
EXPLAINING STATE-ETHNIC CONFLICT

Macapado A. Muslim

One of the costliest forms of conflict afflicting the world today is state-ethnic conflict or anti-state ethnic mobilization.¹ Examples are the civil wars in Lebanon, Northern Ireland and South Africa, and the armed autonomy or separatist movements in several countries, such as the Tamils in Sri Lanka, the Muslims in Thailand and the Philippines, the Sikhs in India and the Basques in Spain.

The growing number and intensity of this form of conflict suggests the inappropriateness of current state strategies toward it and the inadequacy of existing knowledge about it. Therefore,

¹. State-ethnic conflict may be defined as the mobilization of an ethnic group (or a substantial number of its members) against the state. Other terms used to refer to this phenomenon are "ethnic mobilization" and "ethno-nationalism."

State-ethnic conflict has three possible variants (note that they are not mutually exclusive - e.g., a movement may vacillate between autonomy and secession).

It may take the form of a protest movement, i.e., individuals who consider themselves as belonging to, and believed to represent the aspirations of, one ethnic group band together, protesting certain state policies or conditions they deem unacceptable or unjust, and demanding appropriate changes. This form of ethnic political action which is normally carried out nonviolently may involve holding of rallies, submission of position papers or manifestoes to appropriate state authorities and other nonviolent forms/tactics.

A second variant is an autonomy movement which involves not just protest against certain state policies but also a demand of an ethnic group for greater extent of control over the governance of their affairs, i.e., autonomy from the central government. The demand for autonomy by one ethnic group is normally anchored on the assumption that the group possess certain basic and valued peculiarities (different religion, values and practices) which do not hang together with existing omnibus central government policies and standard operating procedures. Autonomy will allow or enable the group to formulate and implement certain policies which may be contrary to certain national policies, but responsive to its peculiarities.

A third variant is a secessionist or separatist movement, i.e., a group of people geographically concentrated in a portion of the state territory is demanding complete separation or secession. Separatist movements are more inclined by their purpose (complete separation from the state) and the predisposition of the state to use its instruments of violence to suppress them. As in the case of some autonomy movements, separatist movements

scholars and state authorities concerned with it need to strengthen their efforts. This paper is envisioned to help in understanding this conflict's nature, determinants and dynamics. It is a survey of the literature on the factors that may explain state-ethnic conflict.

Causes/Explanations: Seven Schools

There are several competing explanations on the etiology of state-ethnic conflict which I will group into seven schools or strands, namely: 1) pluralist-diversity school, 2) resource competition and interest group school, 3) modernization school, 4) ethnic differentiating role of the state school, 5) international influences school, 6) elite competition school, and 7) needs deprivation school.

The *Pluralist-diversity school*² stresses the plural and diverse character of some societies as a cause of ethnic mobilization. According to this school, the existence in a state of many distinct ethnic groups (plurality) with different languages, religions, histories, values and norms, practices, levels of education, economic conditions and other contextual factors (diversity) makes the relationships of such groups potentially if not actually conflictual. It views ethnic differences as mobilizing factors, i.e., they predispose members of one ethnic group to be in conflict with members of other groups. Concerned with armed separatism in Southeast Asia, Ruth McVey views the heterogeneous character of the countries in the region as a major cause.³

normally have their military arms, in addition to political and administrative organs. Their pattern of organization parallels the organization of states, that they constitute and serve as alternatives to their enemy states. Some run their own courts which try cases involving not only their members, but also civilians within their areas of operation. Some of them run headquarters in sympathetic foreign countries.

². Some of the exponents of this school include: M. A. Smith, The Plural Society in the British West Indies (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), Leo Kuper, "Plural Societies: Perspectives and Problems," in Leo Kuper and M. G. Smith, eds., Pluralism in Africa (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); Clifford Geertz, "The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States", in Clifford Geertz, ed., Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa (New York: Free Press, 1963), 105-157; and Sammy Smootha, "Pluralism and Conflict" A Theoretical Explanation," Plural Societies, VI, No. 3 (1975), 69-89.

³. Ruth McVey, "Separatism and the Paradoxes of the Nation-State in Perspective" in Lim Joo-Jock and Vani Shanmugaratnam, eds., Armed Separatism in Southeast Asia (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1984), pp. 3-29.

