Reframing “Ethnic Conflict” as “Politicized Ethnic Conflict”

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Currently, "ethnic conflict" appears to be a useful label for understanding political and social violence around the world.[1] One only needs to search for this term on an academic search engine or database to notice the plethora of studies and articles surrounding this topic. This paper strives to reframe the term "ethnic conflict" as "politicized ethnic conflict" in order to more accurately reflect both the ultimate and proximate causes of this type of violence. By using literature on ethnic conflict and politicized ethnicity, along with the comparative cases of Kenya and Tanzania,[2] this paper argues for the incorporation of the term "politicized ethnic conflict" into the literature since it is evident that politicized ethnicity ultimately drives many instances of ethnic conflict, with ethnic difference serving as a proximate cause and delineator.

While the apparent status quo in academia remains that "ethnic conflict" as a term is useful, maintenance of this term is misguided. By employing this term, one implicitly argues that ethnicity is the main determinant and driver of conflict in absolute terms, or at least neglects to dispel this notion. Fearon and Laitin demonstrate that there is no consistent effect on the likelihood of civil conflict associated with variation in ethnic homogeneity. Additionally, Fearon and Laitin demonstrate that even areas where ethnic grievances are strongest, civil conflict is not more likely (Fearon & Laitin, 2003). This evidence indicates that ethnic grievances themselves are not sufficient to cause ethnic violence. The examples of Kenya and Tanzania support these findings against ethnicity as an ultimate determinant of civil, ethnic conflict. Malipula states that the literature on ethnic conflict has failed to explain why some heterogeneous countries such as Tanzania have not experienced ethnic conflict, while Ajulu argues that ethnic clashes in Kenya "are not tribal conflicts in the primordial sense" (Malipula, 2014) (Ajulu, 2002, p. 251).

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[1] Ethnic conflict and ethnic violence will be treated synonymously

[2] These two countries are compared for their historical, political, and geographic similarities, high levels of ethnic heterogeneity, and differences in politicized ethnicity and ethnic conflict

Although ethnicity is not the ultimate cause of "ethnic conflict" (in most cases), it is misguided to remove the "ethnic" characterization from the terminology addressing these types of conflict.

Eliminating ethnicity from the terminology of these types of conflicts entirely negates the role that ethnicity plays in delineating belligerents and serving as a direct motivating factor for violence. Brubaker and Laitin define ethnic violence as "violence perpetrated across ethnic lines, in which at least one party is not a state … and in which the violence is coded as having been meaningfully oriented in some way to the different ethnicity of the target" (Brubaker & Laitin, 1998, p. 428). Similarly, Fearon states that "a violent attack might be described as 'ethnic' if either (a) it is motivated by animosity towards ethnic others; (b) the victims are chosen by ethnic criteria; or (c) the attack is made in the name of an ethnic group" (Fearon 2008, p. 857). Both of these characterizations of ethnic violence do not maintain that ethnicity must be the ultimate cause and driving factor of violence, but rather that any conflict delineated by ethnicity should rightfully be described as "ethnic." In numerous instances of civil conflict, it is blatantly evident that belligerents are structured according to ethnicity, and that many individuals commit violent acts specifically against people of other ethnicities (e.g. Rwandan genocide). In Kenya, there have been ethnically motivated clashes in the 1990s and notably in 2007 (Dercon & Gutiérrez-Romero, 2012). While these clashes occurred in the context of political contests, this fact does not negate that the proximate delineator and motivation of the violent acts was ethnic difference. Therefore, the maintenance of "ethnic" in describing these types of conflict is necessary, but a better framework and terminology would incorporate the role of politicized ethnicity in driving conflict.

Reframing the term “ethnic conflict” as “politicized ethnic conflict” would result in a more accurate characterization of these conflicts that incorporates both their ultimate cause (politicized ethnicity) and proximate cause (ethnic difference). This approach neither overemphasizes the causal role of ethnicity in driving conflict nor neglects the role of ethnicity entirely, but rather makes the terminology more accurate and nuanced. Fearon introduces the concept of politicized ethnicity by stating that “ethnicity is politicized when political coalitions are organized along ethnic lines, or when access to political or economic benefits depends on ethnicity” (Fearon, 2008, p, 853). The politicization of ethnicity uncovers the ultimate source and political driver of ethnic conflict. Brubaker and Laitin explain that conflicts driven by political power struggles are framed in ethnic terms, thus demonstrating the causation from politicized ethnicity to violence delineated by ethnic difference (Brubaker & Laitin, 1998). One mechanism that exemplifies this causation is that ethnic conflict can occur when a minority ethnic group (which also serves as a political coalition) believes that its ability to fight for a better political outcome will decline in the future, demonstrating how political conflict takes on ethnic hues when political coalitions are divided along ethnic lines (Fearon, 2008).

