What Really Causes Civil War?

Why multietnic societies may not be more prone to strife. By Gary J. Bass

The commonplace assumption that a more homogeneous society is a more peaceful society certainly sounds reasonable. Surely monocratic Japan should have an easier time maintaining domestic order than Indonesia, or Slovenia than Macedonia. After all, in a country with numerous ethnic or religious groups, politicians are easily tempted to organize factions along group lines—which can lead to rising tensions and even civil war or the collapse of the state. In 1938, Benito Mussolini warned, "If Czechoslovakia finds herself today in what might be called a 'delicate situation,' it is because she was not just Czechoslovakia, but Czech-Germano-Polono-Magaro-Ruseno-Ruman-Slovakia."

Today, as Iraq spirals toward outright warfare between Sunnis and Shiites, it risks joining a lengthening list of countries that have seemingly inevitably been ripped apart by bitter sectarian hatreds: Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Sudan and not least Lebanon, which experienced civil wars in 1960 and 1958 and from 1975 to 1990 and may face yet another one.

But what if this whole premise is wrong? Odd as it may seem, there is a growing body of work that suggests that multietnic countries are actually no more prone to civil war than other countries. In a sweeping 2003 study, the Stanford civil war experts James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin came to a startling finding: "It appears not to be true that a greater degree of ethnic or religious diversity—or indeed any particular cultural demography—by itself makes a country more prone to civil war."

Fearon and Laitin looked at 127 civil wars from 1945 to 1999, most often in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. They found that regardless of how ethnically mixed a country is, the likelihood of a civil war decreases as countries get richer. The richest states are almost impervious to civil strife, no matter how multietnic they might be—think for instance of Belgium, where Flemings and Walloons show almost no inclination to fight it out. And while the poorest countries have the most civil wars, Fearon and Laitin discovered that, oddly enough, it is actually the more homogeneous ones among them that are most likely to descend into violence. Fearon and Laitin explained their findings by noting that while the world is awash with political grudges, ethnic and otherwise, civil wars only begin under particular circumstances that favor rebel insurgencies. The most common situation involves a weak, corrupt or brutal government confronting small bands of rebels protected by mountainous terrain and sheltered by a sympathetic rural population, and possibly bolstered with foreign support or revenues from diamonds or coca. These insurgents may be ethnic chauvinists, but they could equally well be anti-colonialists, Islamists, drug lords, greedy opportunists, communists of various stripes, and so on.

The Fearon and Laitin argument has not gone unchallenged. In a 2004 paper, the Oxford economists Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler noted that when an ethnic group makes up more than 45 percent but less than 90 percent of a population, strife becomes more likely. Such a group, they reasoned, will be especially tempted to exploit smaller groups.

Other scholars have backed up Fearon and Laitin's general argument. Crawford Young, an African politics expert at Wisconsin and a former dean at the National University of Zaire, maintains that the new pattern of conflict in Africa, where many of the post-1989 civil wars have broken out, has "nothing to do with religion, ethnicity and race." In contrast to the conventional view that violence in Africa is a product of the legacy of arbitrary colonial borders that bundled rival tribes together, Young blames recent
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African civil wars largely on novel financial and military factors. He points to the illicit sale of arms from the former Soviet Union and the rising professionalism of (h)trained guerrillas (including jihadis who fought the Soviets in Afghanistan) as well as the use of child soldiers in Uganda and Congo.

Young emphasizes that rebels do not need much popular support if they can manage to finance themselves: trading in illicit diamonds helped bankroll and sustain Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia, not to mention rebels in Sierra Leone and Angola. This argument also helps explain why Colombia's civil war, fueled by coca profiteering, has dragged on for so many decades. Far from needing ethnic grievances to perpetuate them, some civil wars can perpetuate themselves.

If true, the notion that ethnic diversity does not make civil war more likely would be reassuring news for citizens of multietnic countries like the United States and India. It would also call into question the thinking of pundits like Robert D. Kaplan, who has written that multietnic Nigeria "is likely to split into several pieces," and Samuel P. Huntington, whose book "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order" previews a world torn apart by cultural differences between Muslims and other civilizations—ethnic warfare on a global scale. The Fearon-Laitin thesis suggests that the debate over the future of fragile countries should turn from questions of ethnic demography to the need for good government, economic development and adequate policing. It also implies that there was no nothing inevitable about the terrible sectarian strife in Iraq. Ethic women do not just happen; they are made.