Subsumable under this school is the view of the "primordialists" which stresses that the distinct features or cultural markers of ethnic groups are "primordial" or the "unmelted" residues of the past. To the primordialists, such features or markers are problematic (i.e., serving as impedances to changes and innovations) and politically disturbing. Hence, members of ethnic-oriented groups (those exhibiting primordial features) have to be subjected to some homogenizing and integrating policies and programs in education, communication, economy, politics and other areas. In other words, exhibiting primordial features (or to be ethnic or to show or be conscious of your ethnic peculiarities) is viewed as a liability or problem that must be suppressed or eradicated.

In the *resource competition and interest group school*,⁴ ethnic mobilization is viewed as a function of the competition for political, economic and other resources between members of different ethnic groups. According to this school, the mobilization of an ethnic group (or the formation of an ethnic movement) is an instrument to advance the interests of its members vis-a-vis other competing groups. In this light, ethnic associations or movements' emphasis on their racial or ethnic identity (cultural symbols) is viewed as a stratagem for group improvement.

Related to this school is what Eric Casino calls a political law of ethnicity which advances the idea that ethnic groups mobilize "to help the individual and facilitate access to resources in a centralizing society."⁵ To Casino, "group formation' and 'ethnicization' is an alternative strategy for getting at scarce resources whose distribution rules have been centralized by the apparatus of the state."⁶

⁴. This is the crux of Leo A. Despres, ed., Ethnicity and Resource Competition in Plural Societies (The Hague: Mouton, 1975). See also S. Steinberg, The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity and Class in America (New York: Atheneum, 1981).

⁵. Eric S. Casino, "Political and Logical Constituents of Ethnicity: Implications for Cross-Cultural Training", a paper presented at the Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research meeting in Mexico City, March 1979, pp. 2-10 and 22.

⁶. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

The *modernization school* views ethnic mobilization as a response of members of ethnic communities to the adverse consequences of changes associated with modernization. These changes may include shift to cash or market economy, emphasis on productivity, industrialization, urbanization, and others. Cynthia Enloe pointed out that:

What we may be witnessing today in places as dissimilar as Pakistan and Canada is the surfacing of ethnic problems caused by the 'national' way to modernity. The ethnic conflicts threatening the stability not only of Pakistan and Canada but of numerous other states are not just a reflection of traditional sentiments that stubbornly refuse to die. They stem in part from the successes of modernization.⁷

She added:

Modern development takes a heavy toll on the solidarity and autonomy of ethnic groups. Homogenization of cultures - often labeled 'Westernization' - plus pressures for centralized nation-states undermine associations dependent on cultural separateness. Simultaneously, mass communication, complex organizations specialization, urban growth and industrialism uproot people from established patterns. The uncertainties of transitional society provoke a self-consciousness about identity that was superfluous in the past. One of the ironies of modernization is that it combats ethnic loyalty while it stimulates ethnic awareness.⁸

In many developing countries, the spread of modernization values (e.g., individualism and the acquisitive ethic), practices (e.g., mechanized and corporate farming) and institutions (e.g., multinational corporations and complex bureaucracies) generated devastating impacts (economic, social, political and ecological) on many ethnic communities located in their peripheries. Modernization destroyed the subsistence economy of ethnic communities, severed their ties to their lands, caused damages to their ecology, and other consequences which in their totality jeopardized the basis of their subsistence and existence. Undeniably, this explains the militancy of some ethnic groups adversely affected by maxi-infrastructure

⁷. Cynthia H. Enloe, Ethnic Conflict and Political Development (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1973), p. 13.

⁸. *Ibid.*, p. 27-28.

projects like dams and other energy projects in certain peripheral countries.

Related to the modernization school is the *ethnic differentiating role of the state school*.⁹ The state is a principal agent of modernization. It has to make decisions on what to do, where, when, and by whom. In this situation, one individual or community may be chosen over others for certain resources (e.g., a position in the government, public assistance or development program). In some instances, one ethnic group or community (a dominant one) is favored (if not pampered), by getting a disproportionate share of the resources distributed by the state, while others are not (or neglected), thereby making members of the latter feel discriminated against (like the feeling of being second-class citizens). Consequently they get alienated from the state. The ethnic differentiating role of the state is held by many as a major cause of ethnic mobilization (including its serious form, armed separatism).

