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Nation Building: Why Some Countries Come Together While Others Fall Apart

Andreas Wimmer

Why do some countries fall apart, often along their ethnic fault lines, while others have held together over decades and centuries, despite governing an equally diverse population? Why is it, in other words, that nation building succeeds in some places while it fails in others? What happens when political integration fails is dramatically demonstrated by the current tragedy in Syria. Outside of the Western-media spotlight, South Sudan and the Central African Republic have gone through similar experiences in recent years. In some rich and democratic countries in Western Europe, such as Spain, Belgium and the United Kingdom, long-standing secessionist movements have regained momentum. They may very well succeed, within a couple of years or a generation, to break these states apart. Why, on the other hand, is there no secessionist movement among the Cantonese speakers of southern China or among the Tamils of India? Why has no serious politician ever questioned national unity in such diverse countries as Switzerland and Burkina Faso? Because in such countries, I will argue, three long-term, slow-moving political processes encouraged ties of political alliance and support to stretch across ethnic divides: the early development of civil-society organisations, the rise of a state capable of providing public goods evenly across a territory, and the emergence of a shared medium of communication.

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What is nation building – and what is it not?

Most American policymakers believe that democracy is the best tool to achieve political cohesion in the global South – so much so that many have equated nation building with democratisation.¹ Democratic elections draw diverse ethnic constituencies towards the political centre, or so the argument goes, by encouraging politicians to build broad coalitions beyond the pool of voters that share their own ethnic background. To be sure, almost all states that have failed at nation building and are governed by minority elites are autocratic, like Syria under Alawi rule. Conversely, democratic countries are on average more likely to include minority representatives in their ruling coalitions.

However, this is not so because societies *become* more inclusionary over time after transitioning to democracy. In many recently democratised countries, ethnic majorities sweep to power only to take revenge on hitherto dominant ethnic elites and their followers. Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein showed this clearly: much of al-Qaeda's and the Islamic State's domestic support came from the former Ba'ath elites and from disaffected Sunni tribes that resented having lost the power they had held under Saddam Hussein. Furthermore, some democracies have excluded even sizeable minorities for generations. The United States maintained slavery during the first 70 years of its democratic existence and denied African Americans any meaningful form of political representation for another full century after slavery ended. Democracy and inclusion go hand in hand because countries that are *already* governed by a more inclusive coalition will democratise earlier than exclusionary regimes that fight democracy tooth and nail. In a nutshell: democracy doesn't build nations, but nations that are already built democratise more easily.

There are two main aspects of nation building: the extension of political alliances across the terrain of a country (the political-integration aspect); and the emergence of a sense of loyalty to and identification with the institutions of the state, independent of who currently governs (the political-identity aspect). To foster both, political ties between citizens and the state need to reach across ethnic divides. Such ties of alliance connect national governments directly with individual citizens or indirectly

through political organisations – voluntary associations, parties, professional groups and so on. Ideally, all citizens are linked into these networks of alliances centred on the state, and thus see themselves represented at the centre of power. Even if their favourite party or political patron is not currently occupying one of the seats of government, there will be other ties to powerful politicians of their own ethnic background whom individuals can perceive as ‘one of their own’. In such inclusive regimes, intellectuals and political elites, as well as the average individual, will define the national community in broad terms to include all citizens equally and irrespective of their racial or ethnic background.

Nation building has important and positive consequences. Cross-cutting alliances de-politicise ethnic divisions such that politics is not perceived as a zero-sum game in which ethnic groups struggle over who controls the state. Rather, more substantial policy issues concerning what the state should actually do can come to the foreground. Furthermore, inclusive coalitions foster a sense of ownership of the state and promote the idea of a collective purpose beyond one’s family, village, clan or profession. Thus, citizens of inclusionary countries will identify with and feel loyal to the nation, rather than their ethnic group, social class or region.² Even the best crafted of propaganda mechanisms – flag rituals, the collective singing of anthems, tombs of unknown soldiers – cannot produce such a shared identity. It emerges only when one sees one’s own people in the seats of government. Citizens who identify with the nation, in turn, are less resistant to paying taxes and supporting a welfare state, and are governed by more effective states.³ Even more importantly, inclusive coalitions that comprise minorities and majorities alike reduce the risk of civil war⁴ and promote economic growth.⁵

