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Reconciling Huntington and Mueller's Theories of Conflict: A Critical Analysis of Race, Culture and Conflict

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A B S T R A C T

The objective of this article is to reconcile Samuel P. Huntington's theory of conflict as emanating from the clash of civilizations with John Mueller's observation that conflicts particularly in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda were the result of political regimes or authorities who recruited sadistic non-ideological marauders and allowed them a free rein, rather than deep historic passions and hatred among the diverse ethnic entities in such countries. This article concluded that the two arguments offered by Mueller and Huntington are not mutually exclusive. In the context of this analysis, the two perspectives do not contrast each other nor do they undermine one another. Instead, they complement each other and throw light on important issues and patterns in the globalized system that warrants optimum attention and critical examination.

Introduction

Conflicts, and by extension wars have been one of the perplexing plagues or challenges of mankind since antiquity. Myriad conflicts have erupted across different parts of the globe, and many wars waged over a variety of incentives. The undercurrent causes, sometimes complex and subtle, could be attributable to diverse motivations including political (power, prestige, honor), economic, cultural identity, and social structure among a host of others. Coser (1956: 3) defines conflict as "...struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power, and resources in which the aim of the opponents are to neutralize, injure, or eliminate their rivals."

Pruitt and Kim (2004: 8) also summed up conflict as the "divergence of interest".

In fact, armed civil conflicts and wars are despised by all and sundry, or at least, a greater majority of the human race on account of their gory and savagery nature, as well as the ravages that warfare inflict not only on the feuding parties involved, but also innocent civilian populations. The peace, orderliness and harmony of the international system, and for that matter, the human universe depends, among other factors, markedly on the absence of conflicts and warfare. Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff

(2001: 188) pointed out, “The stability [and peace] of the international system is usually defined in terms of its proximity to or remoteness from the occurrence or likelihood of large-scale war.”

Since the end of World War II (1945), and more especially since the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union (1990/91), inter-state warfare has depreciated markedly while intra-state conflicts seem to be on the ascendancy. Dziedzic (1998: 1) noted in the post-Cold War era, “It has been anarchic conditions within the sovereign state that have repeatedly posed the most acute and intractable challenges to international order”. The underlying catalysts or structural causes of this type of intra-state violence have been debated, examined and discussed in many circles as emanating from ethnic fragmentation, cultural differences, religion, and politics among a host of others.

A number of prominent scholars and national security policy experts have argued that cultural identity, social structure and demographic affinities have become the mainstream sources of tensions from which many conflicts emanate in the contemporary world. Many of the conflicts across the globe such as the Yugoslavian and Bosnian conflicts in the 1990s, Rwandan genocide in 1994, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Chechen-Russian conflict, and many others across Africa and South and Central Asia arguably augment this line of thought and rationalization. The objective of this paper is to reconcile Samuel P. Huntington’s theory of conflict as emanating from the clash of civilizations with John Mueller’s observation that conflicts particularly in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda were the result of political regimes or authorities who recruited sadistic non-ideological marauders and allowed them a free rein, rather than

deep historic passions and hatred among the diverse ethnic entities in such countries.

Main arguments and analysis

Samuel P. Huntington (1993), a political scientist postulates that people’s cultural and religious identities will be the primary source of conflict in the post-Cold War world. In a 1993 Foreign Affairs article titled “The Clash of Civilizations?” Huntington writes:

“It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation-states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations.”

Huntington further expanded his arguments in a 1996 book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. In both article and book, Huntington contended that the conflict between ideologies among nation-states is eroding and being supplanted by conflict between the civilizations of the world, and that the dominant civilizations will dictate human government and its structure as well as its form. One does not have to look too far but around him or her to realize that recent conflicts, events and developments in the contemporary world seem to unfold along the lines of these arguments. For example, in the West African state of Nigeria, Egypt, and Iraq among others tensions between Muslim communities and Christian groups have culminated in many clashes or conflict between the two religious communities and many people senselessly murdered and properties destroyed. In the case of Nigeria,