Cynthia Enloe pointed out that"

Many central governments in... ethnically varied societies are in fact ethnic themselves - ethnic in their chief constituency, ethnic in their perceptions of other groups in the nation, ethnic in the symbols they employ (e.g., national flags, party insignia), ethnic in their discriminatory methods of distributing the rewards of development.¹⁰

⁹. The ethnic differentiating role of the state is dealt with in several works by Cynthia Enloe. These include C. Enloe, 1973, op. cit.; C. Enloe, Police, Military and Ethnicity: Foundations of State Power (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1980); C. Enloe, "Ethnicity in the Evolution of Asia's Armed Bureaucracies," in DeWitt C. Ellinwood and C. Enloe, eds., Ethnicity and the Military in Asia (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1981), pp. 1-17; and C. Enloe, "Ethnic Diversity: The Potential for Conflict" in Guy J. Pauker, Frank H. Golay and Cynthia Enloe, Diversity and Development in Southeast Asia (New York: McGrawHill, 1977), pp. 135-181.

Another eloquent discussion of this subject is contained in Paul Brass, "Ethnic Groups and the State" in Paul Brass, ed., Ethnic Groups and the State (New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1985), Ch. 1.

¹⁰. C. Enloe, "Ethnic Diversity...", in Pauker, Golay and Enloe, op. cit., pp. 145-146.

In the same vein, Paul Brass argued that the state "invariably makes distinctions, classifies its populations and distributes resources differentially."¹¹ He added that the state

...is always engaged in the differential distribution of resources among categories in the population. Even when the state sets out to be ostentatiously egalitarian, it must choose between types of equalitarian policies that invariably favor some groups or categories in the population and discriminate against others. Moreover, it often does so for reasons of its convenience as well as to favor or protect particular groups against others.¹²

Closely related to this school is Enloe's concept of "vertical ethnic differentiation"¹³ which is basically what Michael Hechter calls the "cultural division of labor."¹⁴ In a vertical system, social stratification is synonymous with ethnicity. This gives us a situation wherein locations and mobility in the stratification system are determined by race or ethnicity, so that a great majority of the members of subordinate or minority ethnic groups are confined to the lower strata and are structurally impeded from moving to the upper rungs of the stratification system. This means that high prestige roles are reserved for members of the superordinate group, while individuals from less advanced groups are denied access to these roles. According to this concept, societies characterized by a vertical system are prone to ethnic-based rebellion or revolution. An example is South Africa.

¹¹. Paul Brass, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹². *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹³. C. Enloe, 1973, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-30.

¹⁴. See William N. Sloan, "Ethnicity or Imperialism?", a review article on Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536-1966* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975) in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Jan. 1979).

A geographic translation of the vertical system is the concept of "centre-periphery"¹⁵ as applied to the analysis of ethnic mobilization. Its principal argument is the subordination of the values and interests of the peripheral parts (where less advanced ethnic communities abound) to those of the center (dominant and advanced parts). Subordination involves not only the exploitation of the resources of the periphery to benefit the center, but also the neglect of the former by the state in its development administration efforts, and also its subjection to central government control (which may involve military repression).

Also related to concept of vertical system is what Casino calls a psychological law of ethnicity: the practice of devaluative categorization by the state and members of dominant ethnic groups in relation to less advanced groups.

(E)thnic groups are also established by categorization, by the tendency of the state and other members of society to ascribe identities and characteristics to groups. This exonymic tendency is matched by a self-defining and autonymic response which leads to group consciousness that further feeds the tendency of others to categorize the stereotype. Mobilization and categorization are linked up in real societies by the tendency of dominant groups to define and represent themselves as the total class (nation-state) in which other members are therefore reduced to marginal minorities with reduced status.¹⁶

The *international influences school* stresses the role of external factors in the mobilization of certain ethnic groups against their governments. According to this school, movements in some countries may have influence on the development of similar or related movements in other countries. Some analysts hold the view that the success of certain Islamic movements in the Middle East have possibly influenced the formation of Islamic-oriented movements (including some armed Muslim separatist groups) in some countries not in the region. Concerned with armed separatism in Southeast Asia, Paribatra argued that "transnational variables may be held to

¹⁵ M. R. Sukhumband Paribatra and Chai-anan Samudavaniya, "Factors Behind Armed Separatism: A Framework for Analysis" in Lim Joo Jock and Vani Shanmugaratnam, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-46.

