Power Sharing and International Mediation in Ethnic Conflicts

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Summary

Despite the proliferation of newly independent states in the Cold War's immediate aftermath, many of which were once in the former Soviet Union, most ethnic group claims to self-determination are unlikely to be realized if this principle is defined as a separate fully sovereign state for each ethnic group. For a variety of reasons, the dissolution of existing multiethnic states into new, ethnically homogeneous countries is fraught with problems, evidenced by the reality that much blood has been spilled in recent years in the pursuit of this often elusive goal.

Moreover, given increasing emphasis on democratic governance as a fundamental human right, ethnic group claims for self-determination should ideally be accommodated in a democratic framework *within* existing states. Although not all ethnic conflicts begin as a quest for territorial sovereignty and self-determination, they often result in such maximalist claims unless they are addressed early and effectively. Power sharing, defined as practices and institutions that result in broad-based governing coalitions generally inclusive of all major ethnic groups in society, can reconcile principles of self-determination and democracy in multiethnic states, principles that are often perceived to be at odds.

Although power sharing normally evolves out of internal processes, the international community as an external player has often sought to promote power sharing in response to ethnic conflicts. There have been some successes and some failures; some pitfalls have been avoided and others have not. Rarely is the international

community's promotion of power sharing informed by a thorough understanding of the leading contemporary scholarship on the issue. A more systematic appreciation of the scholarly analysis of power sharing can highlight the advantages and disadvantages of various approaches and practices for the amelioration of ethnic conflict.

This book presents the scholarly and practitioner debate over power sharing in the context of ethnic conflict dynamics and identifies the principal approaches to, and practices of, power sharing. It also highlights concerns and problems with power-sharing approaches and practices that have been raised by scholars and practitioners alike, and instances where power-sharing experiments failed. In conclusion, it raises issues regarding international intervention in ethnic conflicts to promote power sharing as a means to prevent or manage violent conflicts in societies deeply divided by ethnic differences. This summary highlights some key points.

Ethnic Conflict: Approaches, Patterns, and Dynamics

- Ethnic conflict is explained by scholars as either primordial and innate, or instrumental and (at least partially) socially contrived. The extent to which analysts perceive ethnicity as immutable and innate versus socially constructed or manipulated by political leaders influences beliefs about the types of institutions and practices that can best ameliorate conflict along ethnic lines. A critical factor is whether ethnic groups perceive each other in essentialist, threatening terms, or pragmatically. Pragmatic perceptions between groups in conflict create opportunities for peaceful management of intergroup relations.

- Ethnic conflicts can be more or less severe, depending in large part on the structure of relationships, for example, whether identity and socioeconomic differences overlap. An important predictor of the severity of conflict is the role of the state: Does it stand above conflicts and mediate them, or does a group "own" the state and use its powers to the detriment of other groups?

- A common thread that runs through all violent ethnic conflicts is the manipulative role of ethnic group leaders who foster

discrimination and mobilize group members against their foes. Ethnic *outbidding* refers to extremist ethnic group leaders who decry moderation with enemies as a sellout of group interests.

- Ethnic conflicts can escalate—that is, intensify or spread—or they can de-escalate, resulting in improved intergroup relations. The post–Cold War world contains examples of both. Escalation occurs when background conditions of ethnic strife are combined with *conflict triggers*, or precipitating events. A useful way to conceptualize moves toward more peaceful ethnic conflict management is through a phases or stages approach to de-escalation, in which conflicts that reach a stalemate are managed through protracted negotiations.

Democracy and Its Alternatives in Deeply Divided Societies

- Ethnic conflicts have usually been managed with nondemocratic, authoritarian practices such as subjugation and control. However, informal practices of ethnic balancing have at times kept a relative peace even in societies that are not democratic. Democracy is inherently difficult in divided societies, but democratic practices offer greater promise for long-term peaceful conflict management than nondemocratic ones. Even when democracy is unlikely to be introduced quickly in a society, practices can be put in place that help manage ethnic tensions.

