10 decembrie 2003
Alexandru Balas
**Causes of South Asian Conflicts.
A study case of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Kashmir**

In this paper I shall take a look at three conflicts that take place (or took place) in South Asia: The East Pakistani civil war, the Sri Lankan conflict and the Kashmiri conflict. These are three conflicts that have many causes and one cannot say that they can be put in the same category of conflicts. But they do have common features that I want to portray, as well as differences.

In analyzing these conflicts I shall look at their causes, highlighting when I believe that the "point-of-no-return" (the moment after which there was basically no possibility of stopping violent conflict from developing) has been crossed and I shall also look at the dynamics of these conflicts. Then I shall draw a number of conclusions and some lessons that can be learned from these conflicts.

I shall start by discussing the East Pakistani conflict. Before going and analyzing the causes of the conflicts I want to present some of the underlying problems of the conflict. Even before the partition there were respectable voices inside the Muslim community(Bengalis) that were struggling for independent Muslim states and not one Muslim state, seeing the difficulty of having one state made up of two wings 1,000 miles apart and in-between having a hostile India. Even Lord Mountbatten gave in 1947, only 25 years of existence for this Pakistani state with 2 wings(He was wrong by one year!).

The second point that I want to emphasis is the way Western Pakistanis saw Bengalis(Eastern Pakistanis) and vice-versa. Ayub Khan, in his position as Head of State, portrays the Bengalis as follows: "East Bengalis probably belong to the very original Indian races...until the creation of Pakistan they had not known any real freedom or sovereignty...In addition they have been, and still are, under considerable Hindu cultural and

1

linguistic influence. As such they have all the inhibitions of downtrodden races and have not yet found it possible to adjust psychologically to the requirements of the newborn freedom." (Noman, p.30). This passage shows the perceived superiority of the Western Pakistanis over the Bengalis. On the other hand the Bengalis " from the very onset complained that British colonialists had been replaced by West Pakistani colonialists"(Jones, p.154)

I shall organize the causes of the conflict in 3 main categories: ethnic, economic and political. In terms of the ethnic conflict, beside the way both groups perceived each other, the main contentious issue, was the language problem. Bengalis were speaking Bangla - that was spoken by 54.6% of the entire Pakistani population (the percent represents more or less the percent of Bengalis part of the Pakistani population). Bengal was homogenous from a language point of view, while West Pakistan was split between Punjabi, Urdu, Sindh, Pukhto and British. Even though only 7% of the population spoke Urdu, Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan insisted that Urdu shall become the national language. This action led to riots in Bengal in 1952 against the Government.

"In the economic arena, East Pakistan faced considerable discrimination"(Ganguly, p.52). The Bengalis, even though they were 55% of the entire population were receiving less then the Western Pakistanis in terms of medical and educational investment. The U.S.'s foreign assistance was devoted 66% to Western Pakistan, having in mind that East Pakistan was in a disastrous economic situation after the partition of Bengal into West Bengal(with Calcutta) going to India and East Bengal joining Pakistan. An indicator of the economic discrimination can be seen in the gap in the per capita income in West Pakistan and east Pakistan. While in 1960 the gap was 32% in West Pakistan's favor, by the end of Ayub Khan's regime the gap grew to 61%. So, Bengalis felt again that the central government did not pay enough attention to their grievances.

The political conflict has as an underlying idea, too: the fact that with Bengalis being a majority of Pakistan's population, if elections were to be held the center of power would move from West Pakistan to East Pakistan, a thing that was strongly resisted by the West Pakistani leadership. Even though West Pakistani politics was very divided at a regional level, too, when it came the idea that the power could move to Bengal, all the political groups(regional-Punjabis, Sindh, Balochi or the Mohajirs) united behind the idea that such a thing should not happen. Another point has to be made. And that is the amount of power and autonomy that the regions should have and the central-state should retain. I would say that this is the main feature of this conflict that I shall touch upon again later. The Mohajiri-Punjabi dominated civil-service worked hand in hand with the military to make sure that the central state has more power than the regions. This happened against all the regions, but it

was more resented in Bengal. And there are evidences to support the idea that the Ayub Khan coup was called for by the civil service in order not to allow Bengalis to take over politics in free elections, where it was believed that they would vote as a bloc for the Bengali leadership. Jalal mentions in regard to this that: "In Pakistan the civil bureaucracy became junior partner to the military to keep the East Bengali majority at bay..."(Jalal, p.65) A third point of the political conflict is the representation of Bengalis in the civil service and in the military. Even though one may easily argue that this was an inheritance of the British colonial past, one has to notice that there was nothing significant done under the Pakistani leadership to change the discrimination of Bengali representation in these fields. Bengalis were under-represented in the civil service and the military as Ganguly shows: "In 1971,...,Bengalis were a mere 5% of the officer corps in the army,15% in the air force and 20% in the navy.[...]In the elite civil service, Bengali representation in 1970 amounted to only 16%, despite a 162% increase in college enrollment in East Pakistan over the preceding decade."(Ganguly, p.53)

