Democratizing without Violence in Ethnically Divided Countries: The Case of the Philippines and the Muslim Moro Conflict

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Project Description
In the civil war literature, democratization is associated with heightened risk of conflict. Dominant theories argue that, particularly in the early phases of democratic transition, power-seeking elites use nationalist appeals to win popular support, often portraying ethnic minorities as the so-called “enemies of the nation” and thereby triggering violent ethnic conflict (Snyder 2000). My research builds on the empirical insight that there is ethnic conflict (Snyder 2000).

Research Questions
What are the conditions that generate elite incentives for seeking peaceful relations with ethnic minorities in democratizing countries?

Case Study: The Philippines
Study focus: Government policies towards the Moro minority during the democratic transition period in the mid-1980s

Philippine democratization
1986 People Power Revolution, which ended the Marcos dictatorship and brought Cory Aquino to power. Cory was the widow of the opposition leader Senator Benigno Aquino, who had been assassinated in 1983 upon his return home from exile.

Background of the Moro Conflict
• Moro people (Bangsa Moro): Muslim minority in the Mindanao region (about 5% of the entire Philippine population)
• 13 different ethnic groups & indigenous peoples
• Separatist conflict onset in the late 1960s – Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF)

Martial law years under Marcos
Early 1970s: Army vs. Moro rebels; high levels of violence in Muslim-majority areas in Mindanao
Mid-1970s: Marcos adopts co-optation strategy; 1976 Tripoli Peace Agreement (not fully implemented but divides the separatist movement)
1980s: Government-MNLF relations in the transition period
• No sharp increase in violence (from either side)
• Cory Aquino meets with the MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari, paving the way for peace negotiations
• Minority rights recognized in the 1987 Constitution
• Peace talks begin (not successful)
• Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (1989)

Field Study Objectives
• Identifying the key factors that led the Aquino administration to adopt conciliatory policies towards the Moro separatists during the politically unstable democratization period
• Exploring the conditions that minimize the conflict-inducing effect of democratic transitions

Methodology
Field work in Manila & Quezon City (September-November 2016)
Semi-structured elite interviews (60-90 min) with former government and military officials, as well as established members of the MNLF’s elite cadre, who were actively involved in the peace process during the mid-1980s transition period.

Other interviewees included: Members of former Philippine government peace panels who had negotiated with the MNLF/MILF; Cory Aquino’s close relatives; 1987 Constitutional Commission members; Filipino human rights activists, NGO workers, academics and UNDP & World Bank experts who are knowledgeable about the history of the Moro conflict

Findings
Key factors that prevented conflict onset in the Philippine democratization period:
• Minority mobilization capacity ➔ limited at the time of transition (thanks to Marcos’ “divide and conquer” policy which successfully co-opted some of the Moro rebel leaders) ➔ Muslim separatists were not organized enough to use the moment of political instability to their advantage
• Pre-transition alliances ➔ informal tactical alliance between anti-Marcos opposition forces seeking democratic reform and Moro minority leaders who refused to be co-opted by Marcos ➔ this established a line of communication before the democratic revolution took place; promise of peace honored by Aquino after the transition
• Perceived costs of instability ➔ The newly democratic elite had incentives to avert civil conflict and create an environment of political stability (especially important as a signal to the military mutineers who engaged in several coup attempts against the Aquino government from 1986 to 1990)

Conclusions
The causal link between democratization and civil conflict onset is moderated by contextual factors.
• Non-violent transitions are more likely when...
  ➔ ethnic minorities have moderate mobilization capacity at the moment of transition;
  ➔ democratization occurs through a bottom-up process (e.g. mass revolution), due to (i) pro-democracy forces coming to power with a transformative agenda, (ii) likelihood of a history of cooperation between the new elite and ethnic minority leaders, and (iii) elite incentives for creating political stability & signaling strength to political competitors and challengers.

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