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

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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 succeeded in some places while it failed in others? What happens if political integration fails is dramatically demonstrated by the current tragedy in Syria. Outside of the spotlight of Western media, South Sudan or the Central African Republic have had 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 or 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 organizations, the rise of a state capable to provide public goods evenly across a territory, and the emergence of a shared medium of communication.

What is nation building—and what is it not?

Most American foreign policy makers believe that democracy is the best tool to achieve political cohesion in the global South—so much so that many equated nation building with democratization.[1] Democratic elections draw diverse ethnic constituencies towards the political center, or so the argument goes: they encourage politicians to build broad coalitions beyond the pool of voters that share their own ethnic background. To be sure, almost all states that failed at nation building and are governed by small minority elites are autocratic, as Syria under Alawi rule demonstrates. And 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 democratized 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-Qaida's and now ISIS's domestic support comes from the former Baath elites and from disaffected Sunni tribes that resent the fall from the power they 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 democratize earlier than exclusionary regimes that fight democracy tooth and nail. In a nutshell: democracy doesn't build nations, but nations that are already built democratize more easily.

Rather than focusing on free and competitive elections, I will highlight three other political factors that develop more slowly over generations but a crucial for building ties across ethnic divides. Correspondingly, there is much less that outsiders can do to foster nation building over the short run than is often assumed in policy-making circles, as I will argue in the concluding section. Before exploring these three slow-moving political forces, a brief note on how to define nation building is in order.

There are two sides to the nation building coin: 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 organizations—voluntary associations, parties, professional groups, etc. Ideally, all citizens are linked into these networks of alliances centered on the state and thus see themselves represented at the center of power. Even if their favorite 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, 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-politicize ethnic divisions: Politics is not perceived as a zero-sum game in which ethnic groups struggle over who controls the state. Rather, more substantial policy issues can come to the foreground concerning what the state should actually do. 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 propaganda machine—flag rituals, the collective singing of anthems, or tombs of unknown soldiers—cannot produce such a shared identity. It emerges only when one sees one's own kind of people in the seats of government. Citizens who identify with the nation, in turn, are less resistant to paying taxes, support a welfare state, and are governed by more effective states.[3] Even more importantly, we know from past research that inclusive coalitions that comprise minorities and majorities alike reduce the risk of civil war[4] and promote economic growth.[5] What are the conditions under which such coalitions emerge? I distinguish between three aspects of the ties between individuals and the state: an organizational, a political economy, and a communication aspect. For each, a crucial factor can be identified that enables alliances to reach across regional and ethnic divides, generating a more inclusive coalition. To show how these three factors operate in historical reality I will briefly analyze three pairs of country histories, each pair illustrating one of the three aspects and mechanisms. The comparison between Switzerland and Belgium shows how the organizational aspect of nation building works. Botswana and Somalia illustrate the resource exchange dimension of nation building, and Russia and China contrast with regard to the communication aspect. All pairs comprise countries of similar size, ethno-demographic composition, colonial experience, historical age, and economic circumstances, but differ with regard to one of the three mechanisms enhancing nation building.

Networks of voluntary organizations
The organizational aspect concerns 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 personalized patronage relationships when the political loyalty of a client is exchanged against the patron's support in the event of a future emergency; or they can be fully institutionalized, as in countries

with strong, independent parties; or they can appear as networks of ties between state institutions and voluntary organizations such as local political clubs, professional associations, and the like. It is easiest to establish ties across ethnic divides, I argue, if a dense network of such voluntary organizations already exists. These organizations 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 organizations can build horizontal alliances with each other—such as a coalition of local nursing associations in California. Alliance networks can therefore proliferate across the territory and across ethnic divides, generating a nation-wide umbrella organization of all nursing associations, which can then be tied to state institutions or to a political party that controls the state.

How far such voluntary organizations have developed matters especially in the early years of a country's modern existence, that is, after an absolutist monarchy is overthrown (in much of Europe) or a former colony becomes independent (in much of the rest of the world). If a dense web of such organizations has already emerged previously, the new power holders can tap into these networks to mobilize supporters and to recruit political leaders. The political exclusion of ethnic minorities or even majorities becomes less likely under these circumstances: voluntary organizations have often already developed branches in different 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 organizations—shooting clubs, reading circles, choral societies, and so on—had developed throughout the territory during the late 18th and first half of the 19th 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 mushrooming. 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 politicized 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 already existing cross-regional, multi-ethnic networks of civil society organizations 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 the size of its population. French, German and Italian became official languages of the state—again without giving it much thought. Language diversity remained a political non-issue during most of the subsequent political history of the country—and to this day.

