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The Geography of Civil Conflicts

Civil conflicts are a reality that still today affects the whole world, contemporary fights indeed are predominantly for civil more than interstate reasons. Civil wars are one of the main causes of death amongst all kinds of violent attacks, as on average more soldiers are killed by their own government than by foreign forces; as a matter of fact, the period from 1954 to 1999 registered that 127 civil strifes killed around 16.2 Million people. Starting from the classification of war participants, we can define a civil conflict as an insurgence conducted between a state and another group within its own borders, and, focusing on the members of the latter, they must have access to means of exerting their independence and play a role in international relations. From the origin of the human kind indeed, people from every part of the Earth started conflicts with their fellow citizens or with neighbors especially for the control of lands and for economic reasons. Of course many other reasons are at the base of so much violence and the aim of this paper is to examine why and when such wars arise. Income shocks are at the base of this examination, they do not include only events that happened within a specific country but more those external events present somewhere else in the world. An article of the Economist in 2003 pointed out that “poverty fosters war and war impoverishes” and it can be explained using data. Starting from the analysis of local GDP per capita, we

can see how civil wars have always been predominantly in Third World countries, with a concentration especially in Central America, Tropical Africa, South-Eastern Europe and Middle-East to Southern-East Asia, and in the same time during the course of the war there has been a tendency to depress economic domestic investments in favor of the growth of neighboring states. The data also suggests that more civil wars began in 1990s than in any other post war decades not as a consequence of the failure of the Soviet Union (as Mearsheimer in 1990 suggested) but due to many issues accumulated during the epoch of the Cold War. Moreover, nowadays civil wars seem to be longer-lasting and more destructive than interstate wars because, more than everything, international structures and rules are unavailable or directly ignored by the groups involved. But this is not the only reason for the duration of a conflict, different kinds of shocks affect the way in which wars evolve within countries over time without being at the source of the outbreak: those can be shocks in agricultural commodities, considered as temporary and limited in scope, or financial crises that might have the highest impact on the event. Of course the situation cannot be the same for every place in which a conflict arises: fundamentally a shock affects zones politically unstable and has lower impact on places naturally less open to trades and to international commerce according to the fact that population in those areas are most of all linked with self-consumption and local production and because change in foreign demand affects less remote locations. That said, we must consider that the geo-coding of events is not immune for bias, as all the other statistics, but nevertheless is showed that an increase in demand of the region's agricultural commodities generally

decreases the probability of a conflict, or more in general we can say that a positive external income shock is going to reduce the probability of the spread of wars in certain zones. Thus, income is still a key-word for the analysis of civil conflicts, many economists indeed underline the importance of money in the worldwide diffusion of clashes. The economic factors are the concrete forces that guide a war, as a matter of fact we can consider them as the reason for the beginning, the whole duration, the conclusion and as the general meaning of what happens between or within states; poverty in particular is an important element on which we should focus to understand the movements of the fights, is evident indeed that countries facing an increase in income have a lower risk to become war zones and on the contrary a decrease in income incites individuals to enroll in rebellions by lowering the opportunity cost of their countries' activities. So, in principle, we can assume that the more a country faces poverty and bad conditions, the higher is the probability to face violent events. But actually, this explanation can result too much simplistic. According to the study conducted by Berman and Couttenier, it is true that larger incomes may decrease the risk of conflict but at the same time a positive income shock might raise the likelihood of conflict by increasing the value of resources to fight over. The control and selling of the natural resources present in a country that is facing a warlike situation, at first can be seen as positive means helpful for the resolution of the crisis but history teaches that in the almost totality of the cases this becomes a reason of an even bigger dispute. When a group of rebels starts an offensive against its own state, it needs first of all economic aims and it will reach them through assistance from neighboring

governments or from ethnic diaspora overseas thanks to the fluidity of borders and the possibility to trade from one place to another, and, as mentioned before, the use of natural resources. This latter happens to be the cause of new uprising because most of the time those are resources that have always been used by the government for personal advantages behind the consciousness of the rioters that now, facing the crisis, started to understand their true value. Usually the debates are on the effectively ownership of the aim, even if they were exploited by the national elite, the reality commits them to the region from where they belong. Moreover, the presence of valuable natural resources makes rebellion more likely and their physical presence in the territory is a good reason to keep the fight ongoing, due to the fact that groups can take great economic advantages from their commerce or from exchanging them for weapons and resources of other kind. At this point, data bring us to the example of what happens in African countries as Sierra Leone and Angola with the trafficking of diamonds. In the first one indeed, a bloody war for diamonds is still going from when, after the concession given in the first time to foreign companies to extract and commerce them, population started to understand the real value of the gemstones. From that moment a violent conflict arised and the rebels took control of almost all the critic zones in which diamonds were available. Some analysts believe that it was not for the prestige that trafficking in diamond would have brought them, but more of that was the need for weapons, scarcely available in loco. Mr. Jakkie Cilliers, the head of the non-governmental South African Institute of Strategic Studies, suggests that "If major powers were serious about ending African conflicts they would halt

