



POPULAR SENTIMENTS AND CONFLICT COMPLEXITY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF HOW POPULAR SENTIMENTS AFFECT CONFLICT DYNAMICS

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the linkage between popular sentiments and changes in conflict dynamics through the addition of new complexities due to particular public opinions. Do popular sentiments add to the complexity of a conflict? How popular sentiment transforms an otherwise negotiable conflict to a non-negotiable one? This paper also explores an additional question, 'Can strong public opinions coerce a government head to ignore more pressing socio-economic and political challenges, and shape her/his policies in tune with the popular sentiments?.'

Keywords: *Popular Sentiments in Conflicts, Conflict Complexity, Conflict Analysis, Conflict Dynamics, Conflict Prevention.*

Introduction

Conflict takes its own course and develops complexities if left unaddressed. It is like a brewing tea seemingly calm on the surface till reaching a point of sudden boiling. Early engagement with the issues driving the conflict is a universally accepted remedy prescribed for substantially reducing, if not completely eliminating, the undesired consequences of a conflict. Prevention, resolution and transformation are some of the approaches to dealing with conflict as advocated by peace and conflict researchers. However, these are applicable at the different stages of conflict: advocates of conflict prevention prescribe efforts before the violent eruption of sentiments (Jentleson, 2000; Lund, 1996); conflict resolution is undertaken to resolve the contentious issues among the parties once the conflict becomes manifest (Wallensteen, 2002; Ramsbotham, et al, 1997); and advocates of conflict transformation contend that issues in conflict can hardly be resolved, but can only be transformed to extract the best possible outcome of a conflict (Lederach, 2014).

At the early stages of a conflict, parties hardly express a desire to resolve or transform the conflict. Rather they purposefully engage in escalating the conflict believing that they will outwit the other. The lack of will to prevent / resolve and the propensity for pursuing the conflict characterize the early stages. Parties' belief in victory increases substantially when they possess hard military power regardless of the palpable asymmetry in military strength between them. In very many cases, popular sentiments also have an impact on the escalation / de-escalation of conflicts.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the impact of popular sentiments on conflict. Whether the emerging sentiments aggravate the contentious issues thus adding more complexities to a seemingly non-negotiable conflict? Does popular sentiment shut the window of a possible dialogue between conflicting parties and make the conflict non-negotiable? This paper also intends to find the answer to 'Can strong public opinions coerce a government to ignore more pressing socio-economic and political challenges, and shape her/his policies in tune with the popular sentiments?'

The paper is divided into four sections. The first section offers a critical appraisal of the conceptual aspects of conflict through a review of existing literature. The second section summarises the methodological approach adopted for conducting this study. The third section discusses some selected



case studies where popular sentiments have an impact on conflicts. And the final section offers concluding remarks including the recommendations.

Understanding what is a Conflict

In very simple terms, conflict is equivalent to incompatibility of goals between two persons or group. Parties in conflict are said to be pursuing the same goals: they are fighting, covertly or overtly, for the same limited available resources. Such incompatibility arises when parties do not want to share the resource(s) but want completely for themselves or for their people. Since the parties want to achieve the same goals there is always the likelihood of them engaging in conflict with each other. They prevent each other from achieving their objectives, partly, because of the perception of pursuing divergent interests (Jeong, 2008:5). Boulding defines conflict as a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power, and resources (Boulding, 1962:5). Galtung notes that deep inside every conflict is a contradiction which he further explains in terms of something standing in the way of something else (Galtung, 1996: 70). Conflict throws significant challenge to the existing norms, rules of decision making, and relationships. The term is often contrasted with dispute as very many times people tend to use these terms synonymously. Burton makes a clear distinction between dispute and conflict: dispute is concerned with management issues and the control of discontent in relation to implementing certain policies whereas conflict challenges the status quo (Burton, 1990). Dispute particularly questions the unfairness in authoritative decision making but not the legitimacy unlike conflict which questions the legitimacy of a particular policy related to resource distribution not the decision-making process as unfair.