Public goods provision by the state

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.

This second mechanism can be illustrated by comparing Somalia with Botswana. 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 programs for the periods of droughts that periodically devastated the cattle economy. These initiatives profited all regions equally, and there is little evidence that bureaucrats favored their ethnic kind when it came to allocate 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, on the other hand, conditions for nation building through public goods provision were less favorable. 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. When it came to distributing government projects, bureaucrats favored those who could afford the highest bribe or members of their own clan and lineage. Siad Barre's military coup changed this dynamic only temporarily. Given the lack of institutional capacity, his regime tried to provide public goods through short-lasting, military-style campaigns, such as for the alphabetization of the nomad population or to bring relief to drought victims. No durable political alliances centered on the central government could be built in this way. Barre therefore had to base his rule increasingly on loyal followers from his own clan coalition as well as that of his mother. Those left out resented this ethnic tilting of the power structure. Pitting changing alliances of clans and warlords against each other, decades of civil war broke the country into pieces.

Shared medium of communication

The third aspect of the alliance relationships between citizens and the state refers to communication. 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.

To illustrate, let us compare the history of China and Russia from the early 19th to the end of the 20th centuries. China's population speaks many different tongues, which should make nation

building more difficult. However, letters, newspapers, and books are written in a uniform script. This script is not closer to any of the various spoken languages and thus allows individuals from different corners of the vast country to understand each other effortlessly. Scriptural homogeneity also enabled, throughout the imperial period, 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 center. This ensured that was 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 wouldn't be able to understand each other when speaking could correspond with each other in writing to exchange ideas and form an alliance. The anti-imperial, republican associations that emerged in the late 19th 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 little 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 multi-lingual, but ethnically homogenous nation. The dogs of linguistic nationalism never barked among China's Han majority.

They did 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 Gorbatchov'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 19th century, alliance networks tended to cluster along linguistic lines because reaching a literate public through propaganda and newspapers demands a shared script and language. The popular parties that emerged during the last decade of the 19th and the first decades of the 20th centuries therefore catered exclusively to specific linguistic communities (Armenians, Georgians, Finns, Poles, etc.). Or they resembled a patchwork of linguistically confined alliance networks, as did the Menshevik. National consciousness became cast in dozens of separate, linguistically defined molds—rather than in an overarching identity comparable to that of the Han Chinese.

The Soviet nationalities policy after the revolution of 1917 cemented this state of affairs by alphabetizing and educating minorities in their own language. Their elites were allowed to rule the new, linguistically defined provinces and districts under tight supervision of Moscow. This ensured that clientelist networks formed within separate ethnic compartments. Minorities continued to be heavily underrepresented in the party leadership, the highest ranks of the bureaucracy, and the army. It is not surprising, then, that the leaders of the USSR were not able to forge an integrated "Soviet people" by shifting to a more assimilationist policy, as they did from Khrushchev onward. The political field continued to resemble a patchwork of siloed ethnic groups and the country finally fell apart along these linguistic fault lines when the ice of totalitarian rule started to melt under Gorbatshev.

The long breath of history: State formation and nation building
Reaching further back into history, we can ask from where the state's capacity to provide public goods and a uniform language come. I suggest that they are both legacies of centralized states already built before colonization and before the transition to the modern nation-state. Where highly centralized polities had developed, bureaucratic administrations emerged that learned how to organizationally integrate and politically control the various regions of the state. The governments of newly formed nation-states could rely on this knowhow and bureaucratic infrastructure to provide public goods equitable across regions. Over the very long run, such highly centralized 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 career and allowed them to lay claim to the prestigious "high" culture of the political center.
In pre-colonial Botswana, to illustrate, a series of centralized and tightly integrated kingdoms had emerged, ruled by Tswana speaking noblemen. Once subsumed and subdued by the post-colonial government, these kingdoms greatly facilitated public goods provision by the central state: they provided it with 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 culture and language.
In Somalia's history, no centralized polity governing over the interior of the country and its nomad majority ever emerged. This represented a notable impediment to post-colonial public

goods provision. China's extraordinarily high levels of political centralization 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. Centralized 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 in the case of China: a script).

Beyond case studies: a global analysis

Quite obviously, these case studies don't allow determining the relative influence of the three mechanisms they illustrate. This becomes evident as soon as we compare across the pairs of cases. Somali, for example, all speak the same language, while Switzerland is linguistically more diverse—and yet their two histories of nation building diverge in opposite directions. Compared to Switzerland, China lacked much civil society development up to 1911—leaving the associations supported by the tiny literati class aside—and yet a similarly trans-ethnic alliance structure emerged. In other words, the *ceteris* refuse to be *paribus* when we compare across a handful of cases only.

