ETHNIC POWER RELATIONS AND CONFLICT: LESSONS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

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■ **Introduction**

The vast majority of armed conflicts since World War II have been intra-state wars, and most of them have been fought along ethnic lines. The examples range from the Biafra war in Nigeria and the genocide in Rwanda to the 26-year-long Tamil insurgency in Sri Lanka and the current rebellion by the Russian minority in the Ukraine. This begs the question: "How can political conflicts be managed peacefully in multiethnic societies?" This policy brief addresses this question in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa, using new global data on ethnic power relations to analyze patterns of democratization, ethnic exclusion, and conflict in this region.

Almost all of today's states are multiethnic. Democratic politics in these states are often fraught with conflict or lead to the political marginalization of ethnically defined "others." On the one hand, the conjunction of the two dominant political paradigms of the modern world – nationalism and democracy – has resulted in the idea that "ethnic likes should rule over ethnic likes" (Cederman, Wimmer, and Min 2010, 92). This may unleash powerful exclusionary mechanisms ranging from tyrannical repression to murderous ethnic cleansing, especially in states with a demographic majority ethnic group, in which the latter "can rule 'democratically' but also tyrannically" (Mann 2005, 3). On the other hand, politicians may instrumentalize ethnic categories, such as language, religion, or race, in order to concentrate power and wealth in the hands of a few while, excluding others. As Tilly (1998) noted, categorical boundaries, such as ethnic distinctions, are particularly well-suited to exclude groups from power and create durable inequalities. The Apartheid regime in South Africa is one of the most prominent examples – although not the only one– of such exclusionary social and political systems in the recent history of Africa.

Recent empirical studies reveal that political and economic inequalities between ethnic groups increase the risk of civil conflict (see, e.g., Birnir 2007; Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013; Østby 2008; Stewart 2008). Hence, in addition to the obvious normative objections against it, ethnic exclusion is also a very risky strategy of political leaders. Indeed, the cases mentioned at the beginning of this policy brief are clear examples of the relationship between exclusion and civil war.

Recent quantitative studies have also made major progress in terms of measuring inter-ethnic inequalities across countries, allowing us to compare global trends in ethnic exclusion over time. Using one such particular dataset – the *Ethnic Power Relations* (EPR) dataset –, this policy brief examines patterns of democracy and ethnic exclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa from a global comparative perspective. It shows that, as in most other world regions, ethnic exclusion in Africa has been decreasing significantly since re-democratization in the early 1990s. Yet, the analysis also highlights that democracy *per se* does not have a uniformly positive effect. The policy brief concludes by discussing policy recommendations on how to avert the risk of ethnic exclusion in multiethnic countries.

■ **The *Ethnic Power Relations* (EPR) Data: Measuring Ethnic Exclusion around the World**

One of the most important new data sources is the *Ethnic Power Relations* (EPR) dataset provided by researchers at ETH Zürich (Switzerland) and recently updated to the year 2013 (Vogt et al. 2015)[1]. EPR is a group-based dataset that lists the politically relevant ethnic groups of each country and records their access to state power over time. An ethnic group is considered "politically relevant" if at least one political organization has claimed to represent its interests at the national level or if its members are subjected to state-led political discrimination (Cederman, Wimmer, and Min 2010, 99). Ethnic groups' access to state power is assessed based on the positions of the political leaders representing these groups. State power refers to executive power only, disregarding access to legislative and judicial institutions. Depending on the specific political context, this can be the presidency, the cabinet, the military/armed forces command in military dictatorships, or the ruling party leadership.

Access to power is measured using a roughly ordinal scale, with a broad distinction between included and excluded groups.[2] Groups are considered politically included if their elite representatives occupy executive positions of state power and have real influence on decision making, going beyond mere "token" representation. Thus, the EPR dataset is mostly concerned with what has been termed "descriptive representation" (Pitkin 1967, 60-91). While substantive representation refers to the extent to which the interests of the represented are reflected in the policy output of political institutions, descriptive representation relates to the degree to which the composition of these institutions corresponds to the make-up of the people as a whole with respect to demographic characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity, or class (Pitkin 1967, 60-5, 209; Ruedin 2013, 12-8) .