For developing a better understanding of the concept of conflict, it is important to glance through the scholarly debates over conflict. Why is it important? In general, conflict is often associated with negative connotations. Conflict invokes war / violence. And the preferred mode of resolving the conflict or restoring peace has been war. This is also how a common man's understanding associated with conflict manifests. But some path breaking research has dispelled this notion about conflict. Conflict is an indispensable part of human existence. As long as the humans exist on the planet conflict will manifest in one form or another. Scholars like Mary Parker Follet and Morton Deutsch call for constructive resolution of conflict to create win-win situation for parties to the conflict (Follet, 2007; Deutsch, 1973). Similarly, Louis Kreisberg offers a detailed explanation of how conflict escalates and how it can be resolved constructively (Kreisberg, 2015). Johan Galtung, one of the pioneers of peace research and among the most celebrated scholars in the discipline of peace and conflict studies, asserts that conflict generates energy, and the challenge is how to channelise that energy constructively (Galtung, 1996: 70). Galtung's Transcend approach is very popular in the field of peace and conflict studies.

Scholars like Peter Wallensteen, Hugh Miall, Oliver Ramsbotham, and Tom Woodhouse, have produced high quality empirical research backed by data and case studies for the pacific resolution of conflicts (Wallensteen, 2002; Miall, Ramsbotham, and Woodhouse, 1999). Peter Wallensteen has also produced one of his remarkable works related to the idea of peace and conflict, and what constitutes quality peace (Wallensteen, 2015).

Some scholars, like Micheal S. Lund, Bruce W. Jentleson, Michael E. Brown & Richard Rosecrance, and Connie Peck, have focused more on proactive approaches to dealing with conflicts rather than reacting to disastrous consequences of conflicts (Lund, 1996; Jentleson, 2000; Brown & Rosecrance, 1999; Peck, 1998). Another approach, rather radical, is the approach by John Paul Lederach, who



rejects the idea of conflict resolution and contends that conflicts can only be transformed and resolution is a distant possibility as this idea is peppered with many inconsistencies (Lederach, 2014).

Types of Conflict or Levels of Analysis

In understanding a conflict, it is imperative to understand the types of conflicts through an assessment of conflict typologies. Conflicts occur at many levels: intrapersonal, interpersonal, intrastate, and interstate levels. At the intrapersonal level, a person grapples with his/her own contradictions within; the contradiction may relate to certain decisions and which goals to pursue out of many. This, however, has hardly any direct implication on the society as a whole but this becomes significant in case the person holds any key political or governmental decisions. He/she may face dilemma over certain choices and thus engender a conflicting situation at the intrapersonal level. At this level, personal attitude is very significant in terms of how it transforms into a particular behaviour.

When two or more individuals engage in pursuing the same goal, the conflict manifests at the interpersonal level. Their needs and interests clash, which generates energy between them. Energy has a unique feature of yielding some results: good or bad. That is why Galtung suggested to channelise the energy constructively. At the state/national level or intrastate level, groups with divergent interests lock horns with each over some resources, and aggressively pursue their objectives. In Rwanda in 1994, the world witnessed the mayhem created by two ethnic groups (Hutu and Tutsi) when they clashed violently with each, and rendering some 800,000 thousand people dead in just about 100 days. International conflicts or interstate conflicts occur between sovereign states. Conflicts of this type have dominated the debates for centuries. And such conflicts have caused enormous loss of human lives and property over the centuries. The world is still in the grip of such deadly conflicts, and in many cases, these have manifested violently: the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War, and the recently conclude wars between India and Pakistan, and Israel and Iran. These recent wars have once again brought the interstate conflicts to the centre of world politics. Unresolved territorial disputes and concerns of national security are the major drivers of interstate conflicts. John A. Vasquez, a leading war and strategic affairs scholar, emphasises that disputes over territory have historically been the major source of conflict between states, predominantly between neighbours (Vasquez, 2009:7). Such conflicts set off a train of events (proximate causes) that lead the conflicting parties towards war. War because of concerns over national security has got traction in recent decades. The Iraq War (2003), the Russia-Ukraine War (2022), Israel's pre-emptive strikes against Iran in 2025, and India's attack against Pakistan on May 7, 2025 are some such examples: the later two wars although were limited in nature and their objectives.

