), it became clear that the form of government is an important explanatory variable, but, for example, the electoral system has a strong influence on the likelihood of ethnic conflicts.

D. Brancati (2006) analyzed 30 democracies from 1985 to 2000 using the database “Minorities at Risk.” According to the results of the study, he concluded that the presidential system reduced the likelihood of ethnic conflicts, except for conflicts associated with secession.

U. Theuerkauf (2013) also investigated the influence of state institutions on the outbreak of civil wars. The chronological scope of the study was 1955–2007. Theuerkauf relied on George Mason University’s “Task Force on Political Instability” database. She also concluded that a combination of many institutional factors (formal and informal) could explain the increase in ethnic violence. Such factors are the high level of corruption, the presidential form of government, the majority electoral system, and the unitary form of government.

F. Roessler (2011) focused on explaining civil wars and coups in sub-Saharan Africa during the post-colonial period. His study clearly showed that ethnic conflicts in the studied region arose when the elite excluded some ethnic groups from the distribution of power that threatened to retain the power of the elite. F. Roessler does not directly identify the least conflictogenic form of government. In his opinion, a good form of government that promotes the formation of interethnic coalitions is good.

In addition to internal factors causing ethnic conflicts, there are external factors sometimes playing a decisive role. US American researcher D. Laitin (2001) noted that regional specificity and external factors are the defining features of ethnic conflicts. For example, for ethnic conflicts in the post-Soviet space, external factors are decisive. External support for ethnic minorities provides them with resources for secessionist sentiment and leads to ethnic violence.

Thus, empirical studies conducted in the framework of the study of the influence of forms of government on ethnic conflicts have clearly demonstrated the multifactorial determination of the latter. Indeed, there are theoretical arguments both for and against one form or another of government. Further efforts of the

scientific community in the study of ethnic conflicts will aim at studying specific cases that can enrich our ideas about ethnic conflicts and help to induce new hypotheses containing combinations of variables, including the form of government. New hypotheses will require new empirical research.

4. SUMMARY

Ethnic conflict is more likely in parliamentary systems than in presidential systems. There are plausible reasons why presidentialism might lead to reduced conflicts (Zaznaev 2018).

A strong president can overcome potential political deadlocks in divided societies (Horowitz 1985). He or she could make unpopular decisions, especially those related to the easing of ethnic conflicts. For example, in 1978, Sri Lanka moved to the presidential system in combination with an alternative voting method. As a result, it was possible to block extremists' access to power, promote moderate trends, and help achieve compromise in a divided society (Horowitz 1990). A separately elected presidency, ideally with an electoral formula guaranteeing exceptionally broad support for the presidential candidate, has conflict-reducing effects. Another example is Nigeria. A parliamentary system with a weak president in the First Republic in Nigeria was a crucial factor in bringing about the Biafra Civil War (1967–1970). Moreover, a strong president, elected by the whole nation as one constituency and in the constitutional status as chief executive, could serve as a symbol of national unity.

The separation of power between the president and legislature allows each to serve as a check on the other, so that ethnic groups have more points within the system to block unfavorable actions (Saideman *et al.* 2002). The checks and balances are designed to limit the possibility of a situation in which the winner acquires everything. In a presidential system, if a party or coalition of parties representing ethnic groups loses the presidential election, they can control the voting on key issues and change the mood of congress. This removes the ground for conflicts. Presidential systems increase the identifiability, accountability, and legitimacy of the political system (Shugart 1992).

Do these virtues really hold? Not necessarily. Presidentialism might be equally risky since the inevitable zero-sum characteristic of presidential elections has exacerbated ethno-regional anxieties and inter-ethnic tensions (Linz 1990: 56). "The zero-sum

game in presidential regimes raises the stakes of presidential elections and inevitably exacerbates their attendant tension and polarization" (Linz 1990:64).

The rigidly fixed terms of the president's office do not allow replacing a president who has lost the confidence of his or her party or the people (Linz 1990: 64–65) for political reasons, such as in cases of deep disappointment in the cabinet, wrong or ineffective ethnic policy, and disregarding ethnic interests.

The disadvantage of the parliamentary system is that the survival of the executive power depends on the confidence of the assembly; therefore, the executive branch is unable to oppose the parliament effectively. In contrast, fearing the consequences of a no-confidence vote, legislators can support the government's initiatives—not based on their merits, but on reasons of survival of the government and parliament. If the parliament "presses" on the government, then it becomes a source of government crises. Therefore, under the conditions of the parliamentary system, the effectiveness of mutual control of parliament and government is not high.

5. CONCLUSIONS

An analysis of the scientific literature has led to the conclusion that the question of the relationship between ethnic conflicts and forms of government (presidential, parliamentary, and semi-presidential) remains unclear. Firstly, there is no convincing evidence (both theoretical and empirical) about any significant impact of the chosen form of government on reducing the risk of ethnic conflicts. A much stronger influence on the "pacification" of conflicts is exerted by the form of government (federalism) and the electoral system (proportional type). Secondly, it is not clear how some features of presidential or parliamentary systems threaten ethnic peace and harmony in society. Different points of view are expressed on this score that do not always have an evidence base. Thirdly, the role of the form of government in preventing and resolving ethnic conflicts should not be exaggerated, because their causes and methods of overcoming them are more related to socio-economic, political, psychological, and cultural factors, rather than to institutions.

In addition, it has not been empirically proven whether the form of government affects the intensification or decay of ethnic conflicts, and how this or that form of government affects ethnic conflicts—whether helping to resolve them or, on the contrary,

leading to their aggravation. The hypothesis about the influence of the form of government on ethnic conflicts and the nature of such influence requires deep and thorough empirical verification.

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