- Simple majoritarian democracy contains special problems for ethnically divided societies. Minority ethnic groups expect to be permanently excluded from power through the ballot box and fear electoral contests when the principle of simple majority rule is operative. Power-sharing practices offer an alternative to simple majoritarian practices of democratic governance.

- There are two broad approaches to constructing democracy in divided societies: the *consociational*, or group building-block, approach that relies on accommodation by ethnic group leaders at the center and a high degree of group autonomy; and the *integrative* approach, which seeks to create incentives for moderation by political leaders on divisive ethnic themes and to enhance

minority influence in majority decision making. Consociational approaches rely on elite accommodation and guarantees to groups to protect their interests, such as a mutual or minority veto, whereas the integrative approach relies on incentives for intergroup cooperation such as electoral systems that encourage the formation of preelection pacts among candidates or political parties across ethnic lines. This book argues that both approaches can lead to power sharing while acknowledging that there is some debate about whether the term applies to integrative practices as well.

A Typology of Conflict-Regulating Practices

- The consociational and integrative approaches can be fruitfully viewed as conceptual poles in a spectrum of specific conflict-regulating institutions and practices that promote power sharing. Which approach and which practices are best in any given conflict situation is highly contingent on the patterns and dynamics of the particular conflict. Indeed, a given political system may fruitfully incorporate aspects of both approaches simultaneously. It is useful to consider the practices in terms of three sets of variables that apply to both approaches: territorial division of power, decision rules, and public policies (for example, on language, education, and resource distribution) that define relations between the state and the ethnic groups.
- Five consociational conflict-regulating practices are as follows:
  1. Granting territorial autonomy and creating confederal arrangements.
  2. Creating a polycommunal, or ethnic, federation.
  3. Adopting group proportional representation in administrative appointments, including consensus decision rules in the executive.
  4. Adopting a highly proportional electoral system in a parliamentary framework.
  5. Acknowledging group rights or corporate (nonterritorial) federalism.

- Five integrative conflict-regulating practices are as follows:
  1. Creating a mixed, or nonethnic, federal structure.
  2. Establishing an inclusive, centralized unitary state.
  3. Adopting majoritarian but ethnically neutral, or nonethnic, executive, legislative, and administrative decision-making bodies.
  4. Adopting a semimajoritarian or semiproportional electoral system that encourages the formation of preelection coalitions (vote pooling) across ethnic divides.
  5. Devising "ethnicity-blind" public policies.

Power Sharing and Peace Processes

- Power-sharing practices, when they are adopted by parties in conflicts, often evolve in direct response to a history of violent conflict. Pragmatic perceptions toward other groups can emerge from the belief that the failure to accommodate will precipitate wider strife; political leaders and publics must be motivated to avoid worsening or more violent conflict if power sharing is to be successfully adopted. Unfortunately, such motivation does not always exist: high levels of violence do not inevitably mean that political leaders will be more moderate and adopt power sharing.
- Transitional moments, both in terms of changes in structure of international relations and in terms of relations among groups within states, are moments of promise and peril. Ethnic relations can improve or worsen. Power sharing can evolve from transitions or peace processes in which parties adopt agreements, or *mutual security pacts*, that seek to limit the ability of groups to inflict mutual harm. The degree of unity and organizational coherence of the parties, and the ability of political leaders to persuade their constituents to act peacefully, are the most important variables in creating improved relations among ethnic groups. Conciliatory attitudes must be both broad (including hard-liners) and deep (including key publics as well as leaders).

International Intervention and Power Sharing

- International intervention in ethnic conflicts focuses both on the process by which groups rearrange their relations, through violence or dialogue, and on the terms and structures of the outcomes that are reached. Despite the inherent problems of partition, the international community should not assume that the borders of an existing state are sacrosanct. The principal decision the international community must face in any given violent ethnic conflict is whether separation or power sharing (living together) is the more achievable, sustainable, and just outcome. This is especially true when the parties themselves cannot reach an agreement on this fundamental question.