What are the conditions under which such coalitions emerge? There are ways of analysing the alliances between individuals and the state: organisational, political-economic and communicative. For each of these aspects, a crucial factor can be identified that enables alliances to reach across regional and ethnic divides, generating a more inclusive coalition. Comparisons between Switzerland and Belgium, Botswana and Somalia, and Russia and China illuminate how these factors shape the historical process.

Networks of voluntary organisations: Switzerland and Belgium

The organisational perspective focuses on the institutional form that political alliances between the state and its citizens assume. They can appear in an ad hoc form, as when a citizen exchanges her vote against a politician's promise to implement a specific policy, or in the form of personalised patronage relationships in which the political loyalty of a client is exchanged against the patron's support in the event of a future emergency. They can be fully institutionalised, as in countries with strong, independent parties; or they can appear as networks of ties between state institutions and voluntary organisations such as local political clubs, professional associations and the like.

It is easiest to establish ties across ethnic divides if a dense network of such voluntary organisations already exists. These organisations bundle individual interests, such that politicians or state agencies can connect with them more efficiently. In patronage systems, by contrast, each individual alliance needs to be taken care of separately. Furthermore, voluntary organisations can build horizontal alliances with one another. Local nursing associations in California, for example, can form a statewide coalition. In patronage systems, by contrast, ties proliferate vertically between patrons and clients who in turn become the patrons of other clients further down the pyramid of power and influence. Alliance networks built on voluntary organisations therefore proliferate across the territory and across ethnic divides, while this is less frequently the case with patronage systems, which often remain mono-ethnic. It is easy, to stick with the example, to found a nationwide umbrella organisation of all nursing associations, which might then be tied to state institutions or to a political party that controls the state.

How far such voluntary organisations have developed matters especially in the early years of a country's modern existence, that is, after an absolutist monarchy has been overthrown or a former colony has become independent. If a dense web of such organisations has already emerged, the new power-holders can tap into these networks to mobilise supporters and to recruit political leaders. The political exclusion of ethnic minorities or even majorities becomes less likely under these circumstances: voluntary organisations have often already developed branches in differ-

ent parts of the country inhabited by different ethnic communities. The support base of the new leaders and the leadership itself will therefore be multi-ethnic as well.

This can be shown empirically by comparing Switzerland and Belgium. In Switzerland, civil-society organisations – shooting clubs, reading circles, choral societies and so on – developed throughout the territory during the late eighteenth century and first half of the nineteenth century. They spread evenly because all major regions developed economically and because the small city-states of which Switzerland was composed lacked both the capacity and the motivation to suppress their growth. In Belgium, by contrast, Napoleon, as well as the Dutch king who succeeded him, suppressed these associations. More importantly, Belgian associations remained confined to the more economically developed and more educated French-speaking regions and segments of the population.

When Belgium became independent of the kingdom of the Netherlands in 1831, the new rulers of the country were linked into these French-speaking associational networks. Without giving it much thought, they declared French the official language of the administration, army and judiciary. Individuals who spoke Flemish only were not part of these associational networks and were therefore not represented in central government, despite forming a slight demographic majority. In Belgium, therefore, the Flemish were ruled as an internal colony until the end of the century. Early nation building failed and language issues became heavily politicised later in the century. The country is now close to breaking apart along the linguistic divide.

In Switzerland, the transition to the nation-state occurred after a brief civil war in 1848. The liberal elites who won the war and dominated the country for generations relied on the existing cross-regional, multi-ethnic networks of civil-society organisations to recruit followers and leaders. The power structure that emerged therefore had a multi-ethnic character as well: each language group was represented in the highest level of government as well as the federal administration, roughly according to the size of its population. French, German and Italian became official languages of the state. Language diversity was a political non-issue during

most of the subsequent political history of the country, and remains so to this day.

