Disenfranchisement
Breeds
Conflict

by Benjamin E. Birtles

Conflict arises from various sources of competition loosely categorized as either realistic or non-realistic. Disenfranchisement increases group stress leading to increased non-realistic conflict sources, thereby contributing to a higher probability of physical violence. Forcibly implementing political systems that cause disenfranchisement sets the stage for future conflict leading to the ethical dilemma - can a nation maintain moral superiority while violently engaging in a conflict of its own design?

"*We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families*." This was written by seven Tutsi pastors as they awaited imminent death in a church where they had taken shelter during the genocide in Rwanda and Uganda that occurred in 1994.[1] Genocide, the ultimate expression of aggression towards a group of people, is often predicated on dividing, labeling, and othering a faction within society who can serve as an outlet for the despair and hopelessness felt by many. Since these acts continue to occur it is vital to critically analyze the causes of disenfranchisement and the role politics serves in conflict mitigation.

The Western tradition of representative government supposes that people have a right to choose how they wish to engage within their local community as long as they adhere to social expectations.[2] To engage in one's community through social interaction, commerce, literary exchange, and commentary on current events can be expressed as franchise or the right to express oneself and engage with other people or groups within society. Social disenfranchisement describes a feeling of isolation or dislodgement from the accepted social space typically due to differences in race, religion, ethnicity, or creed.[3] While there are many causes of disenfranchisement, a common trend is power differential to play a dominate role in alienating a person or subgroup from the greater social space. As humans we tend to affiliate with others who reflect our view, values, and passions. If each person is allowed to freely select who they wish to associate with, then natural

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subgroups form that contain a higher degree of homogeneity, with regard to values and norms, than a random sampling of the greater population would suppose. These subgroups tend to form based on ethnic identity, national origin, language, religion, or political affiliation.[4] Social segregation into self-identifying subgroups is not inherently destabilizing as long as cohesion regarding broader societal values and goals reduces discord between factions.

In a permissive society subgroups do not typically pose a threat to the broader community, however, individual members of the subgroup could place greater emphasis on subgroup affiliation than connection with broader social values. When this occurs, the likelihood of ideological literalism increases dramatically.[5] Members of a subgroup who identify with their ideology to the exclusion of all others are often classified as fundamentalists. The danger of fundamentalism is that it is irreducible and often at odds with other subgroups within the larger social construct. An example of fundamentalism in practice can be found when comparing communist with capitalist economic models. While considerable narrative space has been granted to religious examples of fundamentalism, capital models are equally compelling and highly relevant with relation to current geopolitics.

Capitalism is an economic model where individuals own the means of production and are allowed to accumulate wealth based on individual participation in the market place. In contrast, communism is an economic model where means of production are owned collectively without granting individual property rights. Wealth accumulation is not possible in a purely communistic model since all value production is jointly derived and profits are jointly distributed.[6]

These two theories of economic function are diametrically opposed. There is very little commonality between individual and shared ownership. A fundamentalist on either side of this continuum would strictly adhere to the values and norms of their subgroup leading to disagreements between subgroups as to how society as a whole should be shaped or changed. If one of these subgroups gains power they will likely attempt to shape society's values and beliefs to more closely mirror that of the prevailing group. Members of subgroups who are not in power will likely feel marginalized if there are not political recourses for them to address these social changes. If the social mechanisms that allow for change are systematically dismantled or wholly disregarded, then minority groups will feel they are no longer part of the social contract and lose political franchise.[7]

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Disenfranchisement contributes to feelings of desperation and hopelessness and can lead groups to respond through passive inertia or aggressive and destructive styles of engagement. When a member of society feels they are not able to positively contribute or add value through political engagement they will often choose to alienate themselves from the broader society and strengthen bonds within their subgroup.[8] This fracturing of a broader society can be the hallmark of increased diversity of thought and ideology as witnessed in Japan in the mid-1850s which led to rapid industrialization and a higher standard of living for all.[9] However, revolutions of ideology or identity are seldom accomplished without significant turmoil and can result in a stalemate between conflicted parties as evidenced by Afghanistan's current history. Few places on earth can boast greater diversity of influence, religion, or values systems than central Asia. With great diversity comes a higher likelihood for conflict as competing ideas vie for supremacy.[10]

In a region that allows for peaceful social discourse the negative effects of differing power dynamics can be dampened, typically through grassroots movements for social or political change that originate among the most marginalized segments of the population. These bottom-up attempts to change policy peacefully were practiced in the 1930s and '40s in India as the people, led by Mahatma Gandhi, protested for greater franchise that had been denied them through the colonial structure of the British Empire.[11]

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Another example of peaceful protest resulting in positive political and social change in a pluralistic society took place in the United States of America in the 1960s. The Civil Rights movement was designed to correct the legacy of gross disparity between Anglo and African Americans that racial slavery had engendered in the U.S. Throughout the nation, laws and municipal codes had been established to maintain separation between people with fair complexion and those with darker skin coloration. Many institutions were legally segregated, meaning that whites and blacks went to different schools, churches, public recreation facilities, and lodging when traveling.[12] The states in the southeast were disproportionately affected by racial segregation owing to the fact that pre-industrial agricultural labor was performed in these areas by millions of enslaved Americans of African descent. In a bitter struggle for control of social, political, and narrative space, southern institutions of power attempted to deny rights and privileges to freed black Americans.[13] Over the course of nearly 90 years, Americans of African origin

developed informal power structures within their communities, often centered on religious institutions. They used these internal sources of legitimate social power to support a wide program of civil disobedience in the 1960s, where they peacefully refused to obey unjust laws, codes, or statutes that denied them equal rights as compared to other American citizens.[14]