the trade in arms. But the major powers produce arms, so they go after diamonds instead. They have a conflict of interest." Moreover, there are sources according to which the income becoming from diamonds are also used to finance terroristic groups in the country but also elsewhere, in order to expand this kind of business. The possession of arms gives them a huge power to control zones and people, enslaving and exploiting civilians for the work in the mines. This is a very important issue because, as in almost every country of Africa, there is a very huge disparity between its apparent natural resources and the overall well being. The main zones exploited or at least involved in a conflict are still today those very rich resources-wise, in almost all of the countries in which petrol is present, for example, conflicts spread way much easier than in the rest of the world. We can talk about the many stages of Iraqi war¹ or the still going on conflict in the Niger Delta². Anyhow, every nation involved or that has been ground for that kind of economies, is in the list of the poorest nations of the world and has also a very low position in the Index of Human Development. We need to underline this ultimate notion, for the reason that there is a correlation not only with poverty but also between this Index and the possibility of the spread of a war. In countries in which many other factors other than income are in a low degree, as for example education, literacy and health, it is noticeable that there is a tendency for young people to join rebels and to

¹ Before the invasion of 2003, the domestic oil industry of Iraq was fully nationalized and closed to western companies, but later it started to be privatized and dominated by foreign firms.

² Up to 80% of population lives below the poverty line. Nigeria is a country riven by corruption at every level. The religious and ethnic are the main sources for political mobilization and the military sought to diffuse ethnic tensions by creating several states.

start an offensive against their own government. Of course, the conditions of the people are not the best if they enter in those groups but sometimes is the only way in which young people can expect something in return. A study by Population Action International shows how the probability for a state to be involved in civil conflicts is strongly correlated in those areas in which the population is younger on average. Between 1970 and 1999 indeed, 80% of civil conflicts occurred in countries where 60% of the population were under the age of thirty and in which the main causes of death are high rates of diseases as HIV/AIDS, between them Nigeria, Afghanistan and Pakistan. “Those kind of problem, say pandemic, has reversed a generation of gains in human development, hitting young and middle-aged adults of all socioeconomic classes and leaving a dangerous youth bulge” (CFR Task Force report on Africa, January 2006). Moreover, it seems that environmental stresses are very considerable for that problem due to the fact that usually youth bulges, especially in zones of sub-Saharan Africa, lead to degradation of forest, water supplies and arable land and for those reasons they may nourish antigovernment sympathies. Another important question to underline is the correlation of civil conflicts with the global climate. Studies of the period from 1950 to 2004 have demonstrated that the probability of new conflicts arising throughout the tropics doubles during El Niño³ years and it was pointed out that indeed the global climate had a role in more than 21% of all civil conflicts, due to the fact that in those areas people face several economic and problems caused by too rigid or too warm

³ Also called ENSO - el Niño-Southern Oscillation, it is a temporary change in the climate of the Pacific ocean, in the regions of South America. The ocean surface warms up by few degrees celsius and it causes inondations in the closer areas and siccidity in the zones far from the costs.

temperatures. Anyway, later studies of Hsiang and Burke for example, pointed out that actually no conflict can be exclusively related to climate, this is indeed only a factor that affects how things escalate and at least can make population more unhappy than it was in other conditions. But geography, in one way or another, seems to have an important role on the spread of fights. The specialist John Gerrard comments on descriptive statistics suggesting that an indicator for the probability of riots is if terrain is favorable to rebels. From his studies we can see how forest and mountains are an opportunity for rebels better than other kind of zones. In conflict episodes around 25%⁴ of the terrain is mountainous and it is due to the fact that in this way rebels have more possibilities to hide and not to be found. Another index of great importance is the geographic dispersion of the population, using Gini coefficient of population dispersion indeed we can see that the concentration of the population is slightly lower prior to peace episodes (0.57) than prior to war episodes (0.6) and that low population density and low urbanization may inhibit government capability. Even if those data seem to be very robust, we can't ignore the fact that civil conflicts never stopped to arise in places not so jagged, and in fact according to Fearon and Laitin global regional location does not matter after all, and, after controlling for the country characteristics, the rate of civil war onset is not significantly different. Moving the focus on more theoretical factors, we can linger of "failed state". As said before, the human conditions within a state are fundamental for the well being of population and consequently the government, and so the failure to provide basic public

