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Separatism: Product of the Majoritarian Government

Background

In nineteenth century Europe, the rise of nationalism developed the concept of a “national identity” (Stovall 2006). Under a single ruler and legal borders, countries developed nationalism where a common language, history, and culture defined the nation and its people. With this idea of a “national identity”, a majority party and a minority party began to play an important role in shaping the nation-state. During the Age of Enlightenment, the concept of race became highly dependent on physical characteristics (Stovall 2006). The ethnic minority in most cases differed in religion, appearance, and language from that of the ethnic majority. The rise of minorities within a nation-state resulted from migration or involuntary displacement through annexation of territory. The Uyghurs of China and the Tamils of Sri Lanka are still struggling with the hostilities from their proper ethnic majorities. The ethnic majority Han Chinese and Sinhalese are successfully oppressing the Uyghurs and Tamils respectively through state policies and other practices, especially warfare, that leads to the stripping of the ethnic minority’s identity by forcing their assimilation and/or removal as I will show through policies which leads to a desire for autonomy and indirectly prompts separatists movements.

Legislation is enforced by the central government, as per the ethnic majority sentiment, to prevent the practice of religion, language, and traditions that define the ethnic minority in order to suppress them. In China, the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s enforced a common language where minority languages, like that of the Uyghurs, were shunned (Dwyer 2005: 26). Similar to

the Chinese, the Sinhalese created the Sinhala Only Act of 1956 in which Sinhala was made the official language opposing the Tamils (Britannica 2015). These policies seek, and aim to completely remove an ethnic group (as with the Tamils), to force their assimilation into the mainstream culture, all while removing remnants of their proper culture. However, while the ethnic majority rids of the ethnic minority's traditions, they refuse to include them into mainstream society.

Ethnic Majority Sentiment Towards the Minority

The ethnic majorities, in this case study, use a sense of nationalism to pursue an agenda of ridding the minorities of traits symbolic to their identity. The Uyghurs are a Muslim, Turkic-speaking ethnic group that reside in the Xinjiang region in Western China, whereas their majority counterpart, the Han Chinese practice folk religions, speak traditional Chinese, and reside towards Eastern China. The Uyghurs are then culturally and ethnically linked to the Central Asian countries as opposed to China (BBC 2014). The Tamils are the ethnic minority in the north and east of Sri Lanka. They speak the Tamil language and predominantly practice Hinduism, while the majority is Buddhist Sinhalese and speaks Sinhala (BBC 2015). These differences have played a big role in the oppressing of the minority due to nationalism. According to David Brown, an extreme form of nationalism is aggressive ethnic nationalism. This breeds out of a natural reaction by a threatened community against the community that threatens it. As a result, ethnic majorities tend to support violence against ethnic minorities because they are perceived as a threat to the stability of the community (Brown 2008: 769). The Han Chinese destroyed religious texts and mosques, which are both significant to the Uyghurs' practice of Islam. In 1981,

the Sinhalese burned the Jaffna Public Library, which was located in Tamil territory and contained works important to the Tamil culture (Bhattacharji 2009).

The Han Chinese and the Sinhalese formed a collective identity to combat the “threatening” differences presented by the ethnic minorities. Symbols and values become important to the collective identity and forces the minority to integrate or alienate (Brown 2008: 773). In 1948, Ceylon (today Sri Lanka), gained independence from its colonial power, Great Britain. After independence, there was a growth in Sinhala nationalism; Sinhalese was made the official language and Buddhism was its official religion (BBC 2015). The Tamils were alienated by the Sinhalese because they were forced through the uprising in nationalism to not participate in society. The act of the destruction of mosques imposed by the government suppressed the Uyghurs’ ability to practice their religion and revealed the power the Han Chinese held over the Uyghurs. Elected governments function as an agent of the ethnic majority and prioritize their interests over those of the ethnic minorities. Mobilization of the ethnic majority legitimizes the policies instituted by the government (Brown 2008: 781).

The Role of the Government

In addition to the ethnic majority’s influence in governmental action towards the minorities in its borders, governments have its own agenda that also determines the treatment of the minorities. Governments are more likely to fight for territory that is economically, strategically, or psychologically valuable (Walter 2006: 313). In the case of China, the region of Xinjiang, which the Uyghurs inhabit, proves to be of high value for the Chinese because it is resource-rich, producing oil, gas, and coal. Xinjiang is expected to produce 35 million tons of crude oil by 2020 and has the country’s largest coal reserves with about 40 percent of the national total (New York

Times 2014); this is beneficial for China as it is persistent in investing in the region. China is reluctant in granting autonomy to the Uyghurs because it would result in losing the territory. According to Barbara Walter, governments are expected to be less psychologically attached to territory that had once belonged to another group. This is not the case with Sri Lanka. The region had long been inhabited with Tamils who migrated from the nearby Tamil Nadu, even before the colonization of the British (BBC 2015). In the case of the Sinhalese, they refuse to give any piece of land away to the Tamils. This sentiment is what caused the civil war among the two; neither wanted to give up the land they had claimed to be theirs.

