

# Judging Susceptibility to Ethnic Conflict

Written by Charlotte Clapham

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CHARLOTTE CLAPHAM, MAY 6 2012

### Are some societies more susceptible to ethnic conflict than others?

The horrors of Rwanda, Former Yugoslavia and Somalia shocked the international community in the 1990s; however, these cases stand as but a few examples in an ever-increasing series of ethnic conflicts to have plagued contemporary global affairs. Therefore, it is no wonder that scholars and journalists have sought explanations, causations and motivations for these ethnic conflicts.

There is nothing inevitable or predictable about ethnic conflict; it is far more complicated a phenomenon than simply a foreseeable clash of ethnicities. Yet, it *is* possible to assert that some societies are susceptible to ethnic conflict. This essay contends that whilst societies are not *predisposed* to ethnic conflict, there are identifiable factors and conditions which can render a society *susceptible*. However, it cannot be assumed that societies deemed susceptible to ethnic conflict will experience it as a result; susceptibility does not connote the outbreak of violence. Attempts to prophesise about ethnic conflict prove futile, and so in diverting attention toward assessing the 'susceptibility' will enable this essay to explore the common denominators in cases of ethnic conflict whilst simultaneously determining why some societies experience it and others avoid it. With most societies comprised of a multi-ethnic demographic experience ethnic tension at some point in its history, it is important to establish that any society of this kind can be susceptible to ethnic tension. Yet, importantly, the term 'susceptibility' conjures up debate over the strengths or weaknesses of structural as well as ethnic factors, and so it will be an important aspect of this study to analyse these factors.

In order to satisfy some of these questions and issues this essay will firstly examine the impact and role of ethnicity, and the ways in which ethnic tensions are most commonly manifested in societies which experience ethnic conflict. In doing so, this essay will invoke the concept of the 'myth-symbol complex' and observe the influence of 'fear' in order to establish how societies susceptible to ethnic conflict are distinctive from those susceptible to conflict in itself. The second section of the essay is crucial as it asserts the salience of structural factors such as political instability, economic decline and perhaps most importantly, the transition to democracy in rendering a society susceptible to ethnic conflict. Finally, these factors will be applied to the case of Rwandan order to observe how they worked together to leave Rwandan society susceptible to extremist forces advocating ethnic conflict.

### Ethnicity

The images of mass violence, inhumane brutality and exceptional human suffering which flooded the media in the post Cold War era, left the international community unable to comprehend what was deemed to be 'the new world disorder' that was ethnic conflict (Lake & Rothchild 1998: 3). With the western world incapable of grasping the nature and context of what appeared to be a conflict so foreign in nature, the fear that ethnic conflict was contagious, with the potential to spark an epidemic of ethnic conflicts around the globe became a theme of contemporary literature on the subject (Lake & Rothchild 1998: 3). However, as this essay will demonstrate, ethnic conflict does not constitute some form of global disease, able to strike any society at any time. This idea entirely negates the role, nature and impact of ethnicity.

The ethnic tensions inherent in these cases of conflict tend to manifest themselves in specific forms, which directly

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separates examples of ethnic violence such as race riots in the West from severe ethnic conflict which predominantly occur in developing nations. In order to expand these necessary preconditions, it is important to observe what scholars have termed the 'myth-symbol complex' which relates to the formation of collective identity and accounts for the way in which memory is encoded and ideas are articulated (Schopflin 2001: 6-7). In cases of ethnic conflict, myths, symbols and the relationship they have with fear are all salient factors in rendering a society susceptible to conflict. These myths usually relate to 'mythicizations' of history, glorifying one particular group and demonizing another (Kaufman 2008: 203-4). Whilst Schopflin essentially argues that the 'myth-symbol complex' exists in most cases of group identity formation, in cases of ethnic conflict, it is typical that the myths and symbols are manipulated. Ethnicity then emerges as the overriding source of identity, both as a reflection of fear and as a way of inciting fear in the opposing ethnic group. Whilst race riots project a sense of panic and immediacy, the ethnic tensions which precede ethnic conflict are rooted in long process of myth-making through popular discourse, movements and political rhetoric. Moreover it is the way in which this manifestation of the 'myth-symbol complex' penetrates the societal framework of a nation which requires further attention.

In order for members of an ethnic group to feel a sense of fear, there has to be a system in which discrimination, inferiority and a perceived lack of physical security has to be present amongst members of a particular ethnic group and be seen to be implemented at the hands of another ethnic group (Wolff 2006: 66-67). This does not have to be the case in reality, but it has to be present at least in the minds of individuals or groups. As Michael Mann has elucidated, ethnic violence and cleansing does not occur among rival ethnic groups who are separate but equal (Mann 2006: 6). Expanding this notion, Mann argues that 'one ethnic group must be seen as exploiting the other' in order for serious ethnic conflict to develop, which proves useful as it highlights the fundamental issue at the heart of ethnic conflict, this being a process of ethnic stratification (Mann 2006: 6). The manifestations of tension and conflict may lie in the myths and symbols propagated by ethnic groups, yet the tension itself is the result of inequality. However as Mann has identified, it is the structural factors which contextualize conflict and allow for the ethnic tensions exhibited in most multi-ethnic societies to become the type of 'serious' ethnic conflict exhibited in a minority of multi-ethnic societies (Mann 2006: 6).