- The international community often places too much emphasis on democratic elections without considering their potentially adverse impact in situations of severe ethnic conflict, especially when such elections are held with simple majority rule electoral systems and without prior mutual security pacts. Elections are critical moments in peace processes; they are turning points at which relations can polarize or new national unity can be forged through the creation of a legitimate government. Much depends on both the electoral system chosen and the administration and monitoring of the election event. Elections provide important opportunities for intervention to help ameliorate ethnic conflicts because they are especially amenable to monitoring and an ongoing international presence.

- Both historically and more recently, the international community has promoted power sharing by offering formulas—institutional blueprints for postconflict political structures—and has often sought to induce disputants to accept them through a combination of diplomatic carrots and sticks. Increasingly, the international community is using linkages to other issues, such as membership in collective security, trade, and other international organizations, to induce states to adopt practices that promote ethnic accommodation. Promoting

conflict-regulating practices in this manner can be a useful tool of preventive diplomacy to arrest the potential escalation of ethnic conflicts into violence.

- The paradox of promoting power sharing *early* in the escalation of an ethnic conflict is that at a nascent stage of tensions, parties may be unwilling to embrace power-sharing practices because they are not sufficiently desperate or feel insufficiently compelled. At a *late* stage of conflict, after significant violence, enmities may be too deep for parties to share power for mutual benefit. Determining when a conflict is ripe for a power-sharing solution is at best a difficult judgment call requiring intimate knowledge of a situation, especially of the true predisposition of the parties and their willingness to live together within a common or shared political framework.

- Thus, a second paradox is the problem of judging intentions. Tactical adoption of power sharing can set the stage for new grievances and new strife. Moreover, the international community is often asked to secure successful implementation of agreements or to guarantee them, which in essence ties the international community to the substance of a settlement.

- The promotion of power sharing by the international community in situations of deep ethnic conflict is riddled with normative considerations, such as potentially rewarding aggression or appeasement of extremists. It also entails considerable risks, such as inducing parties to share power when their underlying perceptions are still deeply suspicious and based on mutual harm.

- When an international mediator goes beyond facilitating negotiation and backs a power-sharing solution in any given conflict at either an early or late stage of escalation, this policy involves choosing sides. This is true of choosing among parties to a conflict (often in favor of minorities who seek to limit the power of majorities) as well as bolstering more moderate factions within a given party or government against more hardline elements.

Policy Making and Power Sharing

- Power sharing involves a wide range of practices, not a simple model or formula that can be universally applied. Thus, in a given conflict there is no substitute for intimate scholarly and policymaker knowledge in reaching conclusions about whether any given power-sharing practice will likely have an ameliorative or potentially adverse effect on a given ethnic conflict. For example, in some situations consociational power sharing may be an appropriate interim measure but should not become a permanent feature of political life. Likewise, parties in an ethnic conflict may be too insecure to accept the incentive mechanisms of the integrative approach, preferring the more firm guarantees of consociationalism.

- In many countries, democracy may be a long way off, but the international community can exert pressure for the adoption of conflict-regulating practices by nondemocratic states, such as fair treatment of ethnic minorities and ethnically diverse security forces.

- Conditional generalizations can be made that can serve to inform policy. Power-sharing arrangements are successful in managing ethnic conflict under the following conditions:

  1. They are embraced by a core group of moderate political leaders in ethnic conflicts and these leaders are genuinely representative of the groups they purport to lead.

  2. The practices are flexible and allow for equitable distribution of resources.

  3. They are indigenously arrived at, not agreed on as the result of too-heavy external pressures or short-term, zero-sum expectations of the parties.

  4. Parties can gradually eschew the extraordinary measures that some power-sharing practices entail and allow a more integrative and liberal form of democracy to evolve.