A forth point of political conflict is represented by the 1962 Constitution that represented the "formal manifestation of regional subjugation[...] which embodied the dominance of an unrepresentative central government"(Noman, p.30) The character of this Constitution that basically transformed the regional administrations into extensions of the central government produced much resentment among the Bengali population that started to organize politically to face the central government. From that moment on the Awami League, led by the Sheikh Mujibur Rahman started to have the main role in representing the Bengalis point of view and after they came up with the Six Points of 1966 that basically asked for a confederation, they won the national elections of 1970 against Ali Bhutto's PPP.

I believe that the 1970s elections and the fact that Bhutto did not accept the idea of being in the opposition represented the "point of no return" for the conflict. The Dhaka Dialogue as it became known, between Bhutto, Rahman and Yahve did not bring a solution to the political crisis. Instead the Pakistani military became more annoyed with the whole process and it decided to bring the Bengalis to order by using military strength. But all that this produced was a civil war in Bangladesh and the separation of the Pakistani state with the help of the Indian army that jumped in to help out the Bengalis.

In talking through the dynamic of this conflict I want to emphasize the point that this separation was not at all clear from the beginning and not even in the immediate months following the 1970 elections. It was a fast, but gradual intertwining of conflicts and it showed that the "Muslim brotherhood unity" is not strong enough when faced with political or economic problems. I would argue that even though there was a territorial base for the

conflict and there was an ethnic conflict as well as an economic one, the political conflict was the key for this. The reason is that if there would not have been a strong central-state undermining the position of the regional administrations, then Bengal could have agreed to become part of a loose Pakistani confederation, and the violent conflict could have been averted. I want to draw here the distinction between a violent conflict and a non-violent conflict. I believe that the latter would have existed anyway, due to the ethnic tensions between the two wings of the country.

Moving to the Sri Lankan conflict I want to emphasize from the very beginning that this conflict has two "sub-conflicts" incorporated into it. One is the ethnic conflict between the Tamil Hindus and the Sinhalese Buddhists and the other one is the civil war between the radicals of both ethnic groups against the moderates of their own ethnic group as well as against the other ethnic group. Placing the two conflicts on a time frame, the ethnic conflict starts developing long before the civil war, that really develops in the 80s and 90s with the UNP in power.

Before taking a look at the causes of the ethnic conflict I want to put forward some of the underlying pre-independence actions that led to the raise of tensions between the two ethnic communities. The Sri Lankan nationalist movement developed along two-tracks: religious revival and reform movement. These tracks brought with them during the 1930s and 1940s a pattern of competitive relations between the Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan Tamils leaders. A second point that I want to make is the significance of the 1920s changes in the electoral system, that moved from a communal one to a territorial one and made the Sinhalese elite to start mobilizing support along ethnic and caste lines, using historical and religious myths as well as cultural symbols.

Moving to search for the causes of the ethnic conflict I want to point out that the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict has again two "sub-conflicts". One is the conflict against the Upcountry Tamils(Indian Tamils) and the second is the conflict against the Sri Lankan Tamils. The conflict between the Sinhalese and the Upcountry Tamils changed from a class conflict to an ethnic one, that draw into it the Sri Lankan Tamils, too. The class conflict was between the Sinhalese elite landlords of the Kandyan plantations and the poor Upcountry Tamils that were working these plantations. In order not to allow them to become "political capital" for the parties of the left which were trying to support the demands of these Tamils on the national political stage, the Sinhalese decided not to grant citizenship to the Upcountry Tamils. This action had repercussions among the entire Tamil community and put the two communities on a conflicting path. Especially the radicals of the Tamils saw this as a first sign of an anti-Tamils Sinhalese policy. What it also did was to increase the representation

of Sinhalese in the Parliament (in case people voted according to ethnic lines) to 80%, and thus downgrading the presence of Tamils.

The first signs of increased tensions between the Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan Tamil community started in 1956 with the language problems, initiated by the Sinhala Only Act. This act, called as national language only Sinhala, disregarding Tamil. What it did was that it "delegitimated the position of the Tamils(non-Sinhala speakers) as equal citizens on the island" (Shastri, p.143) and produced the massive riots on the island with hundreds of Tamils losing their lives and 10,000 becoming refugees in Colombo. Of course there is the debate to what extent this act was actually implemented. But, in this debate I would disagree with de Silva's point of view who argues that this act was never more than "convenient piece of rhetorical fiction"(de Silva, p.306). I think that one has to look at the effects of this act in terms of the way it was perceived. And the deadly riots that took place show that the Tamil community was stirred by what this act intended to do.