⁴ FAO data

services is the seed of violence and disease. It is quite curious to see that all the states that face state failure⁵ are also extremely poor, economically closed and first of all non-democratic. It has been theorized that democratic states indeed will not find them on opposite sides and that at the contrary they will make a common front to fight rebellions. But according to history, this theory cannot be taken for grant because actually democratic states have been always involved in conflicts, whether domestic or with foreign enemies. Democracy does not mean peace and for sure fails to reduce the risk of violence at least in low-income countries. In addition, we cannot argue that Islamic non democratic states are bloodier, many people give the responsibility for violence to forces that are against the western democracy but for real, this is the same democracy that participate actively in conflicts even out of their region. A power as US indeed, is one of the main protagonist of all the wars spread worldwide, and due to the control of a huge military and economic arsenal, controls the trend of conflicts, so much that Small and Singer suggest to abandon the idea of “domestic” war in exchange for the more general use of the word “international. With its work of economic and military aims, US are able to isolate hostile states geographically and to find allies in the regions that can provide bases, because its scope indeed is to promote globalization to have more countries in the so-called “US-controlled world economy”. We may consider anyway that the US has created a kind of “empire” during decades not by conquest or brute force but by invitation or by economic aid, favorable trade relations and training, and special financial arrangement to those countries that were

⁵ CIA's study on 113 case of state failure

already involved in internal fights. It is nevertheless true that countries that have been objects of US diplomatic and military attention are facing now negative value of conflict-cooperative ratios⁶, meaning that nowadays they provide more wars than aims. It can be explained as a colonialism post litteram, from the moment that needy states depend to powerful countries to have aids, and the latter in contrary take advantages from having them under their protection. Those countries are a kind of new colonies also according to the fact that they are composed of ethnically different people located at some distance from the given system member. This brings us to the important topic of ethnicity, not taking into consideration until now but very suitable for the purpose of this work. Nowadays, ethnicity is dominant for the 49.4% in civil conflicts and someone would argue that is one of the main causes of rivalry between and within countries. According to Tom Nairn, ethnicity or religion are powerful forces that allow especially middle-class in poor regions to enforce movements for redress of their subservient status, they are essentially an activation point that permits to endure feelings of deprivation. In the spread of a conflict, we should however consider that people feel more comfortable with groups that share same culture, religion and ethnicity even if they don't agree on the causes of the fight. Ethnic diversity plays a part in promoting civil war in poor and repressive societies but actually it works only until those countries develop economically and improve in rights and conditions. Ethnic factors are so necessary but not always sufficient to trigger a war, Fearon and Laitin pointed out in facts that ethnically or religiously divided countries have

⁶ Haiti, Iran, Iraq, Lybia, Serbia, Vietnam, Somalia

been no more likely to experience significant violence rebellion political reasons: the causes are, again, more based on economics and geographic resources. As a matter of facts, the reason why countries involved in civil conflicts are situated in almost the same places, brings us back to the condition in which those countries are at the level of capabilities and resources and at the grade of foreign influence and intervention in domestic issues.

To conclude this work, is necessary to point out that the effects of geography and exogenous income variation on civil conflicts are both ambiguous. In the first case, we saw how the location in which one country can be found can determine the spread of a war due to, most of all, the possibility to reach resources and also the easiness to keep in touch with other countries. At the same time however, the most powerful countries enter in wars even if they don't belong to that region, and the causes of the fight become more of international economics than of domestic affairs. In the second consideration, it has been showed up how a positive shock decreases incentives to fight due to the fact that improves conditions of population and of course the quantity of money available, but at the same time it increases the "prize" of the rivalry because the resources that can be appropriated by exerting violence grow. More money on instable countries don't always mean improvement, the most of the time population will continue to live in poor conditions while the financial means are used to strenghten the control of opponents or buy opposition. To the very end of this work we can argue that what affects the most the spread of a civil conflict is of course political and economic motivations of the groups within

the country, factors as ethnicity and culture might make stronger the fight and mobilize the masses and external income shocks, as well, have only effect on conflict intensity, not on the reason of the outbreak.

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