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World Development Vol. 39, No. 2, pp. 199–211, 2011

0305-750X/$ - see front matter

doi:10.1016/j.worlddev.2009.11.031

Sons of the Soil, Migrants, and Civil War

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Summary. — In nearly a third of ethnic civil wars since 1945, the conflict develops between members of a regional ethnic group that considers itself to be the indigenous "sons of the soil" and recent migrants from other parts of the country. The migrants are typically members of the dominant ethnic group who migrate in search of land or government jobs, often supported by the state with economic incentives and development schemes. This paper elaborates on the concept of a sons-of-the-soil conflict; presents descriptive statistics and empirical patterns; identifies a typical escalation sequence; illustrates the several steps with an account of the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict along with other cases; discusses the obstacles to negotiated settlements; and concludes with a suggestion on the role of grievances in explaining civil war onsets.

Key words — Sons of the soil, civil war, ethnic conflict, Sri Lanka, internal migration, grievances

1. INTRODUCTION

Ethnic diversity, if one compares countries at similar levels of economic development, is not significantly associated with a higher risk of civil war (Fearon & Laitin, 2003). Even so, "ethnic" civil wars have been quite common. In most civil wars since 1945, rebel groups have explicitly advocated on behalf of an ethnic or religious group, or they have mobilized and recruited principally along the lines of an ethnic cleavage. From our list of 139 civil wars during 1945–2008, we code 79, or 57%, as "ethnic" in this sense, and another 24 (17%) as mixed or ambiguously "ethnic." Moreover, the prevalence of ethnic civil wars has been increasing over time. Fifty-three percent of the 17 civil wars we code as breaking out in the years 1945–49 were ethnic. For the next six decades, the corresponding percentages are 74, 71, 67, 81, 83, and 100 (for 2000–08). [1]

These ethnic civil wars are themselves heterogeneous. A surprising number, however, exhibit a set of common features and dynamics that have been missed in the recent literature on civil war and ethnic conflict. In 32 of the civil wars in our list—about 31% of the ethnic civil wars—the spark for the war is violence between members of a regional ethnic group that considers itself to be the indigenous "sons of the soil" and recent migrants from other parts of the country. The migrants are typically members of the dominant ethnic group who have come in search of land or government jobs. In many cases the state actively supports this migration with economic incentives and development schemes (occasionally funded by the World Bank or other international development agencies).

We show that these conflicts have occurred mainly in Asia and in large countries, are remarkably persistent and long-running on average, and tend to be low level in terms of fatalities. Of greater interest, we find evidence that there is a fairly common sequence of actions and reactions that produces civil wars of this sort. The violence often begins with attacks between gangs of young men from each side, or in pogroms or riots following on rumors of abuse (rapes, thefts, insults) or protests by indigenous against the migrants. State forces then intervene, often siding with the migrants, and often being indiscriminate in retribution and repression against members of the indigenous group.

In a few cases, the state intervenes on the side of the indigenous minority. Despite the intense grievances this can cause on the migrant side, escalation to civil war does not follow, because the migrants are less likely to pursue rebellion, for reasons we discuss. We also discuss factors influencing the state's choice of whom to support, and speculate on reasons why these costly conflicts are not avoided by negotiated settlements between the state, migrants and indigenous. On the latter, we suggest that because migration will change the balance of power in the region, and because the state often cannot credibly commit to restrict migration in the future, Coasian deals that would pay off the locals or limit migration are hard to reach and implement.

Weiner more than thirty years ago recognized the "potentially explosive" situation stemming from clashes between migrant and indigenous populations, in his classic *Sons of the Soil* (1978, p. 79). In a broader sense, it is evident that some of the worst ethnic violence in the last several centuries has involved the annihilation of indigenous groups by ethnically distinct settlers bearing "guns, germs, and steel" (Diamond, 1997; Mann, 2005). Nonetheless, in the recent cross-national, "micro-level," and case study literatures on civil war, sons-of-the-soil dynamics and their frequency have been largely missed. An example is the relatively well-studied war in Sri Lanka between the Sinhalese-dominated state and the Tamil Tigers. We argue below that the standard narrative of this case misses the central importance of sons-of-the-soil dynamics in driving the escalation and maintenance of civil war violence in Sri Lanka.

In the next section, we elaborate the concept of a sons-of-the-soil conflict and present descriptive statistics and empirical patterns. In Section 3 we illustrate sons-of-the-soil dynamics with a brief account of the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict. Section 4 breaks down the escalation sequence in sons-of-the-soil conflicts into several steps, and provides examples from a variety of other cases. Section 5 considers obstacles to negotiated settlements. Section 6 concludes, developing some implications of the analysis for understanding the role of grievances in explaining civil war.

* Final revision accepted: November 12, 2009.

2. DEFINITIONS AND EMPIRICAL PATTERNS

A sons-of-the-soil (SoS) conflict has the following core features. First, it involves conflict between members of a minority ethnic group concentrated in some region of a country, and relatively recent, ethnically distinct migrants to this region from other parts of the same country. Second, the members of the minority group think of their group as indigenous, and as rightfully possessing the area as their group's ancestral (or at least very long-standing) home.