Descriptive representation is politically high: consequentially for two main reasons. First, the representation of ethnic groups in state institutions is an important indicator of their status and power in society more generally (Horowitz 1985, 185-228; Mansbridge 1999, 648-50; Ruedin 2013, 20). Second, there is increasing empirical evidence that the descriptive representation of social groups promotes their substantive representation, for example in terms of public goods provision (Alwy and Schech 2004; Carnes and Lupu 2015; Franck and Rainer 2012; Preuhs 2006). Especially in post-colonial ethnically divided societies, where institutions tend to be weak and economic opportunities scarce and closely connected to the state – as in much of Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia – the distribution of the state's resources often occurs through ethnically defined patronage networks, linking the well-being of ordinary group members to the fate of their leaders (Chandra 2004; Horowitz 1985; Lemarchand 1972; Woods 1994). In this environment, ethnic group leaders in the government and state bureaucracy act as guardians of their groups in what Jackson and Rosberg (1984, 193) have labeled a "protectoral" system.

A comparison of the major world regions shows that, with the exception of the Middle East and Northern Africa, ethnic exclusion and discrimination are on the wane in all parts of the world (Vogt, Bormann, and Cederman Forthcoming) . As we will see below, this is especially true for the ethnically heterogeneous states of Sub-Saharan Africa since the return to democracy at the beginning of the 1990s. Yet, as expected by many scholars and political observers, democracy *per se* does not have a uniformly positive effect. In Eastern Europe and the states of the former Soviet Union, for instance, ethnic exclusion became more widespread immediately after democratization. Most of these states contain a large demographic majority group, suggesting that democratization in the former communist world became closely linked to ethno-nationalist ideologies, with negative consequences for ethnic minorities living in these states (Mann 2005) .

Table 1 lists the ten states with the highest levels of ethnic exclusion in the world in 2013, according to the EPR data. The list includes a diverse range of countries from Latin America (Guatemala and Brazil), Asia (Bhutan and Nepal), and the Middle East and North

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[1] The original version of the dataset was jointly composed by researchers from ETH Zürich and the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA); see Cederman et al.(2010)

[2] See Cederman, Wimmer, and Min (2010, 100-1) , for precise definitions of the different power status categories.

Africa region (Syria, Jordan, Bahrain, and, depending on how the country is geographically classified, northern Sudan). It clearly highlights the exclusionary nature of the Assad dictatorship in Syria, which is completely based on Assad's fellow Shia Alawites. Yet, the list also reveals that despite the declining trend in the region, some African regimes are still characterized by exclusionary rule, especially Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, which constitute the "hot spots" of ethnic exclusion in today's Sub-Saharan Africa.

Table 1: Top-Ten Countries with Highest Ethnic Exclusion in 2013

Country	Relative size of excluded population
Syria	0.86
Rwanda	0.84
Sudan	0.76
Bahrain	0.70
Bhutan	0.60
Democratic Republic of the Congo	0.56
Jordan	0.56
Guatemala	0.52
Brazil	0.51
Nepal	0.50

Notes: The table lists the ten countries with the highest shares of excluded population, according to the EPR Core Dataset . The values indicate the relative size of politically excluded ethnic groups, as defined above, as a share of the total country population.

Although Rwanda practices a policy of power sharing between Hutus and Tutsis in the formal institutions of state power, such as the cabinet, real decision-making authority is concentrated in the hands of a small Tutsi elite from the hegemonic Rwandan Patriotic Front (FPR) allied to President Kagame. The Democratic Republic of the Congo is very much divided between the western and the eastern parts of the country, with political power firmly concentrated in the hands of President Kabila's ethnic allies from the east, especially the Kivus, Maniema and Katanga. Considering the results from recent empirical studies on ethnic inequality and conflict (see, e.g., Birnir 2007; Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013; Østby 2008;

Stewart 2008), the risk of ongoing or recurrent war in these countries appears particularly high.

■ **Democracy and Ethnic Exclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Historical Perspective**

Figure 1 shows the temporal development of both democracy and ethnic exclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa from 1960 to 2013, relying on the EPR data and the Polity index, which is commonly used to measure the level of democracy across states . The figure compares the regional average values of the relative size of politically excluded groups, as defined above, as a share of the total country population and of the Polity index over time. It becomes evident that the region's return to multiparty democracy was accompanied by a decrease in the level of ethnic exclusion. Although this decrease could be seen as forming part of a more ample trend that had already begun before, democratization and the collapse of numerous authoritarian regimes clearly boosted Africa's development toward ethnically more inclusive regimes.