The second cause, related to the language barrier, is the state employment. Until then the Tamils, even though only 12% of the citizens had the majority in the state administration. Due to the language barrier as well as other measures taken to advantage the Sinhala community, there was an increase in the Sinhalese presence in the state administration and a decrease in the Tamils presence.

A third cause related to the two above is the populist affirmative actions taken in the admission in higher education. The Tamils that were dominating the admission exams at the science-based disciplines experienced a decrease in the number of Tamils that were allowed to enter university, and there was an increase of the number of Sinhalese joining university, that did not have to do as well as the Tamils on the tests, having a specific number of places allocated to them.

A forth point is the colonialisation project. It is the Mahaweli Irrigation project, that caused a settlement of Sinhalese low class people in the Tamil majority regions and thus changing the demographic aspect of these regions. Herring makes the case that "first, the project symbolically and demographically exacerbated ethnic territoriality. [Secondly] Of identified alternatives to the Mahaweli, all projects had an estimated rate of return higher than the 11 percent projected for Mahaweli, and five of nine had more than double the expected return."(Herring, p.151-152) These observations show that the outcome of this project raised the tensions even more and that the motives behind the decision of the government to go on with this project even though there were more viable alternatives had other motives beside developing the country.

A fifth point to be made is represented by the material grievances. The change from a

welfare system to a liberalized free-market external investment economy that happened during the 1970s, led to an erosion of the social safety nets that led to more insecurity and inequality. These brought anger and easy scapegoating and the need for new security and identity led to the escalation of the ethnic conflict.

The fifth point leads to the six point which talks about the minority and "controlling the external investment money flow" complexes of both communities. The Tamils feel a minority on the island of Sri Lanka and thus feel threatened by the Sinhalese majority. The Sinhalese feel a minority in the region, seeing the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Tamilnadu Tamils as one and thus they feel threatened by the Tamils. The other complex is about the perception of the Sinhalese that the Tamil community due to their connections and diaspora, control the external investment in Sri Lanka and the perception of the Tamils that the Sinhalese are the ones controlling this money flow in the detriment of the Tamils, because the Sinhalese run the government.

The last point that I want to put forward as a cause for the conflict is the significance of politics to this conflict. A first observation is that until 1970s the two major Sinhalese parties, the UDP and the SLPF courted the Tamil votes of the FP, that was a swing vote. In the 70s, both major parties won comfortable parliamentary majorities and they did not have to court and therefore listen carefully to the demands of the Tamil vote. The second observation that I want to make is that in the negotiations on different issues between the leaders of the Sinhalese parties and those of the Tamils, the Sinhalese parties always came short of what the Tamils were asking for and they did not follow through with the deals. These type of actions undermined the position of the moderates and raised the position of the radicals in the Tamil community.

The third observation that I want to make represents also a cause of the start of the civil war. It is the desire of the UNP to remain in power. Related to the Tamil conflict they disregarded or downplayed the existing problems and did not make a deal with the Tamils for fear that this would provide "political ammunition" to the more radical SLFP. Related to the civil war, during the 80s and 90s the UNP wanted to stay in power regardless of anything and they targeted the Tamils as well as the Sinhalese JVP and everybody who opposed their policies, thus transforming the ethnic conflict into a civil war.

A forth political observation that I want to put forward is the process of "devolution" and how these influenced the conflict. While the Sinhalese government tried to use devolution at the village and local level in the North-Eastern regions highly populated by Tamils, the later asked for regional devolution so that their voice could be better organized and heard. This was again a contentious point between the two communities.

The Sri Lankan conflict(s) seems to have been escalated by the decisions of politicians to use ethnic identities in order to gain and remain in power. Their ethnic appeals played an important role in leading Sri Lanka into an era of conflicts. Most of the causes of the ethnic conflict have political reasons behind them (be it to not allow for the vote of the Upcountry Tamils or to gain the vote of the poor Sinhalese through the Mahaweli Project).

The Kashmiri conflict is made up of predisposing conditions for the conflict and of opportunistic events.

The predisposing conditions are : a) the different views of the fundamentals of state-construction between India and Pakistani initial leadership; b)Pakistan's irredentist claim to Kashmir. The Pakistani view of the state-construction is one based on a primordial identity, a two-nation theory. The Indian one is a secular one, where the state can be built regardless of the different religions existent in the society. The Pakistani irredentist claim to Kashmir, is based on the idea that Pakistan is the homeland of all Muslims of the Subcontinent therefore Pakistan cannot be complete until Kashmir becomes a part of it. This point however lost validation after the separation of Bangladesh out of Pakistan in 1971.