Causes of Conflicts

As highlighted above, conflicts occur over incompatible goals or contradiction in the interests of divergent groups or states. The causes of conflict are wide and varied. Conflicts may occur over basic needs, distribution of resources, security, divergent group interests, power struggles, cultural differences, structure of the society, and several others. Sometimes, a conflict may occur over economic issues and other material sources but may transform into a conflict whereby identity becomes the bone of contention between the conflicting parties. The Hutus and Tutsis had long fought for domination of state institutions before the conflict turned into an ethnic conflict in which identity took precedence over all other issues.

The range of causes depend on the nature of conflict. Group conflicts most often occur over the distribution of resources whereas interstate conflicts are driven by concerns of national security and



existing territorial disputes. The ongoing Israel-Palestine, India-Pakistan, Ethiopia-Eritrea, and Russia-Ukraine conflicts are examples of conflict because of territorial disputes.

Burton cites denial of human needs as the cause of interpersonal and group conflicts. In one of his edited works, *Conflict: Human Needs Theory*, he has dealt with the issue of denial of human needs extensively. He explains that one of the important needs for humans is the need for recognition (Burton, 1990:3). This need compels them to seek roles and which in turn engage them in competition for scarce resources (power and position). The urge to seeking roles, according to Burton, is conflict making. What happens in such situations is that powerful groups seek role positions and chase developmental needs, and in the process, they purposefully block the needs of other groups.

Methodological Approach

The author has conducted this study using qualitative approach as it is ideal to develop a nuanced understanding of a complex subject like conflict because conflicts do not happen in isolation but are driven by sentiments, emotions, and human behaviours. This method helps in unpacking the causes of social phenomenon such as conflict. This applies equally to interpersonal, intrastate, and interstate conflicts. Daniel Druckman, a well-known conflict researcher, points to the accepted notion that quantitative approaches miss or mask the nuanced understanding of a social phenomenon (Druckman, 2005:9). Where as qualitative analysis offers a deeper understanding where other methods have clear limitations. Since this paper focuses on popular sentiments affecting the dynamics of conflict, this cannot be aptly captured through quantification.

For this purpose, the paper dwells on available literature on conflict, its conceptual aspects, and existing theoretical debates. It also covers some empirical research to understand the linkage between popular sentiments and change in conflict dynamics and emergence of complexities in existing conflicts.

Insights from Some Selected Case Studies

Human emotions and sentiments play a major role in giving rise to conflicting behaviour. Hobbes' famous "war of all against all" thesis stresses upon human nature and their propensity towards war due to a variety of reasons. Such propensity unequivocally has human sentiments as one of the driving forces. For developing a deeper understanding on how popular sentiments affect conflict dynamics and engender complexities, this paper discusses Israel-Palestine, in particular, and some general inferences from other long-standing conflicts.

Israel-Palestine

For more than seven decades, Israelis and Palestinians are locked in intractable conflict that has further aggravated in recent years. The two-nation theory has failed miserably as they have fought several wars over the decades. The resolution of the conflict seems a distant possibility as the Israeli state, over the years, has resorted to piecemeal elimination of Palestinians backed by its 'Dahiya Doctrine'. The doctrine is name after Dahiya, which is a locality in Beirut, where Hamas has its headquarters. This doctrine was propounded by Gadi Eizenkot, the former Chief of General Staff of Israel Defense Forces (IDF). According to this doctrine, IDF deliberately targeted civilian infrastructure to cause difficulties for the civilians, which in turn, forced them to stop supporting Hamas. Similar tactic of constant bombardment of civilian infrastructure has been deployed by IDF in Gaza to neutralize handful of PLO fighters by punishing the civilians.



At the time of settling Israelis in the Arab land, the tension between Israel and Palestine was not as much as it is today. This conflict, however, is characterized by asymmetry. On the one hand, Israel is a regional power backed by the unflinching support of the US. On the other hand, the Palestinians hardly have a state and an organized military. It is a clear case of David fighting with Goliath.