Foreword

The horrors of ethnic violence defy imagination: mass murder, rape, and wanton destruction of places of worship and universities carried out by people who had lived together peacefully. The world watches, seemingly helpless before the overwhelming force of hatred, and asks the inevitable question: "Couldn't someone have done something to prevent this?"

People who have devoted their lives to the study of ethnic conflict have sought answers to three components of this large question. What political conditions drive people to violence? What circumstances allow people to settle their differences peacefully? What is the role of the international community when relations between groups become violent or threaten to become violent? Scholars have developed theories of ethnic conflict and of political institutions that can manage conflicts to prevent them from turning violent. They have extracted principles from detailed research on past conflicts, and situations in which conflicts have been avoided, and they have presented their results to policymakers, hoping that the principles will help guide foreign policy.

But scholars notice that policymakers' eyes often glaze over in response to scholarly analyses. The scholar and policymaker are from two different cultures and thrive on different types of information. The scholar looks backward to find lessons; the policymaker looks ahead and adapts to uncertain circumstances. The

scholar can wait until all the facts are in; the policymaker must improvise. The time horizon of the scholar may be years; the horizon of the policymaker is often weeks, days, or hours. Scholars complain that policymakers' decisions are ad hoc and without a strategy informed by thoughtful analysis. Policymakers say that they often have no choice but to formulate operational policies by instinct.

In Timothy Sisk's pathbreaking study of power sharing, copublished by the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict and the United States Institute of Peace, scholarship bridges the gap to policymaking. This is a highly innovative study that applies theories of democracy in multiethnic societies to international mediation aimed at preventing or ameliorating ethnic violence.

As Sisk notes, in deeply divided societies, where fear and ignorance are the driving forces of ethnic conflict, people tend to identify themselves by their ethnic group, the defining characteristic of social order. Violence can erupt in such societies, especially when there is gross inequality among ethnic groups and discrimination against one or more groups, and when discrimination is reinforced by public policy. To avoid such violence, political institutions must allow ethnic groups to participate in the political process and they must protect human rights. Only in such circumstances will ethnic groups be likely to feel valued.

The power-sharing arrangements described in this book can lead divided societies toward stable democracy and away from violence. Power sharing, appropriately structured, can encourage moderation and discourage extremism—and it can be based on politicians' self-interest: They will do what is needed to get elected. Power sharing can initiate the profound movement of a society away from ethnicity as the strongest social identifier. Coalitions may form along ethnic lines at the outset, but ideology or class may become more important in time. Such a shift may be helpful, as people feel strongly about ideology and class, but they are less likely to fight to the death for these values than ethnic extremists.

Power sharing has been successful in some societies but ineffective in others. It was essential in the peaceful change of government in South Africa. Without an agreement on transitional power sharing, the conflict over apartheid might not have been brought to an end, or a new round of killing might have occurred. Yet a power-sharing pact in Rwanda did not prevent genocide. For this reason, the book focuses on the conditions under which the international community should promote power-sharing efforts to prevent deadly conflict.

The lessons of this work are highly relevant for the leaders of deeply divided societies and for the international community attempting to prevent ethnic conflicts. All too often, international mediation deals only with the *process* of political change: Is it going to be peaceful or violent? Mediators want to prevent or stop the violence by any means possible. The international community must be more involved in shaping the *institutions* that will ensure an enduring peace—the *outcomes* of political change. Mediation needs to be invoked early on and address what may be the most important question: Is power sharing necessary, and possible, in a given society—or is separation a better course? Prescriptions are not possible because every situation has its unique aspects. The value of this book is in the range of options presented to policymakers as well as the illumination of critical issues.