Policies are shaped by the Han Chinese and the Sinhalese, both of which reflect the government and are represented by it. As a result, the government implements these policies because it is what the majority wants and sees fit in maintaining their country. Under Mao Zedong, the Chinese government implemented national policies for his plans of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. These plans called for the government to institute strict assimilation laws that prohibited the practice and teaching of Islam (Cunningham 2012: 10). Due to the Cultural Revolution, Imams were jailed, traditional Muslim clothing wear was removed, and the Uyghur language was removed from the education system (BBC 2014). The migration of the Han Chinese to Xinjiang was promoted, forcing the ethnic majority into the safe community of the ethnic minority (BBC 2014). When Ceylon (today Sri Lanka) was freed from colonial rule, the British put the Sinhalese in power. In 1949, the country that was 70% Sinhalese and 20% Tamil, disfranchised and denied citizenship to the Tamils. This was highly favorable among the Sinhalese nationalists because it essentially rejected any recognition of the Tamils.

Policies are not the only initiative that these governments take. They also use violent measures to perfect their oppressing agenda and suppress the separatist movements cultivated by the policies enacted. Following the September 11th attacks, the Chinese government took advantage of the “War on Terror” in order to combat the Uyghurs. China managed to convince the international community of a linkage between the Uyghurs and al-Qaeda, which helped them pursue their shutdown of the separatist movements (Cunningham 2012: 13). Although there was little to no evidence linking the Uyghurs to al-Qaeda, the Chinese government easily detained 1,295 people for suspicion in taking part of the separatist movements. The Chinese government, along with the international community, targeted the Uyghurs because of their religion, an important aspect of their identity. During this time period, about twenty Uyghurs were captured by the United States Military after its invasion of Afghanistan and were imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay without any charge of offense (Cunningham 2012: 14). Due to their religion, the Uyghurs were assumed to be dangerous and they were removed from society because they were jailed, even though they were attempting to achieve independence through the separatist movements. In 1981, a group of Sinhalese nationalists, which included police and government sponsored paramilitias, burned down the Jaffna Public Library, home to important works of Tamil writers and dramatists. This action represented the desire to remove Tamil history and culture from Sri Lanka. Tamil businesses, a Hindu temple, and a local newspaper were also destroyed. Statues of Tamil cultural and religious figures were defaced and demolished (Bhattacharji 2009). The government did not hesitate in the destruction of all things Tamil, but encouraged it by siding with the Sinhalese nationalists. Actions as such foster a deep resentment from the ethnic minorities to the ethnic majorities because they understand that the government’s actions are intentional and

are meant to break down their identity and community. As a result of this, separatist movements grow.

The Separatist Movements

A separatist movement is the product of a long-time internal struggle within the minority's country due to multiple factors such as disenfranchisement or stripping of culture and values (Jenne 2007: 541). Both the Sinhalese and the Han Chinese riddled of characteristics that form the collective identity of the minority Tamil and Uyghurs. The Tamils were not a part of the government as they were disenfranchised and the Uyghurs were forced to reject their culture. The argument for independence is based around the ethnic homogeneity within a particular region. The Uyghurs mainly reside in the western region of China in Xinjiang and the Tamils live primarily in the north and east of Sri Lanka. Both ethnic minorities are located in a concentrated area of the countries they inhabit which leads them to fight for independence on the land they reside on. The East Turkestan Movement (EITM) is the Muslim separatist group founded by militant Uyghurs whose main goal is forming an independent state called East Turkestan. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), or the Tamil Tigers, is the militant separatist group with 7,000 to 15,000 armed personnel. Similar to that of the EITM, the objective of the LTTE is to create a homeland for the ethnic Tamils (Bhattacharji 2009). These separatist groups turned to violence as a form of retaliation against their respective governments in order to regain power. EITM has been blamed for more than two hundred violent incidents between 1990 and 2001, including bombing buses, markets, and government institutions (Xu 2014). The Tamil Tigers are credited for creating the suicide bomb jackets with which they costed more than 70,000 lives

with over 200 suicide attacks (Bhattacharji 2009). They have targeted public transportation, holy Buddhist sites, and office buildings occupied by the Sinhalese majority. The rise in resistance and retaliation from the separatist groups are due to the cultural repression, corruption, and police abuses by the ethnic majority governments.

Conclusion

The fight for independence is correlated with the struggle for power. Both the Uyghurs and the Tamils were and continue to be undermined by the ethnic majority power held in the governments. The Uyghurs and Tamils were forced to physically detach from their culture through the use of legislation enacted by the government under the influence of the ethnic majority sentiment. These policies denied the minorities of rights or any influence over the land they inhabit, and ultimately excluded them from aspects of public life. Together, the ethnic majority and the central governments indirectly caused these violent separatist movements they are trying to impede. As expressed by the theories, the Uyghurs and the Tamils are both responding similarly to the nationalism posed onto them by the Han Chinese and Sinhalese and reacting to their government's treatment. These separatist movements are not solely a call for independence, but a statement about identity.

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