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PROBLEMS OF VIOLENCE AND DEMOCRACY IN DIVIDED SOCIETIES

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South Africa is no more unique in coping with problems of inter-group violence and conflict, whether they be of religious, racial or ethnic variety, than countries such as Lebanon, Israel, Cyprus, Sudan, Northern Ireland, etc. This is the unanimous conclusion of international academic experts who met from 20 to 28 March 1983 in Freiburg, West Germany, at a workshop arranged by the European Centre for Political Research.

I was privileged to participate in this workshop which included four academics from Lebanon, one West Bank Palestinian, two Israelis, a Protestant and a Catholic from Northern Ireland, two South Africans as well as well-known analysts of Southern Africa and divided societies such as Arend Lijphart, Theo Hanf, and Heribert Adam. The theme of the workshop was "Violence and Conflict Regulation in Divided Societies" and a sub-theme was whether democratic government could exist successfully and with stability in such societies. What was most impressive was the extensive factual research of these academics, the absence of any ideological outbidding or moral holier-than-thou-ness and particularly their ability to avoid that old social science

temptation and that is to make too few theoretical assumptions cover too wide an area of social and political reality.

Divided societies are called such because, inter alia, there is a cultural, religious and/or racial diversity in the composition of the population; group domination appears to be almost an endemic political problem to be coped with and hence conventional majoritarian democratic principles do not seem to successfully reduce inter-group conflict and competition; finally, the political cleavages tend to spill over into the social life and the market place. This must, by no means, be seen as implying that divided societies do not have ordinary political groups of a non-racial, non-ethnic or non-religious variety. They do, but the nature of political competition has a definitely higher conflict potential because groups deliberately mobilize on a racial, ethnic and cultural basis. There are more than one hundred such countries in the world today, many of them being in the Third World or developing areas.

Conventional liberal and radical analyses somehow seem unable to adequately come to grips with the intractability and persistence of inter-racial, inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflict in the domestic political context of these societies. Liberals continue to apply individualistic assumptions to these problems whilst radicals continue to regard any group entities other than economic classes with suspicion and as examples of mystification and false consciousness. And yet, Israeli-Arab tensions intensify in Israel

and on the West Bank; Marronite, Drus and Suni-Muslim relations in Lebanon fluctuate between violent confrontation and uneasy truces; Protestants and Catholics look at each other from no-go zones in Northern Ireland; racial and ethnic groups compete for power and privilege in South Africa; and so one can go on. In all these societies violence is endemic as a strategy either to change or maintain the status quo. How do these societies cope with violence and conflict and what is the likelihood of democratization? Are these societies, because of the nature of their internal divisions doomed to perpetual conflict and confrontation? These were some of the questions considered by the workshop.

The first thing to emerge was that in all these societies there was some form of group domination and that there was a variety of strategies used by the dominant group to regulate violence and conflict in these societies. Very often it is the subtlety of control used by the dominant group which undercuts the ability of the dominated group or groups to mobilize effectively. Consider some of these strategies :

- Assimilation - where the dominant group feels confident that it can absorb a minority or minorities into the political system without its position of dominance or control being affected. Whether such assimilation is successful or not is not the issue - it still remains the policy of the dominant group. For example, the Israeli policy towards the Arab minority in Israel; Protestants towards Catholics in Northern Ireland and, in South

Africa, Afrikaners towards the English. Assimilation does not mean cultural or religious absorption but political assimilation into the existing political system precisely because such assimilation will not threaten the position of dominance of the privileged group.

- Partition - This is the opposite strategy to the previous one. The dominant group feels threatened by the possible inclusion of other groups into the political system and therefore attempts to separate them out into partitioned political systems. In South Africa the policy towards Blacks is such an example and Israeli policy towards West Bank Palestinian Arabs is another case in point.
  
- Co-option - In this case the dominant group attempts to reduce the potential for conflict by co-opting elites from the subjected groups into helping to administer the system of political control. It differs from straightforward assimilation in the sense that the subjected minorities do not participate on an equal basis with members of the dominant group in the political system. Various other bases of participation are first created such as own political institutions, separate voters rolls, etc. The clearest case of co-option is the South African Government's constitutional proposals attempting to co-opt certain sections of the Coloured and Asian communities into a new constitution where White domination will still be entrenched.

- Containment - Basically the dominant group does not see any kind of immediate solution to the problem and simply tries to keep the level of violence, disruption or conflict as low as possible. This is clearly the British Government's policy towards Northern Ireland and indirectly the South African Government's policy towards urban Blacks and the use of influx control is a policy of containment.

- Consociation - This is an attempt by different groups in society, each with serious disruptive potential, to work out a political compromise based on consensus and bargaining. The dominant group accepts that its position of continued dominance is unacceptable and in terms of rational self-interest tries to strike a political compromise with other groups. At various stages in Holland, Switzerland, Belgium, Lebanon, Sudan and Cyprus consociational arrangements existed or still exist. It is an option which enjoys a great deal of attention in White politics in South Africa although much more nonsense than sense is spoken on this issue - particularly in the reports of the President's Council.

Of course there are other more crude strategies such as persecution, coercion and straightforward genocide but all those I have mentioned above, with the exception of consociation, are attempts by the dominant group to keep its position of control and superiority intact. This then becomes one of the major contributory factors to the escalation of violence and conflict in these societies. Irish Catholics and Israeli-Arabs refuse to assimilate; South

African Blacks and West Bank Palestinians refuse to be partitioned away. In fact, dominant group strategies for regulating conflict and violence become totally counter-productive to their intentions in most cases. This feature tends to create the impression that violence and conflict are inevitable in these societies. But these problems are often compounded by other intervening factors. For example, there is a difference between minority group domination (e.g. in South Africa) and majority group domination (e.g. Israelis, Marronites in Lebanon, Protestants in Northern Ireland). Dominant minority groups are unlikely to consider assimilation as a strategy whereas dominant majority groups are comfortable with it but less likely to consider partition as a strategy. Also, dominant groups with powerful international lobbies (e.g. Jews in Israel) can consider more daring or controversial strategies with impunity whereas those without such international backing (e.g. Afrikaners in South Africa) run a greater risk. In addition, the vulnerability of a country to external intervention (e.g. Lebanon by Israel and Syria, and Northern Ireland by Great Britain) narrows the viability and options of domestic conflict regulation more than in a country where such intervention is unlikely (e.g. South Africa).

Finally, the strategic significance of a country to one of the major powers (e.g. U.S.A. or Russia) has an immediate bearing on superpower reaction to domestic conflict regulation in divided societies. Thus atrocities on a more limited scale in South Africa, indefensible as they are, evoke a far stronger response than massacres and genocide in Uganda and Burundi.

These intervening factors underline the fact that there are no ready-made or simplistic formulae to establish democratic governments in divided societies. Some academics despair that such formulae are at all possible. Others steadfastly believe that a new political culture of inter-group accommodation is being forged out of the political, social and economic forces of divided societies which holds out the promise of eventual stability in government in these strife-torn countries. Such were the academics gathered at Freiburg at the workshop.

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