the undercurrent cause of the protracted conflict between the adherents of the world's great religions has largely been that a section of the Muslim community (in fact, a minute percentage) aspire, among other things, to establish an Islamic rule in territories occupied by both Muslims and Christians, albeit predominantly by Muslims (for example Maiduguri state). To such extremist groups, such aspirational state would seek a vigorous application of the dictates of the Holy Quran, and all of its associated edicts and practices. Boko Haram, an Islamic militant group espousing an Islamic state of Nigeria, for example, believes western education, particularly of girls (or women) is evil. Ironically, a number of its bigwigs have indeed received western education. This group is infamously known to be culpable for suicide bombings, and terrorist attacks on communities including torching of churches and homes, as well as attacks on government properties, personnel, and innocent people. In April 14-15, 2014, for example, Boko Haram abducted about 219 boarding school girls in Chibok in northeastern Nigeria. The school infrastructure mostly burnt down as well. Similar cases abound in Pakistan and Iraq. In October 2012, the Taliban in Pakistan, on the other hand, attempted to kill Malaila Yousafzai, a fifteen year old girls' education advocate by shooting her at close range. She survived the attack, and is more than determined championing the cause of girls' rights not only in Pakistan, but internationally. Today, Malaila represents the voice for girls' education globally. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) which is largely a Sunni extremist or terrorist group has been committing heinous crimes against humanity in both Iraq and Syria. Today, the militant Islamic group has control over large swaths of territory that runs from Iraq through Syria. It recently captured Ramadi in Anbar

province, in addition to, Fallujah and Mosul. The preceding illustrations, indisputably, make a mockery of religious freedom and girls'/women rights in these states.

The September 11th, 2001 attacks on the United States orchestrated by Al-Qaeda (a terrorist group) spearheaded and bankrolled by the late Osama Bin Laden could be explained along the lines of civilizational clash as the perpetrators, Osama Bin Laden in particular, claimed apart from the United States' occupation of Muslim lands in the Arab world, rapid spread of western culture into Arab countries and their perceived unjust U.S. application of its military power across the globe, as well as the intractable Palestinian-Israeli conflict, it is their objective, apart from retribution, to also establish an Islamic caliphate from North Africa to Europe.

Today, adherents of those extremist ideologies motivated largely by religious doctrines, or perhaps dogma, albeit significantly weakened, still seek the opportunity to cause mayhem and bloodshed in the West. In an article "Violence for Violence Sake?" Shahin (2001) explaining the sources of Palestinian anger, grief and discontent, argued that the United States and Europe remain the military backbone of Israel, and the two provide huge chunk of the finances and logistical support for Israel in its perpetuation of crimes against the Palestinian people, Arabs and Muslims. She cites, for example, that the US provides \$60 billion in annual aide to Israel. Shahin writes "The international community is being outrageously selective. Surely, any war on terror must, also include those who practice terror against Arabs." To Shahin, if the war on terror emanating predominantly from Muslim states is to be won, the United States and Europe must re-examine their blanket support for Israel and change, and

that the US ought to pull out its troops from Muslim lands, and the status of Palestine must be addressed.

It is important also to point out that ethnic division or fragmentation can have crucial impact on the political stability and democratic performance of a country. In other words, there is arguably a relationship between political stability and ethnic diversity or demography. For example, in the Yugoslavian and Bosnian conflicts, ethnic sentiments and allegiance played dominant roles, the Serbs against ethnic Croats, Croats against ethnic Albanians, and vice versa, in a very conflating complex web, and each group committing mayhem and atrocities under the guise of nationalistic aspirations. The Rwanda genocide, for instance, whereby an estimated 800,000 minority ethnic Tutsis were massacred by the majority ethnic Hutus also epitomizes how ancient ethnic frictions, sometimes whipped up by historical antecedents and old colonial legacies and practices, can escalate into unimaginable consequences. In his work, *Democracy, Ethnic Fragmentation, and Internal Conflict*, Benjamin Reilly albeit arguing that ethnic division can sometimes be a cohesive national force as in the case of Papua New Guinea also acknowledged that, "The nature of the ethnic divide can thus have a significant influence on the way ethnic conflicts are manifested and consequently on the capacity of the political system to manage them" (Reilly, 2000/2001: 163).

