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Political Science 125

Civil Conflict: Explanatory Variables

Civil conflict, as defined by Gleditsch et al. (2002), is when there is “a contested incompatibility that concerns government [and/or] territory where the use of armed force between the two parties[, one of which must be the government of a state,] results in at least 25 battle-related deaths [annually].” This is typically understood as a conflict between a government and an organized opposition, but the question of *why* a civil conflict occurs has been the subject of intense research for political scientists. The three contributing factors of civil conflict that will be discussed in this paper, in the order of increasing importance and explanatory power, are grievances, state capacity, and international interference with recognition that the overwhelming majority of civil conflicts in the twenty-first century are recurring conflicts (Walter, 2015).

The explanation for civil conflict occurrence (and recurrence) as a result of grievances is understood through identity and emotions. Bates (1985) proposes that cultural groups, the subject to various economic, political, or identity-based afflictions, become politicized to compete for the benefits of modernization; leaders aim to create a “minimum winning coalition,” or the smallest coalition necessary to seize power, and thereby enrich the most among themselves with the resources, social capital, and technology formerly available to those previously in power. Petersen (2002) hypothesizes that grievances produce mobilizing emotions: fear, hatred, resentment, and rage; emotions expressed due to structural conditions, e.g. modernization, discrimination, state collapse, history, etc., to achieve their alleviation of grievances, i.e. justice.

This explanation can be projected onto Serbia at the collapse of the former Yugoslavia where ethnic and religious communities, each facing a deep history of grievances that stem from explicitly-prejudicial behavior, or more implicit-prejudices as a result of economic hardship, begin conflicts over definitions of spatial boundaries to each respective “nation” and the negotiation of what justice and accountability looks like for past harms by neighboring “nations” (The Death of Yugoslavia, 2015). The minimum-winning coalition, in the Serbian case, would be the ethnic constitution of Serbians which overlaps with the preponderant religious practice at the expense of those ethnic and religious groups who are not considered ‘Serbian’ in the national sense. The limitations, however, are addressed by the fact that, had grievances alone predicted civil conflicts, there would be more civil conflicts than we currently observe and therefore the current understanding is, while grievances may be a necessary condition for civil conflict, they are not a sufficient condition. A contemporary example might be available in China’s repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang who constitute a sizable minority in China and present practices, religious and cultural, contrary to the standards enforced by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)(China’s Repression...). The Uyghurs already organize themselves and have a coherent identity separate from China (as defined by the CCP), but have not organized resistance against the government in the face of obvious grievances that result from prejudicial discrimination. This suggests the necessity for a qualifying factor: State Capacity.

State Capacity, also known as opportunity, can be understood as a contributing factor to civil conflict because of the observed inverse-relationship between strong state capacity, e.g. a high-income, stable nation that successfully protected itself from a previous war, and the occurrence of a civil conflict. Fearon and Laitin (2003) present data of variables that constitute an academic definition of state capacity and its correlation with civil conflict occurrence. The

negative correlations that were determined to be significant were per-capita income and prior wars, whereas those positively correlated were proportion of mountainous terrain, the “newness” of the state, and its population. This provides fertile ground for the hypothesis that any interest for seizing power, be it a result from grievances or not, relies on the perception that an opportunity is available by the state’s inability to defend itself from these to-be-usurpers. For example, if the nation was wealthy, and presumably invested such wealth into militarization/policing, and was successful in extinguishing a previous war, it seems unlikely that rebellion would be successful and isn’t worth attempting. Likewise, if the government has been recently formed and covers a large population of which cannot be easily policed in mountainous territory, an opportunity of successful opposition and overthrow of government arises. Barbara Walter’s paper, “Why Bad Governance Leads to Repeat Civil War” (2015), builds upon the implications of weak state capacity. By presenting data that since 90% of civil conflicts by the 2000s were recurrences, the lack of government accountability, defined as strong political and state institutions, results in opposition (re)organizing for the purpose of achieving their (initial) goals. Walter (2013) posits the important question of why we would expect a civil conflict in North Korea (DPRK), but we have yet to see organized opposition. It is plausible, following the projections of the aforementioned scholars, that the state capacity of the DPRK is too strong for grievances to coalesce into an organized opposition. The DPRK has the “world’s fourth-largest military” and is believed to “possess chemical and biological weapons.” (What’s The Status of North Korea’s...) Furthermore, it is documented by detractors that they intentionally manipulate language, so that the concept of freedom is alien to them, and criminalize dissent, by individuals or families/groups that attempt to organize (Park, 2017). However, a question of how

oppositions, and civil conflicts thereof, may arise in nations that have relatively strong governments leads us to the external support of opposition groups.

The final contributor of international involvement explains how grievances that motivate an opposition group can be legitimized by external recognition and, through direct and indirect participation, international actors can promote the occurrence (and recurrence) of civil conflicts by strengthening the state capacity of the government and/or providing highly-effective military technologies to the opposition group(s). Byman et al (2001) presents evidence that international interventions are mostly through foreign state support, accounting for 45 out of the documented 74 instances in the data set, whereas refugee and diaspora support account for 21 and 19 instances respectively. We can attribute the foreign state support as both a recognition and strengthening of the group, and the diaspora and refugee support, as more of a recognition of the actors in the conflict. Kalyvas and Balcells (2010) further argue that the technologies of rebellion, understood as the military technology made available to opposition and governments impact the nature of civil conflict by prolonging it, and in some instances, reviving it. Shimer (2018) provides the example of Russian interference in smaller democracies and offers more analysis to Russia's goals beyond direct support evident in Russia's backing of various rebel groups throughout the Middle East (and government too, with the case of Iraq). By both recognizing and providing means to equalize the power imbalance between the rebel groups and their governments, international actors like Russia, in this example, capitalize on those rebel groups' grievances by providing an opportunity to usurp their governments when it benefits Russia's geopolitical interests thereby reviving conflicts and prolonging existing conflicts.

In conclusion, the literature behind civil conflict grows more explanatory as variables become introduced. Grievances, and their underlying emotional responses, become sufficient

causes when the opportunity arises from a weak state capacity to prevent rebellion. Furthermore, with the international influence of aid, military or financial, the opportunity to successfully rebel changes and explains the recent increase in recurrent conflicts and the prolonging of others.

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