State provision of public goods: Botswana and Somalia

The political-economy aspect of the ties between the state and its citizens concerns the resources that they exchange. Citizens are more likely to politically support a government that provides public goods in exchange for the taxes, dues and fees collected from them. The relationship between government and citizen is then no longer based on extraction under the threat of force – as was typically the case for the more coercive regimes that preceded the nation-state, such as an absolutist kingdom, an imperial governor or a colonial administration. The more a government is capable of providing public goods across all regions of a country, the more attractive it will be as an exchange partner, and the more citizens will attempt to establish an alliance with it. The composition of government will reflect such encompassing alliance structures and thus the ethnic diversity of the population. Citizens that receive public goods in return for their political loyalty and their taxes are also more likely to embrace the nationalist rhetoric generated and propagated by governing elites and their intellectual aides.

Somalia and Botswana illustrate this second mechanism. When Botswana became an independent country in 1966, its government efficiently created and managed export opportunities for cattle breeders; massively expanded transportation infrastructure, schools and health facilities; and created emergency programmes to address droughts that periodically devastated the cattle economy. These initiatives profited all regions equally, and there is little evidence that bureaucrats favoured their own ethnic groups when allocating these resources to specific villages or districts. Correspondingly, the ruling party gained support across regions and ethnic constituencies, which in turn translated into a parliament and cabinet that showed no signs of ethno-political inequality. This inclusionary power configuration then produced, over time, a strong identification with the state and the Tswana majority, into which more and more minority individuals assimilated over time.

In Somalia, conditions for nation building through public-goods provision were less favourable. After the formerly British and Italian colonies

were unified into an independent state, there was little capacity to provide public goods to the population overall. The rapidly expanding bureaucracy was nourished by foreign aid rather than domestic taxes. When it came to distributing government projects, bureaucrats favoured those who could afford the highest bribe or members of their own clan and lineage. Mohamed Siad Barre's military coup in 1969 changed this dynamic only temporarily. Given the lack of institutional capacity, his regime tried to provide public goods through short-term, military-style campaigns, such as the one to bring relief to drought victims. No durable political alliances centred on the national government could be built in this way. Barre therefore had to base his rule increasingly on loyal followers from his own clan. Those left out resented this ethnic tilting of the power structure. Decades of civil war fuelled by changing alliances among clans and warlords have broken the country into pieces.

Shared medium of communication: China and Russia

Establishing ties across regions and across ethnic divides is easier if individuals can converse with each other in a shared language. This decreases 'transaction costs', meaning the effort needed to understand each other's intentions, to solve disagreements and negotiate compromise, and thus to build durable relationships of trust. Linguistic divides therefore slow down the spread of political networks across the territory of a country. Compare China and Russia from the early nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century. China's population speaks many different tongues, which should make nation building more difficult. However, letters, newspapers and books have been written in a uniform script, allowing individuals from different corners of the vast country to understand one another effortlessly. The Chinese writing system is logogrammatic and, in contrast to European languages, disconnects sign from sound. Until the middle of the twentieth century, Chinese was pronounced differently depending on the actual language spoken by a person. The script therefore is equally accessible to speakers of all the various Chinese languages.

Throughout the imperial period, scriptural homogeneity enabled the national government to recruit a bureaucratic elite through a system of

written examinations administered in all regions of the country, none of which was disadvantaged because its spoken language differed from that of the centre. This ensured that the elite was as polyglot as the population at large. The same held true for the political factions that formed among its members, as men who could not understand one another when speaking could correspond in writing to exchange ideas and form an alliance.

The anti-imperial, republican associations that emerged in the late nineteenth century also had a polyglot membership. After these forces rose to power under the Kuomintang and overthrew the imperial dynasty in 1911, the power structure remained multi-regional and showed few signs of a linguistic tilt. The same can be said of the Communist Party that took power in 1949. Given the inclusive nature of the ruling coalition, no linguistic nationalism ever emerged among the non-Mandarin-speaking groups of the Han majority. The Han were imagined as a multilingual but ethnically homogeneous nation. The dogs of linguistic nationalism have never barked among China's Han majority.