¹⁶ E. Casino, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

be causes or, at least, contributory factors of armed separatism."¹⁷ He added that "international Islam, however vague the notion may be, is one such variable while communism ... is another."¹⁸

Another possible international variable is subversion or intervention by foreign powers or certain groups in other countries.¹⁹ For example, Malaysia used to be linked to the armed Muslim separatist movements in the Philippines and Thailand.

A possible international variable which is related to the two preceding schools is the penetration and exploitation of the periphery of peripheral countries by international capitalism, resulting in social and economic inequities, factors which Paribatra argued, may serve as basis for armed separatism.²⁰ Ronald Grant and E. Spencer

¹⁷. M. R. Paribatra in the "Concluding Discussion" portion of Lim Joo-Jock and Vani Shanmugaratnam, eds, op. cit., pp. 263-264.

¹⁸. Ibid., p. 263.

¹⁹. Ibid., p. 264.

²⁰. M. R. Paribatra in the "Concluding Discussion" portion of Lim Joo-Jock and Vani Shanmugaratnam, eds., op. cit., pp. 263-264.

The strength of international capitalist penetration as an explanation for state-ethnic conflict is well argued and demonstrated in a paper by Robert Stauffer about the Moro secessionist movement in the Philippines. Using "World System" perspective, he argues that

(t)he war in Mindanao is between forces representing the cutting edge of the expanding capitalist world-economy on the one hand (the Philippine government and its public and private transnational allies), and the MNLFF on the other.

See Robert Stauffer, "The Politics of Becoming: The Mindanao Conflict in a World System Perspective", Third World Studies Dependency Series No. 31, Third World Studies Center, University of the Philippines, October 1980, p. 2.

On the relationship between multinational corporations (MNCs) and ethnic mobilization, read the items in Ronald M. Grant and E. Spencer Wellhofer, eds., Ethnonationalism, Multi-national Corporations and the Modern State, Monograph Series in World Affairs, Vol. 15, Book 4, Graduate School of International Studies, University of Denver, 1979. The articles include Cynthia Enloe, "Multinational Corporations in the Making and Unmaking of Ethnic Groups", pp. 9-32.

Wellhofer's comment on the relationship between ethno-nationalism, multinational corporations, and the state is very revealing.

MNCs and other multinational economic alliances initially offer tantalizing benefits to the state. Later, however, MNCs may exasperate ethnic tensions by discriminatory policies, inequitable exchanges, and reinforcement of the status quo. Minority and ethno-nationalist movements are one major reaction to injustices, and ethno-nationalism serves to legitimize a challenge to the ruling elite and to social order. ²¹

Closely related with the resources competition and interest group school is the *elite competition school* ²² which views ethnic mobilization as a function of the competition or rivalries between elites (or sub-groups (inter-ethnic elite competition). Ethnic mobilization is seen not simply as a result of one whole ethnic group competing with, or being dominated by, another group. This school begins with a model of intergroup relations that assumes both the existence of sub-groups within each class or ethnic category and of different relations between each sub-group within and across categorical boundaries. It considers the achievement of broad class or ethnic group consciousness as a rare event. It recognizes the possibilities for ethnic elites from different ethnic groups to collaborate in relation to common class interests while retaining a strong sense of a separate ethnic identity. It avoids the usually untenable assumption that particular states are creatures of particular classes (held by classical Marxists) or ethnic groups and is attentive to the more usual reality, which is one of alliance between the state and particular sub-groups within a class or ethnic group. Finally, this school qualifies the common pessimism concerning the future of multi-ethnic societies and leads to an appreciation of the multiple possibilities or alliance and collaboration as well as conflict across ethnic group boundaries and between ethnic groups and the state.

²¹. Ronald M. Grant and E. Spencer Wellhofer, "Introduction" in Ronald M. Grant and E. Spencer Wellhofer, eds., *op. cit.*, p.2.

²². This discussion was informed largely by Paul Brass, "Ethnic Groups..", in Paul Brass, ed., *op. cit.*, pp. 18-23.

According to this school, ethnic mobilization may spring from either the group's internal or external relations. It may be engendered by the competition for political, economic and other resources among elites (or sub-groups thereof) within an ethnic group. This emphasis on the internal relations of ethnic groups is the latest strand in the literature on ethnicity and political conflict. Another possibility for ethnic mobilization is the competition between elites (or sub-groups thereof) across ethnic boundaries. It seems important to stress that the center stage of elite competition within the across ethnic groups is the state. This school holds that elites and inter-elite competition are the major explanatory variables of ethnic mobilization.