Figure1: Levels of democracy and ethnic exclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa over time
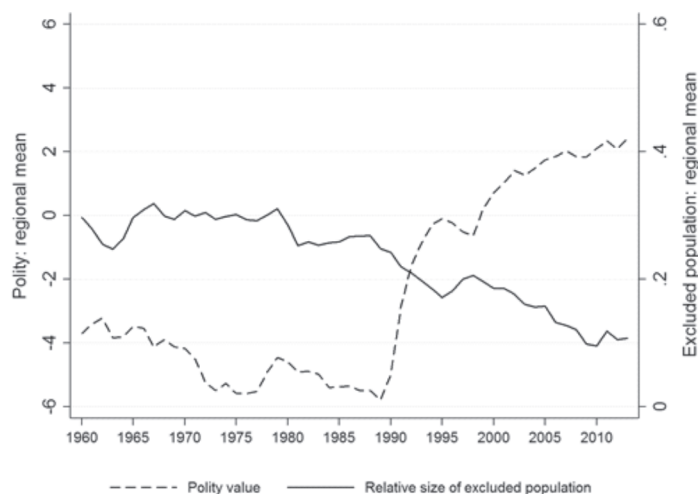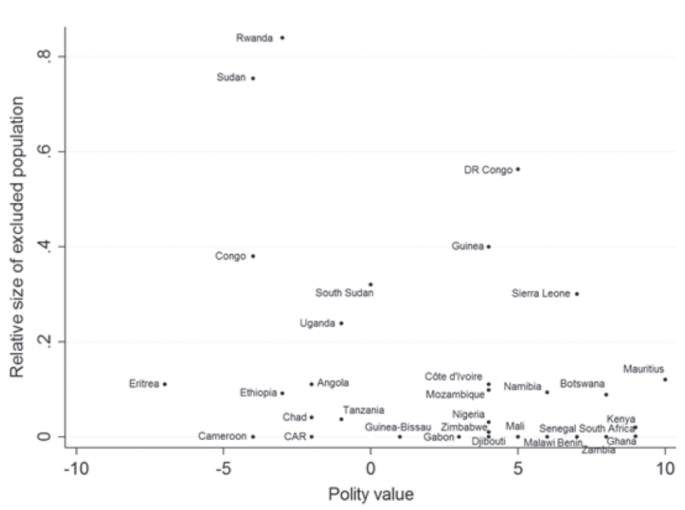

Notes: Based on the Polity IV index (Gurr, Jaggers, and Moore 1989 and the EPR Core Dataset (Vogt et al. 2015). The figure shows the average Polity values and the average values of the relative size of politically excluded ethnic groups (as a share of the total country population) of all Sub-Saharan African countries from 1960 to 2013.

The most outstanding examples of this trend towards ethnically inclusive democracy include South Africa, Kenya, Niger, Malawi and Liberia. But also countries like the Central African Republic, Angola, Togo, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Guinea, which in 2013 could not (yet) be considered full-fledged democracies, have made major moves towards ethnically more inclusive governance.

Figure 2 examines the relationship between democratic governance and ethnic exclusion in Africa in 2013, plotting the Polity index against the EPR country-level indicator of the relative size of politically excluded groups. We can discern roughly four main clusters of countries. The bottom right corner of the figure assembles several states with high levels of both democracy and ethnic inclusion. These *inclusive democracies* include Mauritius, Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, Kenya, Senegal, and Ghana, among others. Some countries, such as Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Mozambique, and Gabon, feature relatively inclusive regimes but still fall short of certain democratic standards, without being considered authoritarian regimes.

The second main cluster, located in the bottom left corner, is composed of *ethnically inclusive authoritarian regimes*. Eritrea, Cameroon, Ethiopia, and Angola are the most prominent cases in this group. Yet, according to the empirical evidence cited previously, the third main cluster of countries constitutes the most dangerous scenario for ethnic peace: the *ethnically exclusionary authoritarian regimes* that can be found in the top left corner. This cluster is represented, above all, by the two aforementioned cases of Sudan and Rwanda. The situation is much less extreme – but still worrisome – in the three cases of Congo-Brazzaville, Uganda and Africa's youngest state, South Sudan. Finally, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Guinea form the fourth main cluster. They exhibit certain features of democratic rule but still exclude relatively large ethnic groups from access to executive power.