They have barked throughout the modern history of Russia, however, and the empire twice fell apart along ethno-linguistic lines: after the Bolshevik revolution in October 1917 and again in the thaw of Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms around 1989. One of the reasons is that it is difficult to form political alliances across a population that speaks a great many languages of entirely different linguistic stock, from Finnish to German, from Russian to Turkish, from Korean to Romanian. In stark contrast to China, moreover, these languages were also written in different scripts, including in Latin, Arabic, Cyrillic and Mongolian. When the age of mass politics set in during the late nineteenth century, alliance networks tended to cluster along linguistic lines because reaching a literate public through propaganda and newspapers demanded a shared script and language. The popular parties that emerged during the last decade of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth centuries therefore either catered exclusively to specific linguistic communities (Armenians, Georgians, Finns, Poles) or at best represented a patchwork of linguistically confined alliance networks. National consciousness became cast in dozens of separate, linguistically defined moulds rather than in an overarching identity comparable to that of the Han Chinese.

The Soviet nationalities policy after the 1917 revolution cemented this state of affairs by alphabetising and educating minorities in their own language. Their elites were allowed to rule the new, linguistically defined provinces and districts under Moscow's tight supervision. This ensured that clientelist networks formed within separate ethnic compartments. Minorities continued to be heavily under-represented in the party leadership, the highest ranks of the bureaucracy and the army. It is not surprising, then, that the USSR was not able to forge an integrated 'Soviet people' even after it shifted to a more assimilationist policy under Khrushchev. The political field continued to resemble a patchwork of siloed ethnic groups, and the country finally fell apart along these linguistic fault lines.

State formation and nation building

Why are some countries better at providing public goods to their citizens, and why are some populations more linguistically fragmented than others? Both state capacity and linguistic homogeneity appear to be historical legacies of centralised states already established before colonisation and before the transition to the modern nation-state. Where highly centralised polities had developed, bureaucratic administrations learned how to organisationally integrate and politically control the various regions of the state. The governments of newly formed nation-states could rely on this know-how and bureaucratic infrastructure to provide public goods equitably across regions. Over the very long run, such highly centralised states also encouraged peripheral elites and their followers to adopt the language (or in the Chinese case, the script) of the central elites. This promoted their own careers and allowed them to lay claim to the prestigious 'high' culture of the political centre. In pre-colonial Botswana, a series of centralised and tightly integrated kingdoms had emerged, ruled by Tswana-speaking noblemen. Once subsumed and subdued by the post-colonial government, these kingdoms greatly facilitated the provision of public goods by the central state, affording it legitimacy as well as an institutional infrastructure on which to build an administration. They also promoted, throughout the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods, the assimilation of non-Tswana populations into the dominant Tswana language.

In Somalia's history, no centralised polity governing the interior of the country and its nomad majority ever emerged. This was a notable impediment to post-colonial public-goods provision. China's extraordinarily high levels of political centralisation over millennia provided the background for the emergence and empire-wide adoption of the unified script, as well as the assimilation of a wide variety of political elites into the neo-Confucian canons of the empire. Centralised indigenous states, on which colonial rule often rested, therefore provided an important background condition for successful nation building because they left the dual legacy of a bureaucratic-political infrastructure and a uniform language or script.

Beyond case studies: a global analysis

These case studies don't permit the assessment of the differing relative influences of the three mechanisms they illustrate. Somalis, for example, all speak the same language, while Switzerland is linguistically more diverse, yet their two histories of nation building diverge. Compared to Switzerland, China lacked much civil-society development up to 1911, yet a trans-ethnic alliance structure emerged in both.

