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IGCC POLICY BRIEF

"Ethnic" Conflict Isn't

Ronnie Lipschutz and Beverly Crawford

"Ethnic" and "sectarian" conflicts are not caused by ethnicity or religion. To avoid future episodes we need early warning systems and intervention in societies undergoing rapid and destabilizing economic and political transitions.   *Full recommendations, page 4.*

Summary:

"Ethnic" and "sectarian" conflicts are not caused by ethnicity or religion. Such conflicts occur when a country's "social contract" comes under pressure from both internal and external forces. When the global economy pressures governments to engage in rapid political and economic reform, ethnic and sectarian entrepreneurs mobilize constituencies around ethnic or religious differences in an attempt to grab or restore positions of power and wealth. Avoiding future episodes of "ethnic and sectarian conflict" requires early warning systems and intervention in societies undergoing rapid and destabilizing economic and political transitions. ❖

Conflict arises when social contracts are eroded. All stable countries are characterized by political and social arrangements that have some form of historical legitimacy. We can call these arrangements "social contracts." Sometimes, these contracts are expressed in written constitutions; at other times, they are not written down, but are found instead in the political and social institutions of a country. In either case, such social contracts structure the terms of citizenship and inclusion in a country's political community, the rules of political participation, the political relationship between the central state and its various regions, and the distribution of material resources within the country.

These social contracts also specify the roles that people may occupy within the country and society, and the relationships between these roles. Frequently, these roles and relationships have what we would call an "ethnic" or "religious" character as, for example, in the traditional caste system in India. Such social contracts are frequently neither just, equitable, fair, nor respectful of human rights; they are, however, widely-accepted, and people tend not to try to disrupt them. This is one source of social and political stability.

Economic liberalization and democratization put pressure on social contracts. Today, the social contracts of many countries are falling apart, as global economic competition and integration put increasing pressures on governments to increase economic efficiency and the utilization of resources. Countries are pushed into pursuing domestic policies that will make them attractive to capital and foreign investment, which, ideally, will help them to build up an industrial base. This, in turn, should allow further generation of wealth, creation of economic opportunities for individual and country, and a general improvement of living

standards. But these policies usually require drastic changes in domestic social contracts, and such changes threaten those who have possessed power and wealth under the old arrangements.

Ethnic and religious entrepreneurs try to grab power during wrenching transitions. Economic and political transitions also offer great possibilities for power and wealth to those well-placed individuals who are entrepreneurial enough to see the opportunities inherent in the newly-emerging systems. But transitions also provide the context in which political violence can erupt, as struggles develop over who is to gain control of the newly-contested levers of institutional power and the possibilities of access to domestic and international sources of capital and wealth. It is in these settings that what appears to be ethnic and sectarian conflict seems most likely to develop. Ethnic, religious and class identities become points of conflict as ethnic entrepreneurs—those in power, or those who would grasp power—mobilize their constituencies in support of struggles with other elites for political power, social status, and economic resources.

The collapse of Yugoslavia was caused by such entrepreneurs. The "social contract" put in place among the Yugoslav republics (Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia) and autonomous provinces (Kosovo and Vojvodina) involved a particular distribution of power and wealth among them and with the Federal government. Under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito and his colleagues in the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, for historical reasons, and because some republics and provinces were less developed than others, a redistribution of wealth among the republics and provinces was implemented. The richer republics (Slovenia, Croatia) subsidized the poorer republics and provinces (Serbia, Bosnia,

Montenegro, Macedonia, Kosovo). The economic crisis of the 1980s, brought on by the oil crises of the 1970s and international economic competition, increased resentments among the republics, eroded living standards throughout the country and fostered a desire for greater autonomy in the richer republics. It also subjected the country to the demands of international lenders for structural adjustment policies, which further undermined the social contract.

In the late 1980s, the Serbs began to fear that they might be deprived of their economic lifeline--financial resources, markets and goods--to Slovenia and Croatia. Led by Slobodan Milosevic and the intellectuals at the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences, Serbian government and party officials began to play the "ethnic card." Through historical revisionism, they began to claim that recent historical episodes of violence, dating back to World War II, were really ancient and unalterable animosities among Serbs, Croats and Muslims. The Serb leadership did this in order to mobilize ethnic Serbs throughout Yugoslavia in support of a recentralization of power under Serbia. The result was defensive counter-mobilizations in the other republics, and their eventual declarations of independence. What the Serbian leadership could not get through political pressures it eventually sought through war.

Yugoslavia is archetypal, not exceptional. Case studies of a number of other contemporary "ethnic" and "sectarian" conflicts have been undertaken as part of a collaborative project, "Redefining Global Security: Liberalization, Eroding Sovereignty and Ethnic and Sectarian Conflict," run through the Adlai Stevenson Program on Global Security at the University of California, Santa Cruz and the Center for German and European Studies (CGES) at the University of California, Berkeley, and sponsored by IGCC, the Pew Charitable Trusts, and CGES. These case studies

have focused on countries in Europe, Asia and Africa. The results suggest that Yugoslavia is unique only in terms of its recent political economy and the historical and cultural resources available for manipulation by ethnic entrepreneurs.

In other words, the resources available to ethnic and sectarian entrepreneurs vary from one place to another, but the pattern is largely the same: Where the circumstances supporting social contracts have come under sudden and strong pressure from various forces, such entrepreneurs arise to manipulate contexts as a means of acquiring power. In some instances, the result is a "revolution," in which old social arrangements are overthrown and new ones take their place; in others, outcomes are less clear, although casualties are not.

"Early warning systems" are essential to warding off such conflicts. If "ethnic" and "sectarian" conflicts are neither ethnic nor sectarian, attempts to head them off, or restore social peace, should not focus on ethnicity or religion. Instead, interveners must identify how the "social contracts" of multi-ethnic or multi-religious societies are constructed, how political and economic pressures and transitions undermine them, and who might try to retain or grab power using ethnic or sectarian differentiation as a political tool. To intervene successfully, we require both a better understanding of societies "at risk" and "early warning systems," put in place by non-state organizations and institutions, that will monitor for signs of friction, collapse and conflict.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can be well-placed to monitor deteriorating or potentially threatening situations, and to bring them to the attention of international and other institutions. If such NGOs are locally-constituted, they can establish the conditions for addressing these deteriorating situations. In many parts of the world, NGOs are increasingly

involved in a wide variety of economic development projects, intended to promote self-help within weak groups and communities. These are models for dealing with the economic dislocations associated with economic and political transitions. There are also a number of promising examples of NGO-initiated mediation efforts between ethnic and religious communities that ought to be more closely studied and emulated. Such efforts have been growing in prominence over the past few years, and should be encouraged and funded, preferably by private funds provided to organizations and institutions located within the societies at risk.❖

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How to head off "ethnic" conflicts:

IDENTIFY AT-RISK SOCIETIES

1. Don't focus on ethnicity or religion.
2. Assess the elements of multi-ethnic social contract, along with the economic and political factors that might undermine it.
3. Identify and isolate potential power-clutchers and power-grabbers.

SET UP EARLY-WARNING SYSTEMS

4. Use locally-constituted NGOs to monitor for signs of friction, collapse, and confusion.
5. Fund and use NGO development projects as models for coping with economic dislocation.
6. Use and fund NGO mediation efforts to head off "ethnic card" players.