The world has come a long way since the onset of Israel-Palestine conflict. New technologies of communication and information have brought drastic change across the world. The world is experiencing information warfare for some years now. Claims and counter claims, narratives and counter-narratives impact people's psychology and thereby lead to flaring of sentiments. A lot of content available on social media handles spawn different kinds of emotional and sentimental outbursts among peoples. This applies equally to Palestinians and Israelis. The live videos of destruction and killing undoubtedly enflames human passion and emotions. That ultimately leads to demand of stern action of their respective governments / authorities. Such popular sentiments leave governments in a fix and dilemma over choices: between strategically sound and prudent choice or instantaneous action to mollify the public sentiments. A study conducted by Ayusha Chalise for the Cairo Review of Global Affairs puts forward a detailed analysis of public sentiments manifested through Instagram and other social media outlets. Among the findings, the author particularly highlighted the sentiments expressed in terms of 'solidary for Palestine', and 'solidarity for Israel' which ultimately depicted hardening of peoples' stance and hatred towards each other.

Intractable conflicts, such as Israel-Palestine, develop complexities over time. Several new issues emerge which are totally different from the original cause(s) that spawned the conflict at the first place. Hate through continuous demonization of each other being one. The conflict, in turn, transfuses into a zero-sum game in which outright victory becomes the goal of parties. From the constructive, win-win situation conflicts take a deter toward destructive outcome in terms of large-scale violence and war. The Israel-Palestine is a test case to highlight the sentimental aspects of people on both sides. Provocation and enflaming of sentiments also worked in the case of Hutu-Tutsi conflict in Rwanda. Genocide campaign undertaken by the ethnic Hutus against the Tutsis may not have been the original choice but the emotions and sentimental card played by the radio broadcasts added new complexities and changed the whole conflict dynamics. In a fit of rage, the majority of Hutus took up arms against the Tutsis and butchered some 800,000 people in a span of 100 days, not even sparing the moderate Hutus.

The long-standing conflict between India and Pakistan has also seen instances where public sentiments changed the conflict dynamics and added new complexities which made it difficult to resolve over the years. As it stands, the conflict has become a zero-sum game as these countries are not interested in a negotiated settlement of the conflict. To add to the complexity, Pakistan's use of terror tactics further alienated Indians away from a consensual resolution of the conflict over Kashmir and territories along border areas of these two nations.

Conclusion

The longevity of conflicts makes resolution difficult. A conflict stretched for long periods adds new complexities. Popular sentiments further add to the development of complexities as evidenced by a number of conflict cases. A number of conflict researchers and IR experts have drawn attention towards emerging complexities in conflict due to its longevity. The prolongation of conflict, especially internal conflicts, engender new forms and dynamics of war particularly the criminalization of war – change from ideologically motivated conflicts to armed banditry (Gurr, 2002:48). In long-drawn



conflicts, new complexities emerge also due to poor communication, misperception, hostile attitudes, and misjudgement (Kreisberg, 1998), The hostile attitudes and misperceptions of each other are also driven by sentimental issues across groups.

The chances of resolution of conflicts are higher when parties are willing to engage with the underlying or outstanding issues. Conflicts left unaddressed, or characterized by lack of efforts to resolve, have a tendency of developing new complexities. People's sentiments play a major part in adding to the conflict complexity as new issues will keep manifesting with the passage of time. Peace and conflict scholars, therefore, call for early action or preventive measures so that core issues can be addressed in time before the situation goes out of control. Former United Nations Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali had famously proposed a policy prescription for early prevention of conflicts in the form of *An Agenda for Peace*. In this brief report, he explained preventive diplomacy as “*action to prevent disputes from arising between parties, to prevent existing disputes from escalating into conflicts and to limit the spread of the latter when they occur.*” In this definition, Boutros-Ghali clearly emphasized the importance of taking early action at different stages of conflict in order to resolve the limited issues in conflict rather than taking reactive action when several new complexities become attached to the conflict. It is clearly evident from the existing research and latest trends on social media that popular sentiments play a part in changing the conflict dynamics and adding new complexities to an existing conflict. Governments, if not compelled by public sentiments and opinions, may have the luxury to take decision based on rational choice rather than resorting to reactive strategy and adding further complexities in the existing conflicts.

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