Sisk's study draws on the experience of a number of Institute of Peace activities and initiatives on peacemaking in multiethnic societies. In addition to numerous Institute-funded grant and fellowship projects on specific conflicts, many in-house activities in recent years have focused on ethnic conflict amelioration, with special emphasis on the former Yugoslavia, Africa, the former Soviet Union, and South Asia. For example, one of the Institute's earliest grants supported the volume edited by Joseph Montville, *Conflict and Peacemaking in Multiethnic Societies*, upon which the Sisk book builds. The Institute has also focused on the tools of conflict prevention, work which yielded the recently published Institute Press book *Preventing Violent Conflicts: A Strategy for Preventive Diplomacy*, by Michael Lund.

A wide array of past and present Institute programs on religion and conflict, the rule of law and transitional justice, negotiation and mediation, elections and conflict resolution, and managing today's "complex humanitarian emergencies" through peacekeeping and diplomacy also relate to the power-sharing theme.

The Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict is deeply concerned with the democratic processes that Sisk describes. In identifying preventive measures, the Commission distinguishes between long-term structural tasks and immediate operational tasks to defuse a crisis. Structural prevention includes strategies to build intercommunal confidence, overcome deeply held mistrust, and restructure institutions that discriminate against certain ethnic groups. Democratization, which performs all these tasks, is a crucial element of structural prevention. Thus the Commission supports research—such as this work—and international fora to highlight the role that democratic institutions and power-sharing arrangements must play in the post–Cold War world. A study by Larry Diamond, a leading scholar of democratization, led to a recent Commission report, *Promoting Democracy in the 1990s: Actors and Instruments, Issues and Imperatives.* An upcoming forum in Moscow will address power sharing among institutions, minority groups, and the states of the former Soviet Union. The established democracies, with so much relevant experience, can play essential catalyzing and sustaining roles to help countries negotiate the complicated and slow process of democratization. The Commission is attempting to distill lessons from the recent record of the international community in conflict prevention.

Ethnic conflicts will continue to be a challenging aspect of the post–Cold War world. And many of these conflicts could easily become very violent. The critical question is whether pre-conflict situations can be managed to prevent the turn to violence, ideally through the structures of participatory democracy. An alert, active international community—with the close collaboration of scholars

and policymakers—can help contending parties forestall violence by encouraging the adoption of an appropriately structured power-sharing agreement based on democratic principles.

We hope that this book, a road map to scholarship and analysis of the role of the international community in promoting ethnic amity, will serve the policy and academic communities well as they grapple with today's—and tomorrow's—conflicts.

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Preface

This book has its origins in a previous book by the author on the negotiated transition from apartheid to inclusive, nonracial democracy in South Africa (*Democratization in South Africa: The Elusive Social Contract*, Princeton University Press). Those concerned with the amelioration of ethnic conflict in the post–Cold War era turn to the South African experience for lessons learned that may be applicable to other countries. Power sharing, it is widely believed, was an appropriate transitional outcome to the South African negotiations because it allowed for a careful balancing of majority prerogatives and minority interests in the immediate post-apartheid era. Without power sharing, the white minority may have sought to fight enfranchisement of the black majority to the bitter end.

The international community played an important role in fostering relatively peaceful change in South Africa ("relatively" peaceful because some 14,000 people died in political violence during the transition period), even if the decision to create a five-year government of national unity after apartheid was an internal one. External mediation did occur in South Africa, but it was either indirect or last-minute. External intervention to end apartheid, however, was extensive and sustained for many decades. The international community made a difference in South Africa, even if the conflict was transformed at a late stage, after much suffering and bloodshed.

Can *early* promotion of power sharing by the international community stave off violent ethnic conflict? If so, when, if, and how? The intent of this book is to begin to shed some light on these questions.

The study of power sharing has previously been the domain of students of comparative politics, while the issues of mediation and intervention are studied by students of international relations. This book seeks to bring these two strands of scholarship together in an effort to promote greater understanding of the possibilities and pitfalls of intervention to pre-empt the deterioration of ethnic relations into violence through the early and appropriate adoption of power-sharing institutions and practices.