

Amalendu Misra. *Politics of Civil Wars: Conflict, Intervention, and Resolution*

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In *Politics of Civil Wars*, Amalendu Misra undertakes an ambitious project: to explain the initiation, process, escalation, termination, and recurrence of civil wars. His explanation revolves around nationalism and the process of nation-building. The first chapter reviews previous theories of civil war, taking the now-conventional view that neither greed nor grievance is sufficient to explain the phenomenon. This part of the work shows mastery of the literature, both quantitative and qualitative, although discussion of quantitative studies becomes much less comprehensive after the first chapter. It concludes with a warning that poor, autocratic states with “massive regional imbalances” and corrupt leaders are most likely to fall victim to civil wars. The next chapter argues that civil wars mark a failure of the process of nationalism and hence are a natural feature of evolving societies. Misra implies that civil war is simply inevitable as new nation-states mature:

Creating a successful nation . . . always extracts immense amounts of suffering and sacrifice from the citizenry of that state. Eventually, in a few rare occasions, a handful of polities ever manage to realise this undertaking. However, those that do nonetheless go through bloody periods of extreme levels of violence and conflict. (p. 43)

The third chapter deals with the expansion of violence. Oddly, this chapter appears to be only tangentially related to civil war as such, ignoring limited civil wars and focusing almost exclusively on genocides. Indeed, the logic of the chapter suggests that violence always begets violence, making escalation to the deliberate massacre and then genocide of civilians all but inevitable — it is difficult for Misra to explain why most civil wars do not become genocidal in character.

The next two chapters assess the effects of international intervention on civil wars. Misra concludes that these interventions are often problematic but may sometimes be helpful when they are multilateral, combine diplomacy with threats of force, and are undertaken early in the conflict process. Misra links intervention to the process of nationalism and argues that nation-building is extremely difficult and costly.

The final three chapters deal with postwar society. First, Misra seeks to identify which factors contribute to the emergence of postwar democracy and power-sharing. He warns that the pathways of reconciliation can generate new revolts and racist ideologies. Second, Misra assesses the choice between “punish, pardon, or amnesia” as postwar reconciliation measures and advocates truth-seeking and limited retribution. Finally, Misra suggests

mechanisms for interrupting the conflict cycle but concludes that, since no two societies or civil wars are alike (a theme throughout the work), there is no “universal blueprint” for peace or reconstruction.

Two problems mar the work. First, Misra is too quick to make unsupported assertions about history. In arguing that large territory makes revolutionary civil war difficult for would-be rebels, Misra argues that “there has never been any serious attempt to seize the power of the state” in Russia, India, or Indonesia. (p. 24) Surely, the 1918-1921 Russian Civil War and even the 1953 Darul Islam revolt in Indonesia serve as counter-evidence for this hypothesis. The same hasty generalization is found when Misra discusses the well-known commitment problem:

Negotiated settlements always produce a scenario where one group or party is naturally less powerful than the other. In a scenario where the state and rebel groups enter a peace settlement the latter always end up with a lower position of strength in the overall military balance or equation. (p. 99)

No evidence is provided for this assertion that all governments are more powerful than all rebel movements. Second, Misra fails to make specific or testable predictions, often settling for vague statements of little use to scholars or practitioners. For example, Misra argues that both “greed” and “grievance” play a role in civil war initiation — a stand on the position long since adopted by scholars on both sides of the divide. Similarly, Misra waffles on globalization: “While there is some truth in the argument that economic globalization precipitates conflict in a fragile state the opposite can often be true in some cases.” (p. 37)

This vagueness re-emerges in his discussion of nation-building efforts:

. . . the process of nation-building is successful where the post-conflict community is enlightened and capable, where the citizens forego their previous animosity against one another, make sacrifices for the future well-being of all, and embrace the universal values. In the absence of these fundamental prerequisites, it is hard to attempt any meaningful and reasonable state-building. . . . (p. 94)

Few scholars attempt to deal with every aspect of civil war in one study, and this book synthesizes a vast body of literature, drawing attention to unsolved puzzles. Its primary failure lies in its inability to define its core concepts — nationalism and nation-building — precisely enough to make specific and testable predictions about civil wars. Even though it ultimately fails to solve the puzzles it presents, the scope and ambition of the work make it useful as a starting point for those searching for common threads between the different stages of civil war.

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Lust-Okar, Ellen. *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World: Incumbents, Opponents, and Institutions*. New York: Cambridge, 2005.

In her book *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World: Incumbents, Opponents, and Institutions*, Ellen Lust-Okar investigates the conditions under which political opponents take advantage of economic crises to press their political demands. While many studies have attempted to explain the impact of economic crises on political reform by focusing on the nature of the economic crises, the strength of the civil society, regime type, and elite satisfaction, Lust-Okar argues that they have failed to predict when political elites are willing to push their demands for political reform as they do not take into consideration the structure of contestation. Therefore, the main argument of her book is that the structure of contestation, which determines who is and is not allowed to participate in the political arena, explains “both the dynamics of government-opposition relations and when liberalization is more and less likely to be stable.” (p. 5)

Lust-Okar maintains that there are three ideal types of contestation structures within nondemocratic states: first, inclusive, unified structure of contestation; second, exclusive, unified structure of contestation; and third, divided structure of contestation. (p. 38-40) In an inclusive, unified structure of contestation, all political opponents are allowed to participate in the formal political sphere but their participation is controlled by the incumbent elites. In contrast, in an exclusive, unified structure of contestation, no political opponents are allowed to participate in the system. The divided structure of contestation provides a middle ground between the former two types as it allows some political opponents to participate in the political system while excluding others. By focusing on the relationship between opposition groups and the incumbent elites, the relationship between competing opposition