Furthermore, other factors could be crucial for nation building. Firstly, colonial experience could make a difference. Countries like Somalia and Botswana suffered from the divide-and-rule policies of colonial powers, which could have made post-colonial nation building more difficult in those countries than in Switzerland and Russia, which were never colonised. Secondly, nation building may be a function of economic development. Switzerland had a successful export industry and became an international centre for banking and insurance, while Botswana had diamonds. Somalia and China, by contrast, remained poor agricultural economies for generations. Thirdly, the structure of ethnic cleavages may matter. Where linguistic and religious divides reinforce each other, as in Romanov Russia, nation building might be more difficult than in Switzerland, where speakers of the same language are separated by religion. Finally, nation building may work best where countries have fought wars with other countries, gluing their citizens together by mobilising them for total war and instilling in them a strong sense of national solidar-

ity. Similarly, centuries of boundary adjustments and ethnic cleansings in Europe may have led to more homogeneous populations that are easier to integrate into a national polity. Yet there is not much support for these other possible explanations of nation building. Statistically, countries are not more likely to fail at nation building if they were subjected to colonial rule for a very long time or if that rule assumed a specific form (such as settler colonialism or indirect rule); if their economies are underdeveloped; if they have no history of inter-state wars or ethnonationalist conflicts; or if religious and linguistic cleavages overlap.

The three mechanisms specified above – organisational, political-economic and communicative – turn out to be the best predictors of nation building. To measure how successful nation building has been, one can calculate a country's population share of the ethnic communities represented at the highest level of government. Data is available from 1946 to 2005 and for 155 countries.⁶ The data shows that political exclusion is less pronounced where voluntary associations have spread among a population, where the state is providing public goods, and where the linguistic landscape is more uniform. Literacy rates, strongly influenced by public school systems, measure public-goods provision. The global mean is 65%. Statistical analysis shows that if 80% of the adult population can read and write in a country, the share of the excluded population will be roughly 30% lower than in a country in which only half of the population is literate. The probability that two randomly chosen citizens speak the same language measures linguistic diversity. The global mean is 38%. If the probability is 52%, the share of the excluded population will be about 30% lower than in a country where the likelihood is only 25%. The share of the excluded population is also reduced by roughly the same amount if a society with 12 voluntary associations per 500 individuals – the global mean is four per 500 – is compared with a society that has a negligible number of voluntary organisations.

Finally, the analysis also shows that where highly centralised states had emerged before the colonial interlude and before the transition to the nation-state, contemporary governments provided more public goods and the population spoke fewer tongues. This forms another crucial element of the tectonic view on nation building advocated here. To demonstrate, there are

two useful sources on the history of state formation. The first is available for 74 countries of Asia and Africa whose pre-colonial political structures were documented by social anthropologists. The second, collected by economists, covers 141 countries and measures how far an indigenous state controlled the territory of a present-day country during the second half of the nineteenth century. To illustrate, increasing the share of the population that lived in states (as opposed to stateless societies) before colonisation by 40% increases post-war literacy rates by roughly 9%, and the chances that two randomly chosen individuals in the early 1960s spoke the same language by 17%. The effects are similar if the second data source, which measures levels of state development in the late nineteenth century with an index that runs from 0 to 50, is used. If this index is increased by 12 points, 4% more adults were likely to read and write and there was a 10% higher chance that two citizens spoke the same language in the early 1960s.

* * *

Obviously, the past cannot be engineered retrospectively to create a historical state that would favour contemporary nation building. Nor can a state's capacity to provide public goods be enhanced in a couple of years. A shared language of communication cannot be taught to a population within a short time span. Voluntary organisations around which political alliances coalesce will not take root in a society over the short run. The time it takes to develop these three crucial political factors is measured in generations, not years. Fixing failed states or building nations therefore cannot be done within the time span of an American presidency or two.

Over at least two decades or so, global institutions such as the World Bank have attempted to build the institutional capacity to provide public goods in developing countries. This steady emphasis on governance and capacity building represents a welcome corrective to the more erratic foreign policies that elected governments of Western countries often pursue. A consistent and long-term commitment to strengthening government institutions and making them more efficient at public-goods delivery represents the best international policy to help nation building around the world.