As a result of these two non-violent cases of social change, both India and the United States gained fairer representation and social franchise for their citizens. This representation led to self-governance for India. In the U.S., it resulted in legal protection extended to people based not only on skin tone and national origin but also their religion, gender, and sexual orientation.[15] While calling the process leading to social and political change in India and United States peaceful is somewhat misleading due to the inherent power struggle between conflicting ideologies, the changes affected in both countries were completed without large scale physical violence leading to armed aggression.

In contrast to the examples of India and the United States, Rwanda and Myanmar are examples of countries where opposed social factions perpetrated genocide against their political and economic rivals. Tutsis historically make up less than twenty five percent of the population of the region currently known as Rwanda. They formed a political caste of elites who ruled over the Hutu and Twa people of the region. Though a numerical minority, the Tutsis controlled economic, political, and social systems within the Rwandan region for nearly one thousand years.[16] Colonial forces from Germany and Belgium leveraged the rift between powerful Tutsis and the agrarian Hutus to destabilize the regional systems of power in order to implement colonial control. Tensions heightened, culminating in a civil war in the late 1950s that saw the formation of the Republic of Rwandan where foreign colonial powers were cast out and Tutsis regained the monarchy,

crystallizing their place at the top of the social and political hierarchy. This storied history of majority oppression by a racial minority led to a violent backlash against Tutsi rule between 1990 and 1994, culminating in the Rwandan Genocide. During 1994, as much as 70 percent of the indigenous Tutsi population, estimates ranging up to 500,000 people, were slaughtered by the ruling Hutu majority government.[17] This disastrous state of affairs can be traced directly to racial tension exacerbated by European colonization, where local caste systems were magnified as an extension of colonial power. Another contemporary example of social and political disenfranchisement leading to extreme physical violence is the plight of minority groups in Myanmar. In contrast to the previous example of a minority dominated economy facing backlash by an alienated majority, in Myanmar it is the majority group who has long wielded power and used that power to deny minority groups of citizen status and suffrage in recent elections.[18] Myanmar, also known by some as Burma, is located at the confluence of trade routes between China, India, and the Arab world. Due to its location, Myanmar has experienced diverse cultural and economic interaction, which has led to several minority populations of distinct ethno-linguistic heritage. These populations have lived in relative harmony with the Buddhist majority for much of Myanmar's history. One specific group, the Rohingya people, have faced military crackdowns and aggression since 1978, owing mostly to their divergent religious beliefs, social customs, and Indo-Aryan heritage.[19] At the time of this writing, this ethnic group is still facing violence on a systemic scale such that the United Nations has classified it as an ongoing genocide. While total numbers are unverified, due to Myanmar's military restricting access to the Rohingya lands, estimates range in the tens of thousands killed and more than six hundred thousand displaced.[20] The cases of Rwanda and Myanmar contain several stark differences regarding the source of social disenfranchisement, however, a common thread of marginalization leading to physical violence permeates both narratives.

> **When legal frameworks are designed to promote certain subgroups within a nation at the expense of others, the outcome is social and political injustice.**

As brokers of power, either derived through the consent of the governed or taken by violence, nations incur a moral obligation to limit negative interaction between people who reside within their borders. When legal frameworks are designed to promote certain subgroups within a nation at the expense of others, the outcome is social and political injustice. Systemic injustice undermines the social contract concept of Western governance, thereby depriving certain people of their ability to initiate change within the political system.[21] This breakdown of social contract, especially when applied deliberately to subgroups within a population, is a precursor for civic disenfranchisement.[22] Without license or recourse, marginalized groups will seek to correct this moral deficit by changing the current system of governance to one that more adequately represents their needs. The current model of interventionist foreign affairs, led by the United States and its NATO allies, adds an additional wrinkle in the tapestry of regional power dynamics. Aiding a nation in the development of a governance system based on a Western model incurs an ethical obligation to do no harm. When a society based on feudalism or tribalism is suddenly pushed into a strict democratic electoral process, the tyranny of the majority often appears.[23] When left unchecked, this imbalance of power leads to the systemic alienation of minority interests which can culminate in sectarian violence.

As a wielder of immense power, a national government and the military that supports the nation has an ethical obligation to treat people justly, with dignity and respect. When special privilege is given to any subgroup it undermines the legitimacy of the rule of law within a nation; and, when people who belong to other subgroups are marginalized, it diminishes their franchise or voice in the democratic process. Disenfranchisement leads to resentment and can cause conflict between various sects within a society; therefore, it is imperative that each person is afforded an equal opportunity to participate in the political process. *IAJ*

NOTES

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22   Jeong, 54-58.

23   Guinier, Lani. *The Tyranny of the Majority: Fundamental Fairness in Representative Democracy*. New York: Free Press, 1994: 504.