Figure 2: Democracy and ethnic exclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa, 2013

Notes: Based on the Polity IV index (Gurr, Jaggers, and Moore 1989) and the EPR Core Dataset (Vogt et al. 2015). The figure shows the Polity value and the relative size of politically excluded ethnic groups (as a share of the total country population) for each country in the year of 2013.

■ **Conclusion:**
Insights for Policy Recommendations

A global analysis of the newly updated EPR data confirms previous evidence that politically excluded ethnic groups are significantly more likely to start ethnic rebellions than included groups (Vogt, Bormann, and Cederman Forthcoming). Hence, ethnic exclusion can be expected to be a very risky political strategy on the part of rulers in multiethnic countries. This suggests that especially in young, ethnically heterogeneous states with yet unconsolidated political institutions, ethnic inclusion and minority rights must be a central political and institutional concern.

Indeed, political scientists have long argued that democracy in multiethnic societies needs certain institutional safeguards to avoid violent group conflict. In particular, three main strategies have been advanced in the academic literature: the "de-ethnicization" of politics, partition, and power sharing. The "de-ethnicization" strategy consciously attempts to ban ethnic identities from the political process by creating an ethnically "blind" constitutional and legal framework that guarantees universal political equality

and individual rights independent of ethnic group identity. The oft-cited prime example of this "liberal universalism" is the American Constitution (see, e.g., Rothchild and Roeder 2005).

Yet, in practice, this strategy is often not much more than a concealed version of ethnic dominance, in which equality and ethnically "blind" laws are used in the political discourse to disguise (and, thus, reinforce) the dominance of the demographically or economically most powerful group. In fact, the American Constitution tolerated the political and economic marginalization of African Americans during long periods of the country's history, particularly in the South. Similarly, constitutionally guaranteed individual rights have not eliminated racial discrimination in Guatemala and other Latin American countries. In Sub-Saharan Africa, organizations making explicit ethnic claims are constitutionally banned in almost all countries (Moroff 2010). However, this has not prevented the politicization of ethnicity by state rulers and their challengers – suggesting that generally, "de-ethnicization" by itself will not be enough to manage group relations in Africa's multiethnic states.

Perhaps the most radical solution to avoid ethnic civil conflict is partition (see, e.g., Kaufmann 1996). Beyond the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, this strategy has only very seldom been applied because of the practical difficulties and the strong opposition from the international state system. The African cases of South Sudan and Eritrea thus constitute exceptions to a general global pattern. However, there are also important political disadvantages associated with this strategy. First, new states created through secession usually contain relevant ethnic minorities themselves, which means that the issue of maintaining ethnic peace is not solved by partition, but simply moved to a different location. This is exactly what has affected Africa's youngest state, South Sudan, which slid into civil war soon after its independence. Second, secession also entails the risk of inter-state war between the two new states, as exemplified by the bloody Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict at the end of the 1990s. Finally, the example of Somalia shows clearly that even ethnically homogenous states may experience protracted civil violence between rival groups.

Therefore, the most promising strategy to maintain peace in most multiethnic states is probably some kind of power sharing between ethnic groups. Following Arend Lijphart's (1977, 2004) consociational theory, this strategy explicitly recognizes ethnic group differences and attempts to create political institutions that guarantee the rights and safety of ethnic groups. At the level of the central state, this means that representatives of all ethnic groups should have equal access to political power. (Ethno-)federalism is also considered a key institutional feature of ethnic power sharing (McGarry and O'Leary 2009). Nevertheless, some scholars have argued that this strategy might be less useful in the particular ethno-political context of Sub-Saharan Africa (Mozaffar and Scarritt 1999). Moreover, in the case of previous conflicts, ethnic autonomy is often not sufficient to guarantee peace in the future (Cederman et al. 2015). Hence, in order to avoid civil violence in the democratic or (potentially) democratizing multiethnic states of Sub-Saharan Africa ethnic inclusion at the level of the central state will be absolutely crucial. In particular, the opportunities of political participation should be distributed equally among the population at large – independent from ethnic identity –, while broad-based inter-ethnic coalitions at the elite level are necessary to maintain political stability and peace.

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