Public goods should be provided by national and local governments, rather than private agencies, foreign NGOs or intervening armies. Public goods provided by outside forces do little to enhance the legitimacy of the national government. According to the *Survey of the Afghan People*, conducted by the Asia Foundation annually from 2006 to 2015, public-goods projects conducted by foreigners are far less effective in creating satisfaction with the national government or in motivating citizens to turn to government institutions to solve their local disputes, rather than to traditional authorities or warlords. It is especially disheartening to find that Afghans think more positively about the Taliban after foreigners have sponsored public-goods projects in their district.

A coherent strategy for nation building must also promote the communicative integration of a country by supporting its unified school system. Countries around the world have come a long way in schooling their populations and teaching them to speak a common language. Continued support for national school systems in the face of budgetary pressures is therefore a meaningful long-term strategy not only to achieve sustained growth and gender equity, but also to foster nation building.

In addition, indigenous civil-society organisations merit international support. Such support can lead to political backlash, as shown by the recent crackdowns on foreign-funded NGOs in many Eastern European countries. But in the long run, such organisations will provide a political infrastructure that helps establish ties across ethnic divides and foster political integration.

Finally, and admittedly more problematically, outside support for groups that fight for a more inclusionary regime and that are themselves built on a multi-ethnic coalition may enhance prospects for nation building in the long run. As history shows, highly exclusionary, minority-dominated regimes like the one ruling contemporary Syria can often be overcome only through armed struggle. Peaceful transitions such as South Africa's are rare. Violence in the present, then, is sometimes the price to be paid for the sustainable peace that political integration and nation building offer. Nothing guarantees, however, that new rulers after a violent regime change will not simply turn the tables, excluding the hitherto dominant groups from political representation in national government. One good example among

many is how Iraqi Shia political elites marginalised Sunni politicians after the American invasion.

Insistence on arrangements for power-sharing, despite all its well-documented flaws,⁷ might therefore still be the best option available for outside powers with some leverage in the local political arena. Few observers today would harbour the illusion that effectuating such arrangements is easy. The difficulties of implementing them against the will of major political forces are well illustrated by the case of Iraq, and perhaps even more dramatically by that of Bosnia, which would have fallen apart long ago if left to its own fate. Policymakers should therefore reject the idea that it is feasible to ‘teach other people to govern themselves’, as a prominent intellectual put it at the height of the nation-building enthusiasm of the George W. Bush era.⁸ To build nations from the outside is next to impossible if local conditions are not conducive to putting minorities as well as majorities on an equitable political footing.

Notes

- 1 James Dobbins, ‘America’s Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq’, *Survival*, vol. 45, no. 4, Winter 2003–04, pp. 87–110; Francis Fukuyama, ‘Nation-Building 101’, *Atlantic*, January–February 2004.
- 2 Andreas Wimmer, ‘Power and Pride: National Identity and Ethno-Political Inequality Around the World’, *World Politics*, vol. 69, no. 4, October 2017, pp. 1–35.
- 3 Pelle Ahlerup and Gustav Hansson, ‘Nationalism and Government Effectiveness’, *Journal of Comparative Economics*, vol. 39, no. 3, September 2011, pp. 431–51; Salwei Qari, Kai A. Konrad and Benny Geys, ‘Patriotism, Taxation and International Mobility’, *Public Choice*, vol. 151, no. 3, June 2012, pp. 695–717; Kai A. Konrad and Salmal Qari, ‘The Last Refuge of a Scoundrel? Patriotism and Tax Compliance’, *Economica*, vol. 79, no. 315, July 2012, pp. 516–33.
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- 6 Wimmer et al., ‘Ethnic Politics and Armed Conflict’.
- 7 Philip G. Roeder, ‘Power Dividing as an Alternative to Ethnic Power Sharing’, in Philip G. Roeder and Donald Rothchild, *Sustainable Peace: Power and Democracy After Civil War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. 51–82.
- 8 Fukuyama, ‘Nation-Building 101’.