In his article, *Banality of Ethnic War*, John Mueller (2000: 43) observes that the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda "Rather than reflecting deep, historic passions and hatred, the violence seems to have been the result of a situation in which common, sadistic, and often distinctly non-ideological marauders were

recruited and permitted free rein by political authorities." It is important to note that some of the ethnocentric violence, according to John Mueller, is fanned by demagogic, criminal, neophyte, and opportunistic politicians whose aim it is to utilize ethnic divisions as lynchpins to achieve political power. Such political elements and nation-wreckers organize hooligans, street gangs, and thugs to pursue their parochial interests. Their actions are tantamount to treason and premature ejaculation; they are selfish, self-serving and diabolic. Mueller cites Yugoslavia and Rwanda as typical case studies. Mueller debunks the notion that ethnic nationalism was a catalyst in the Yugoslavian conflicts. He writes: "The violence that erupted in Yugoslavia principally derived not from a frenzy of nationalism-whether ancient or newly inspired-but rather from the actions of recently empowered and unpoliced thugs" (Mueller, 2000: 47).

In fact, in the case of Rwanda many argue that the difference between Hutus and Tutsi is not racial per se, but rather based on the social castes manufactured and emphasized by the German and Belgian colonists. The artificial and superficial distinction was employed as part of the governing strategy of both colonial imperialist powers. Similar governing style was used in virtually every part of Africa by the colonists particularly after the partition and scramble for Africa at the Berlin Conference of 1884/5; a policy vigorously pursued by the colonists during the colonization of the African continent (Wesseling 1991). Does the expression "divide and conquer" ring a bell? Perhaps it does. In his book, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda*, Gourevitch (1996) details the difficulty that he had in distinguishing Hutu from Tutsi. Culturally, both ethnicities are one and the same, but for

the artificial and superficial distinction created between the two groups by the colonial powers. Since politics can be considered the authoritative allocation of values and resources (Easton 1953), controlling the political landscape and the levers or reins of government can thus be equated to controlling ownership of wealth and its distribution in the society. Therefore, after the death of the Rwandan president Habyarimana (a Tutsi) in a plane crash on 6 April 1994, Hutu leadership therefore saw a golden opportunity, arguably, to shift the political and economic balance of power within the country, Rwanda.

Mueller again drawing from the Yugoslavian experience argues that militant nationalism did not enjoy popular support at the beginning of the conflict but only succeeded as a result of unscrupulous people manipulating the system to their advantage, politicians in particular, as well as the absence of a strong organized opposition to militancy. Mueller (2000: 45) writes:

“...support for militant nationalism in Yugoslavia was not all that deep even at the time of its maximum notice and effect in the early 1990s. The rise of some militant nationalists in elections during that period stemmed less from their wide appeal and more from their ability to manipulate the system and from the disarray of their opposition.”

Today, the Central African nation of Burundi is faced with a serious political crisis. President Pierre Nkurunziza's second term of office ends in August 2015. However, he has expressed the desire of running for president for a third term. Opposition parties, about 17 political parties, as well as a section of the international community have accused Nkurunziza of violating Burundi's

constitution which stipulates that a president's term of office can only be renewed once. Protests have broken out in Bujumbura and other parts of the country for over a month resulting in, at least, 20 fatalities since April 25, 2015. Over a 100,000 Burundians have fled the country and sought refuge in neighboring states fearing an escalation that could potentially lead to repeat of civil war. Opposition party leader Agathon Rwaso has implored the international community to put more pressure on Nkurunziza to stand down on his bid. Local, parliamentary and presidential elections are supposed to be organized and a president sworn into office by the close of August 2015, yet president Pierre Nkurunziza has not rescinded his decision to seek for a third term. By this conduct, Nkurunziza is sowing the seed of political conflict and violence in a country that just emerged from a twelve-year civil war in 2005.