Emphasizing the role of inter-elite competition in ethnic mobilization, Paul Brass pointed out that

...it is central to the argument here that elites and inter-elite competition of specific types and alliance patterns with the state are the critical precipitants in ethnic group conflict and political mobilization. All factors, including the richness or paucity of available cultural symbols, regional economic inequalities, patterns of differential social mobilization, and the like are but backdrops and resources for elites to draw upon for the purpose. Without elite entry into such situations, injustices and inequalities may be accepted, cultural decline or assimilation may occur, and grievances may be expressed in isolated, anomalous, or sporadic forms of conflict and disorder. Moreover, skillful elites who lack such 'objective' bases for mobilization as, say, systematic discrimination or evident regional inequalities will often create images or perceptions of them by magnifying minor cases of discrimination or specific instances of regional inequality.²³ (Emphasis added).

He added:

It is not assumed that elites can do whatever they wish with the cultures and symbols of the groups they seek to represent. It is, rather, assumed that some elites can sometimes get away with representing their groups to the state authorities even without a popular base, especially when the state authorities for their own purposes wish to recognize them as the group's sole representative. However, in a free competition with other elites from their own groups or with elites from other ethnic groups, it matters a great deal how effective competing elites are in interpreting,

²³ . Ibid., pp. 48-49.

reinterpreting, and manipulating the symbols of the group for purposes of political mobilization.²⁴ (Emphasis added).

A major explanation for ethnic mobilization which combines some of the variables associated with the preceding schools is *needs deprivation*. The deprivation of basic human needs (these may include physiological and social needs) is advanced as a major explanation not only for ethnic violence but also for the general issue of why men rebel.²⁵ The feeling of being marginal or backward by members of an ethnic group in relation to other more dominant groups or the broader society can cause the former to mobilize against the latter and/or the state.²⁶ According to this school, people in backward (or deprived) areas are more prone to radical political actions than those in more advanced regions.

A variant of this is John Burton's theory which views ethnic mobilization as a function of an ethnic group's unsatisfied need for identity, recognition, security and participation.²⁷ According to this school, an ethnic group values attachment to religion, language and other cultural markers which are the constituent elements of its identity. Such an identity which members subjectively value has to be recognized or respected (at least tolerated) by others. In addition, it craves for its security: the security of the persons, the properties, and the interests of the individual members and the group as a collectivity. It also gives high value to involvement in societal affairs affecting it. This involvement would include independent or

²⁴. Ibid., p. 48.

²⁵. See Ted R. Gurr, Roques, Rebels and Reformers: A Political History of Urban and Crime Conflict, London, 1976.

²⁶. The high frequency of secessionist movements in backward regions was reported in Donald L. Horowitz, "Patterns of Ethnic Separatism", Comparative Studies in Society and History, Vol. 23, 1981, pp. 165-195.

²⁷. See John W. Burton, Global Conflict: The Domestic Sources of International Crisis (Sussex: Wheatsheaf Books Ltd., 1984), pp. 92-99 and 147-148; and John W. Burton, Deviance, Terrorism and War (Martin Robertson, 1979).

autonomous decision-making in matters involving its interests, and adequacy of its representation in appropriate institutions of governance. Being fundamental to human existence, these needs cannot be eliminated by repression, threat and coercion.²⁸ As pointed out by Burton, "failure to meet these fundamental needs leads, inevitably, to community organization, political pressures and, finally, when these do not achieve the required results, to violence in one form or another."²⁹

The social needs deprivation theory stresses that most efforts to solve state-ethnic conflict fail because state structures, processes and policies are taken as "givens" to which the needs of individuals, groups and institutions must be attuned and adjusted, instead of the other way around. This suggests that in state-ethnic conflict resolution efforts, the identity, recognition, security and participation needs of ethnic groups which are crucial to their existence must be considered as givens, to which state structures, processes, policies and programs must be tailored.

Concluding Statements

It must be noted that while the arguments of each of these schools cannot be ignored, none of them can be taken as a sufficient explanation for ethnic mobilization. The specificity of human experiences (individually and collectively) and the multi-dimensionality of state-ethnic conflicts require a multi-faceted and open-ended approach of inquiry. Hence, while each deserves attention in the study of state-ethnic conflicts, none can be super-imposed as the only explanation for conflicts like the contemporary Moro struggle in Mindanao.

²⁸. John W. Burton, 1984, p. 148.

²⁹. Ibid.