## Structural Factors

Whilst myths, symbols, fear and inequality are all factors which can sow the seeds of ethnic conflict, it is structural weaknesses and corruption in the sphere of politics and the economy which allow these seeds to flourish and grow. Whilst it is the failings of such structural factors in certain developing societies that increase their susceptibility to gross levels of ethnic violence, in turn, it is the strength of political and economic structures which can restrain ethnic tensions in developed societies.

The institutionalization of ethnic divisions is an unfortunate but increasingly prevalent theme of developing states. The structure of power on an ethnic basis often initiates policies of exclusion; usually resulting in a society in which ethnicity is a citizen's primary identity. In this climate people's social status, economic position and access to the political system are determined by their ethnicity alone. Whilst there are few societies exempt from social stratification, as Horowitz has argued, the societies of the West appear to contain more pluralistic notions of identity, making ethnic loyalties less exhaustive, and therefore less divisive (Horowitz 2000: 19-21). This is the result of developed and secure democratic foundations within Western political structures. Therefore, the absence of such egalitarian and protective principles in the politics of certain developing states enables existing ethnic tensions and divisions to be reinforced and manipulated by those in power. As writer Dinaw Mengestu has claimed, ethnicity in this political climate becomes a 'tool of politics', and as a 'tool' of politics it can be wielded against citizens in times of weakness (Derbyshire 2011). The dangers and realities of ethnic politics, has both in the past and present, provoked many on the domestic and international stage to call for the strength and protection of democracy in nations exhibiting these signs of susceptibility to conflict. However, whilst democracy can in itself prevent conflict, the process of democratization has the propensity to exacerbate ethnic tensions rather than diffuse them.

Michael Mann is highly instrumental in this debate as he raises awareness of the link between the transition to democracy and the outbreak of ethnic conflict (Mann 2001). The ultimate drive to achieve 'rule by the people' or the 'demos' inherent in the principle of democracy, proves problematic for societies built on ethnic politics, as it holds the

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potential to initiate a scramble to power by those of different ethnicities, fuelled by fears of exclusion (Mann 2005: 3). It is useful to address the recent publication by Minority Groups International (MGI) of 'Peoples under Threat' which documents the states and regions they believe are most likely to experience conflict in the immediate future. There are two significant aspects of this study worthy of discussion. Firstly, the majority of examples such as Sudan, Somalia and Russian Federation are deemed at risk of specifically ethnic conflict. Secondly, MGI explicitly note that 'the degree of ethnic diversity in a state is not itself positively correlated with risk of conflict'.<sup>[1]</sup> They assert that conflicts do appear to be predominantly of an ethnic nature but have been deemed at risk due to an assessment of more structural factors, such as indicators of good governance and observing whether they are prone to conflict in general.<sup>[2]</sup> Additionally, the societies deemed most at risk of ethnic conflict were in the process of democratization, albeit at different stages. This serves to reinforce the idea that some societies are susceptible to ethnic conflict, whilst also verifying the fundamental importance of structural conditions.

With the majority of contemporary ethnic conflicts occurring in developing countries, there is a strong case to be made for the relationship between ethnic conflict and economic deprivation. Though it should not be considered a necessary precondition, when present alongside transitional politics and a society stratified on ethnic lines, it can aggravate an already discontented population. Moreover, an array of scholars and journalists have given much weight to economic factors in making a society more prone to conflict, and so in theory this should be no different in cases of ethnic conflict (see, Wolff 2006; Humphreys et al 2008; Saideman et al 2002). The dangers of economic downturns in this context are abundant. For example, declining growth can result in greater pressures on the government/politicians, mass job loss and can act as a general incentive for rebellion (Wolffe 2006: 85; Saideman et al 2002: 112). Economic deprivation may not possess the power to spark ethnic conflict but it can create conditions conducive to ethnic violence by in many cases creating the many displaced, frustrated and unemployed individuals, who are in themselves more susceptible to extremist notions of ethnic conflict.