In Rwanda, president Paul Kagame whose second seven-year term expires in 2017, points out he opposes scraping the two-term limit, but that he could seek a third term bid if Rwandan people convince him to stay on (See Myjoyonline.com in the reference). Article 101 of the constitution of Rwanda stipulates a president's seven-year term of office can be renewed only once, and under no circumstances should a person hold the office of president for more than two terms. Frank Habineza, leader of the Rwandan Democratic Green Party, lamented this would be a distasteful and wrong move if Kagame were to follow through. The Democratic Green Party in the pursuit of constitutional order in Rwanda filed a lawsuit in the country's Supreme Court that prayed the court to stop the president from any attempt to circumvent the Rwandan constitution, and to block parliament from any schism and effort to amend the

constitution to enable Kagame run for president for a third consecutive time. In an apparent reaction to these developments in the East African region, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Tom Malinowski stated “Term limits encourage leaders to focus on leaving a good legacy, instead of perpetuating their own power...and they give new generations the opportunity to be leaders” (See Myjoyonline.com below in the reference). The Rwandan and the Burundian situations clearly illustrate how the conduct of some self-interested politicians can potentially throw whole nations into conflict.

Mueller emphasizes the point that ethnic feud or conflict is usually perpetuated by just a small militant group that visits mayhem and atrocities on other people, contrary to popular perception that ethnic feud or civil conflict is an all out warfare between different ethnicities. He argued, “...ethnic warfare...is waged by small group of combatants, groups that purport to fight and kill in the name of some larger entity...a condition in which a mass of essentially mild, ordinary people can unwillingly and in considerable bewilderment come under the vicious and arbitrary control of small groups of armed thugs” (Mueller, 2000: 42) He compared ethnic warfare to the “movie images of the American Wild West or gangland Chicago, and often had far less to do with nationalism than with criminal opportunism and sadistic cruelty, often enhanced with liquor – liquid courage” (Mueller, 2000: 53).

On the other side of the coin, cultural and or ethnic fragmentation has actually been the reason for the democratic and economic success stories of some nation-states. What this illustrates is the fact that the mere existence of diverse and numerous ethnic divisions or groups in a country does not

necessarily imply that there is a high probability or possibility for the eruption of ethnic conflict and violence. Instead, it illuminates the fact that a salient political system can take advantage of unity in diversity. For example, Indonesia, Tanzania, India, Ghana, Papua New Guinea, and the Philippines are very ethnically fragmented states. However, notwithstanding their naturally inherent ethnic fragmentation such countries have harnessed this diversity as a national force to build relatively peaceful, democratic, and economically prosperous nations. Reilly argues, “...the primary reason for Papua New Guinea’s democratic success is the sheer diversity of its ethnic structure which virtually guarantees that no one group is able to single-handedly monopolize political power...PNG’s extreme ethnic fragmentation may be the overriding factor in its democratic success to date” (Reilly 2000/2001: 168).

Conclusion

Therefore, the two arguments offered by Mueller and Huntington are not in conflict with one another. In other words, the two perspectives do not contrast each other nor do they undermine one another. Instead, they complement each other and throw more light on issues and unique trends in the globalized system that warrants optimum attention and critical examination. Conflict and violence exact heavy toll and every effort must be made to nip them in the bud. Herrera (2009: 4) wrote “...peace is not the natural state of society but a human construct that requires effort and implementation.”

A myriad of the ethnic, religious, cultural, and civilizational clashes today have, to a large degree, been sparked by opportunistic politicians and religious over zealotry providing a gateway for thugs, street gangs,

and criminal elements a free rein. Udayakumar (1998) pointed out "Peace being the goal of almost everybody's struggle becomes everybody's business including in spheres such as health or education. There may be specialists and servants such as peace researchers or doctors or teachers but the pre-occupation with these issues cannot simply be restricted to the experts or their expertise." Therefore, regardless of our ethnic, cultural, religious, political, social and economic backgrounds, we ought to endeavor to work toward peace so as to create a better world for posterity. It must be the duty of all and sundry to ensure that peace prevails wherever we find ourselves. The two perspectives bring to fore a phenomenon that is taking root in the international political system and rapidly shaping our contemporary world in the 21st century.

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