By "conflict" we mean competition and dispute over scarce resources such as land, jobs, educational quotas, government services, or natural resources. A SoS conflict may be violent, but it need not be. Ideally we might like to estimate the rate at which SoS conflicts become violent, and to undertake an empirical analysis of what factors distinguish the violent cases from the non-violent ones. This would require coding ethnic groups in a sample of countries for whether they see themselves as indigenous to a particular area and whether the area is experiencing significant in-migration by another ethnic group, making for increased competition for various resources. Partly excepting some of the Minorities at Risk data discussed below, and some temporal variation within our civil war cases, we do not have such data. So we are limited here mainly to examining patterns in the set of civil wars that are driven, at least in part, by a SoS conflict.

We coded our list of 139 civil wars during 1945–2008 for whether they were SoS conflicts by these criteria.[2] One "threshold" issue that needs to be specified is to say how recent the migration of the "outsiders" has to have been. Taking a view of several centuries, Catholics in Northern Ireland see themselves as sons of the soil versus Protestant settlers. Serbs in Kosovo might have the same view regarding Kosovar Albanians, Africans in South Africa vis-a-vis South African whites, or Abkhaz regarding Georgians (who migrated in Abhkazia mainly in the 1920s and 30s). Although we think at least some of these cases can be profitably understood and analyzed as SoS conflicts, for our analysis here we will take "recent migration" to mean within a generation of the violent conflict's onset.

Table 1 shows the distribution of SoS cases by region, and lists them. Thirty-one of the 139, or 22%, involve indigenous-versus-migrant conflict; as noted, this is 30% of the 103 cases of "ethnic war" in our list. Fully half of all SoS cases are in Asia, and these 16 comprise 41% of 39 civil wars we code for Asia. SubSaharan Africa is the next most common locale for SoS wars, with 26% if one counts the anti-colonial struggles in the settler colonies of Algeria, Angola, Kenya, and Mozambique.[3]

Why so many SoS cases in Asia? Arguably, the physical and social geography of many Asia states are particularly conducive to this form of conflict. China, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Thailand, and Myanmar all have major lowland river plains densely populated by a large ethnic group that dominates the state (and usually gives it its name). The plains are often bordered by rough, much less developed mountainous terrain inhabited by diverse ethnic minorities—often "hill tribes"—who use slash-and-burn agriculture or are pastoralists.[4] Population pressure in the river valleys can make expansion to these formerly peripheral lands attractive for poor farmers from the dominant ethnic group.

Relatedly, SoS conflicts tend to occur in larger countries, both for the set of all civil wars and just for those that have occurred in Asia.[5] We find that SoS wars account for one of the strongest empirical regularities that has emerged from cross-national statistical studies of civil war onset, namely, that civil war is more likely in countries with larger populations (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Hegre & Sambanis, 2006). If one runs an onset model (such as the one in Fearon & Laitin, 2003) but coding onsets only for non-SoS conflicts, the estimated coefficient for log of country population shrinks by two thirds and is no longer statistically significant. By contrast, if one codes a dependent variable that is "1" only for SoS civil war onsets, the coefficient for population increases by about 300% and is very strongly significant.[6] Thus, it appears that the main reason that larger population is associated with civil war onset is that larger countries have been prone to have SoS civil wars.

A striking fact about SoS conflicts is their typically long duration. They often simmer at a low level, but from the state's perspective must seem impossible to get rid of. A simple Weibull or exponential model estimates the median duration of SoS conflicts to be about 15 years, as compared to about 7 years for all other civil wars. One quarter of all non-SoS wars are predicted to last more than 15 years, whereas one quarter of SoS conflicts are predicted to last more than 31 years.[7] At the same time, SoS cases are much less deadly than other civil wars on average. Table 2 summarizes. All these differences would be extremely unlikely to arise by chance if in fact the distributions for SoS and non-SoS wars were the same.

Civil wars in which the rebels are seeking independence or greater autonomy for a region tend to be slightly less deadly on average than civil wars where the rebel's goal is to capture the center. But this does not explain the differences in Table 2. SoS wars are much less lethal even within the set of autonomy-seeking civil wars.

The patterns described above use data at the level of countries and civil wars. The Minorities at Risk (MAR) project provides data at the level of groups within countries for some 342 religious and ethnic minorities in 123 countries.[8] Groups are selected into the sample if they were judged by MAR coders to have been subject to discrimination as a group, to have organizations supporting greater group rights, or to be an "advantaged minority" subject to challenge. Unfortunately, this is not a random sample from a population of ethnic groups; MAR groups are selected based on a perception that they are at greater risk for violence or oppression. And in fact one third of MAR groups are coded as having been involved in a "small scale guerrilla activity" or greater at some time since 1945, as compared to only 15% of the 710 minority ethnic groups in Fearon's (2003) list of ethnic groups in 166 countries.

Nonetheless, MAR has coded variables that allow us to make some comparisons at the group level concerning sons of the soil and their competition with migrants.[9] There are variables coding (a) whether the group has a regional base, (b) whether the group is indigenous and, if not, when the first wave of its members migrated to their present location, and (c) whether and to what extent the group faced "competition for vacant land" (coded for the 1980s, 1990s, and in 2000).[10] Sharing all three characteristics should be a reasonable if imperfect coding for SoS groups facing pressure from migrants. Forty-nine of the 342 MAR groups qualify, with the list including most of the groups in our Table 1, and a good number of others as well. Close to one quarter of the indigenous groups with a regional base are coded as facing competition for land in at least one decade since 1980 (49/211; but note that selection bias means that the population frequency is probably lower).

Rates of rebellion against the state (as shown on Table 3) vary with the three factors, revealing several patterns.[11] First,