The predisposing conditions for the conflict however are not enough to create the conflict. The opportunistic events are the ones that escalate the conflict. They are based on false optimism, that the facts seem to suggest that it is mainly a feature of the Pakistani state. It consists of the misreading of an opponents relative military strength and will, and of the allies' will. Looking at the wars fought over Kashmir in 1947(Pakistan believed that India does not have the will to intervene), in 1965 (they believed that China will back them up and that they still have the strength to take on the Indian Army) and in 1999 (they were testing the will of the Indians), we see that Pakistan initiated them all the time, based on wrong assumptions. As Jones mentions the Indian committee of enquiry for the Kargil War came up with a report that said that "Pakistan's action at Kargil was not rational"(Jones, p.91). Leaving aside the way the Indians think about Pakistan, we could consider this to be another sign showing that the Pakistani Army has the tendency of not calculating the risks of some actions to their full extent.

There are two characteristics of this conflict: the international conflict between India and Pakistan and the conflict between the central Indian state and the desire for regional autonomy in Kashmir. The first characteristic of the conflict has been discussed above, therefore I shall focus on the second one. I want to make the following point: Even though the Kashmiris might resent the Indian government policies, that does not mean that they want to become part of Pakistan. The Muslims of Kashmir are Sufists Muslims, very different of the Sunni and the Shia. The majority of them did not want to become part of Pakistan

and they still do not want that to happen and resent the "terrorist networks" that infiltrate from Pakistan. The problem is that Pakistan "translates" the anti-Indian actions as pro-Pakistani actions, which is not at all the case. In the 1980s there was a rise of the Kashmiri independence movement, the JKLF, against which both the radical pro-Pakistani groups (Hizb-ul Mujahideen) and the Indian government started fighting. The reason for the rise of these separatist movement in the 80s, after a "dormant" period between 1965 and early 1980s, is that the political elite of Kashmir after having experienced "two largely fair and free elections in 1977 and 1983 was unwilling to countenance any efforts on the part of a regime in New Delhi to turn back the electoral clock." (Ganguly's article, p. 181)The claim for independence/autonomy is a very delicate topic, and a second battlefield in this conflict.

This conflict transformed over time and now India does not want to give up Kashmir for fear that other states may follow the same path and that would disintegrate the Indian state, while Pakistan built a huge army which rational would disappear if the Kashmiri conflict would be settled. Ganguly presents this as follows: "India feared that relinquishing its claim to Kashmir would set off an internal domino effect, in which other disaffected minorities would demand to secede from the Indian union."(Ganguly, p.6)

Drawing a line and adding the conflicts in search for conclusions, I want to point out the fact that all of them had an internationalization. India is or was part of all of the conflicts at a certain moment in time. This shows India's desire to be a hegemon of the area. Secondly, in all of these conflicts the idea of a conflict between the central-state and the regions appears in a form or another, a sign that politics in South Asia are very decentralized. Thirdly one can notice that where there is an ethnic conflict there seems to be a similarity of causes: language, economic, political, cultural- as in the Sri Lankan and East Pakistani cases. The politicians seem to be held responsible for the outbreak of violence in all the cases, be it because they use ethnic appeals to rally support(Sri Lanka), because they disregard and look down upon the problems of a region(East Pakistan) or because they have different visions of state-building and make wrong calculations regarding the enemy(Kashmir). But I would say that if we are to think that the politicians are the main actors of these conflicts, it makes sense that if they fail they are held responsible and if they succeed in putting an end to the conflicts they are considered the heroes.

I think that one of the lessons that may be learned are that one should always pay attention not only at what a political decision does but also at what it is perceived to be doing, especially in multi-ethnic environments. A second lesson that I consider important to draw out of these conflicts is the idea that when there is a discussion about the legitimization of a group(Tamils, Bengals) as citizens with full rights of a state, or of an entire state (Pakistan,

over the issue of Kashmir), then the situation may become violent.

Bibliography

1. Oman Noman, *1947-1958...The Disenchantment with freedom*, London KPI, 1998

2. Owen Bennett Jones, *Pakistan: Eye of the Storm*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2002

3. Sumit Ganguly, Conflict Unending. India-Pakistan Tensions since 1947, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002

4. Ayesha Jalal, *State formation and political process in India and Pakistan, 1947 to c.1971*, Cambridge, England Cambridge University Press, 1995

5. Amita Shastri, *"Government Policy and the Ethnic Crisis in Sri Lanka"*, in Brown and Ganguly (eds.) *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*,

6. K.M. de Silva, *Reaping the Whirlwind,*

7.Ronald Herring, *"Making Ethnic Conflict: The Civil War in Sri Lanka"*, in Esman and Herring (eds.) *Carrots, Sticks and Ethnic Conflict,*