## Rwanda: A Case Study

This essay has sought to identify as well as better understand the foundational factors which often characterize cases of ethnic conflict. Therefore the case of Rwanda will be invoked as a means of demonstrating how the factors highlighted in this essay, contributed to making Rwanda a society susceptible to ethnic conflict. Kaufman's emphasis on the 'myth-symbol complex' proves to have been prominent in the manipulation of ethnic tensions in Rwanda, and is to an extent reflected in the work of Alison des Forges as she underlines the specific myths which penetrated Rwandan society by Hutu extremists (see Kaufman 2008; Des Forges 1999). In the case of Rwanda, it is clear that radicals strived to penetrate society with false notions of 'Tutsi unity' which they claimed had facilitated Tutsi in their conquests of the past and enabled them to retain their power in the present (Des Forges 1999: 62). Moreover the symbol projected of Tutsi as society's 'cockroaches' worked alongside propaganda which rejected the idea that Rwandans were a single people, thus seeking to intensify ethnic difference (Des Forges 1999: 62). Naturally, these myths and symbols acted as both a reflection and an exacerbation of collective group fears, formed on an ethnic basis. Rwanda is perhaps one of the most conspicuous examples of how myths, symbols and fear can encroach upon an already weak society, accentuate existing and even create new ethnic tensions and prompt a level of susceptibility to ethnic violence. However, this idea of Rwanda being 'an already weak society', is salient, and will be developed by analysis of its structural fragility in terms of the pressure to democratize and its economic downturn.

In terms of the political structure of power, it is evident that policies of exclusion coupled with a concrete association of power and ethnicity plagued Rwandan society, harbouring and perpetuating ethnic tensions. Moreover, the domestic and international pressures to democratize and undergo a process of political liberalization are frequently overlooked but leading contextual factors. As Melvern has elucidated, Rwandan society was *victim* to a corrupt and ethnically divisive government but *vocal* in its emerging pro-democracy movement, applying pressure on the Habyarimana regime to accept power sharing and further democratization (Melvern 2006: 24-25; Newbury 1995: 13). Significantly, the path toward democracy contributed to society's vulnerability to the threat of ethnic conflict, as it heightened the insecurity of those in power, leaving them fearful of their exclusion from politics at the hands of those they were themselves systematically excluding (Newbury 1995: 12-13). Although Rwanda experienced both domestic and international pressures to democratize, it is worth elaborating on the impact of Rwanda being a 'developing nation', consequently affording the Habyarimana regime its autonomy, perhaps aggravating ethnic

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tensions, Hutu extremism and further incentivising violence.

Economic destitution held enormous implications for Rwandan society. As with many developing nations, international aid was inextricably linked with levels of political and economic reform, thus with an economy in a state of collapse by the early 1990s, President Habyarimana was effectively at the mercy of the international community (Des Forges 1999: 19). Moreover, with militias recruiting thousands of unemployed, angry and zealous men, the realisation that Habyarimana would be forced to abandon aspects of extreme ethnic politics, served as a catalyst for the outbreak of violence (see, Melvern 2006: 56; Estes 2010: 44). This highlights how economic decline, often a defining characteristic of developing states, can exacerbate ethnic tensions and alter the course of ethnic politics for a number of reasons, contributing to the overall fragility of societies susceptible to ethnic conflict.

## Conclusion

This essay has sought to reinforce the basic premise that most societies are prone to ethnic tensions yet only some societies are susceptible to ethnic conflict. In the process of exploring why it is that some societies are susceptible to conflict of this nature, it is the prominence of developing countries in cases of ethnic conflict which is made conspicuous. Although, this is not solely due to their structural ineptitudes, but the result of a fusion of processes of ethnic stratification, myths and fears with conflicting or hazardous structural foundations such as transitional democracy, political instability and corruption and economic deprivation. The identification of these specific conditions and factors not only verify that indeed some societies are susceptible to ethnic conflict but also serve to elucidate the factors and societal conditions present in the West which allow those societies to contain ethnic tensions. In invoking the case of Rwanda, this essay sought to demonstrate that while ethnic conflict is in no sense a homogenous phenomenon, there are often common root causes, contextual factors and primary conditions which can be applied and reflected by most cases of ethnic conflict. Even in the case of the Rwandan Genocide, which boasts a wealth of scholarship due to its immense complexity, this template of susceptibility can be applied, as demonstrated in this essay.

It must be noted that scholarly enquiry and research into the specific factors, events and trajectories of individual cases of ethnic conflict remains of great importance in expanding our understanding of the phenomenon. However in uncovering general trends, the international community alongside academics and politicians will eventually be able to abandon the often ignorant and misguided interpretations and prescriptions for societies that experience ethnic conflict. This essay has attempted to go beyond flippant generalisations regarding ethnic conflict. Equally so politicians, academics and the media should not perceive these linkages common trends as merely indicative that poor nations alone are susceptible, or that it is simply a matter of ethnic tensions dominating a developing nation. Indeed using this model of susceptibility, hopefully the future understandings of journalists, academics and politicians, will recognise that there is no predictability or obvious prescriptions for ethnic conflict. The evidence presented in this essay has offered the first step in this direction, laying the foundation for a revision of out-dated understandings of causes of ethnic conflict.

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*Written by: Charlotte Clapham*  
*Written at: University of Sheffield*  
*Written for: Dr Janine Clark*  
*Date written: November 2011*