From a comparative perspective, Kenya and Tanzania demonstrate how politicized ethnicity serves as the key driver of ethnic conflict. In Kenya, there is high politicization of ethnicity (politics strongly divided along ethnic lines), while in Tanzania it is low (ethnicity plays little to no role in politics) (Weber, 2009). In fact, ethnicity has emerged as the preeminent factor in political competition in Kenya, thereby giving new and invigorating social salience to these identities (Ajulu, 2002). Therefore, when considering the lack of politicized ethnicity in neighboring Tanzania, it becomes evident why Kenya has experienced bouts of ethnic conflict

while Tanzania has not. Rok Ajulu provides evidence to this causal relationship in the Kenyan context, describing how ethnic clashes are politically organized, and how oftentimes these conflicts are precipitated by political elites who use ethnic differences simply as an organizing principle to achieve their own political ends (e.g. by dividing the electorate along ethnic lines and establishing political rents) (Ajulu, 2002) (Dercon & Gutiérrez-Romero, 2012). On the contrary, the lack of politicized ethnicity in Tanzania means that violent confrontations between ethnic groups have been kept to a bare minimum (Cocodia, 2008).

Much of the current literature regarding whether "ethnic conflict" is a useful analytical label falls into polar opposite camps: those (often implicitly) regarding "ethnic conflict" as a useful term, and those pushing for the removal of the term in its entirety. Both of these approaches are misguided and fail to incorporate the nuances of what has historically been labeled "ethnic conflict." The status quo camp, which supports the use of "ethnic conflict" in analytical terminology, fails to highlight the political considerations that serve as the ultimate drivers of ethnic conflict. As demonstrated above, ethnic difference does not cause ethnic conflict in its own right, and thus this terminology mischaracterizes the true causes and mechanisms of ethnic conflict.

The revisionist camp, which seeks to eliminate "ethnic conflict" as an analytical label, similarly fails to highlight an aspect of ethnic conflict, which in this case is ethnic difference. In "Against the Concept of Ethnic Conflict," Gilley argues that ethnic conflict is not a concept, but rather a "messy descriptive label for a bunch of unrelated phenomena," partially because what defines "ethnic conflict" is too vague in the first place (Gilley, 2004, p. 1161). While Gilley may be correct in that ethnic conflicts are not uniform in characterization, this does not support the

complete elimination of the term "ethnic conflict" to explain conflicts in which they all have the same feature in common: violence delineated by ethnic difference. By assenting to Gilley's suggestion, the critical aspect of ethnic difference in these conflicts disappears, running counter to Gilley's intention of trying to better understand these conflicts.

Another scholar in the revisionist camp, Charles King, concedes slightly more to the benefits of the "ethnic conflict" label, but ultimately argues against it. King writes that "the 'ethnic conflict' label is fine as an easy shorthand for wars in which the belligerents define themselves, in part, along cultural lines," highlighting the distinction between wars delineated/not delineated along ethnic lines (King, 2001). However, King does not uphold this term for its rightful reason of inclusion: the fact that ethnic difference serves as a proximate driver of conflict, not just a delineator. It is one thing to only acknowledge that belligerents are divided along ethnic lines; it is another (and more accurate) to also acknowledge that people are mobilized to participate in acts of violence against people of other ethnic groups *because of* ethnic difference. If a combatant in an ethnic conflict is driven to believe that members of another ethnic group are the enemy and consequently resolves to acts of violence against them, it matters not why he believes this (e.g. political mobilization of ethnicity) or whether the other ethnic group truly is the enemy. If people are still committing acts of violence along ethnic lines, then dispelling with the notion that ethnic difference plays a unique role in these conflicts is truly misguided. Further, King argues that viewing ethnic conflicts as essentially different from other intra-state conflicts can be misleading, citing two reasons: ethnic grievances can be manufactured, and symbolically-created hatred is insufficient to cause violence (King, 2001). His first reason does not provide a sufficient explanation for why "ethnic conflict" should be

eliminated as a concept entirely; while King is correct in that these ethnic grievances are often manufactured, that does not negate the fact that in some conflicts people are inspired to and do commit violence against members of other ethnic groups specifically, while in other conflicts this is not the case. King's second reason similarly fails to negate the fact that people are still committing violence along ethnic lines, regardless of the political and leadership mechanisms required to spur this action. Therefore, King's assertion that ethnic conflicts are not essentially different from other intra-state conflicts is misguided, and could lead to serious policy consequences in terms of conflict resolution. Although King's two lines of reasoning do not support the elimination of "ethnic conflict" as an analytical concept in its entirety, they do support the incorporation of political elements in the analytical understanding of ethnic conflict.

This paper has demonstrated that the question of whether "ethnic conflict" remains useful as a label for understanding political and social violence is nuanced due to the role that the politicization of ethnicity plays as an ultimate cause of many ethnic conflicts, and uses the comparative examples of Kenya and Tanzania to ground these arguments. From an analytical perspective, in order to improve understanding of the ultimate causal factors and mechanisms for these conflicts without losing sight of the importance that ethnic difference plays as a proximate cause and delineator, the term "politicized ethnic conflict" should arise as an analytical label.

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