Furthermore, other factors could be crucial for nation building. First, doesn't the colonial experience make a difference? Aren't countries like Somalia and Botswana, who suffered from the divide-and-rule policies of colonial powers, disadvantaged in their quest for national political integration compared to Switzerland and Russia? Second, one could argue that nation building is mainly a matter of economic development. Would Switzerland look like Somalia had its export industry not been as successful and had it not become an international center for banking and insurance? Would Botswana have been able to provide public goods so effectively if no diamonds had been discovered in its sandy soils?

Third, it could be easier to build nations in countries like Switzerland, where religious differences and language boundaries do not overlap. In Romanov Russia, by contrast, most linguistic minorities also adhered to a different religion than the Russian speaking and Russian Orthodox majority. If that is the case, ethnic divides could become more politically divisive and nation building more difficult. Fourth and finally, we should perhaps assume a more sober perspective and argue that nation building succeeds where countries have fought many wars with

other countries, gluing their populations together by mobilizing them for total war. Similarly, it could be that European government could build coherent nations because centuries of boundary adjustments and ethnic cleansings have led to more homogenous populations, easier to integrate into a national polity.

To answer these kinds of questions, we can analyze datasets with information on countries from around the world. This helps determine whether any of these four factors might be crucial for understanding where nation building succeeded and where it failed. It also allows evaluating weather the three mechanisms highlighted above work in countries beyond Switzerland, Belgium, Somalia, Botswana, China, and Russia. For such a quantitative analysis, we first need to measure how far nation building has succeeded in a country. To that end, I rely on a dataset that estimates the population share of the ethnic communities not represented at the highest level of government. This data is available from 1946 to 2005 and for 155 countries.[6] Using this data, I can show that political exclusion is less pronounced where voluntary associations have spread among a population, where the state is good at providing public goods, and where the linguistic landscape is more uniform.

To make the results of this statistical analysis accessible, let us compare three sets of countries with each other. To measure public goods provision, I rely on literacy rates, which are strongly influenced by public school systems. If 80 percent of the adult population can read and write in a country (15% above the global mean of 65%), then the share of the excluded population will be roughly 30% lower than in a country in which only half of the population is literate (15% below the mean). To measure linguistic diversity, we can calculate the chances that two randomly chosen citizens speak the same language. If it is 52% (14% above the mean rate of 38%), the share of the excluded population will again be ca. 30% lower than in a country where the likelihood is only 25% (14% below the mean). The share of the excluded population is also reduced by roughly the same amount if we add one more voluntary association per each five individuals.

There is not much support for the other possible explanations of nation building briefly discussed above, as additional statistical analysis with a set of other variables shows. 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 had assumed a specific form (such as settler colonialism or indirect rule); if their

economies are underdeveloped; if they look back on a long history of inter-state wars or ethno-nationalist conflicts; or if religious and linguistic cleavages overlap.

Finally, the analysis of large-scale datasets also shows that where highly centralized states had emerged before the colonial interlude and before the transition to the nation-state, contemporary governments provide more public goods and the population speaks fewer tongues. This forms another crucial element of the tectonic view on nation building advocated here. To show this, we can rely on two different measures of the precolonial 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 data, collected by economists, covers 141 countries and measures how far an indigenous state controlled the territory of a current country during the second half of the 19th century.

Policy implications

Quite obviously, the past cannot be engineered retrospectively to create a historical state that would favor contemporary nation building. Nor can a state's capacity to provide public goods be bumped up within a couple of years. A shared language of communication cannot be taught to a population within a short time span. Voluntary organizations around which political alliances coalesce will not take root in a society over the short run. When it comes to these three crucial political factors, time 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 are best provided by national and local governments, rather than private agencies, foreign NGOs, or intervening armies. These might be more effective from an economic point of view. But public good provisioning by outside forces does little to enhance the legitimacy of the national government. This can be shown using the *Survey of the Afghan People,* which has been

conducted by the Asia Foundation every year 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 even more disheartening to find that Afghans think more positively about the Taliban after foreigners sponsored public goods projects in their district.

A second long-term strategy of nation building is to 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—which in the long run enhances nation building, as discussed above. 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.

Third, supporting civil society organizations, as is done for example by the German party foundations such as the Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung or the Soros Foundation, may lead to political backlash and turmoil. The recent crackdown on foreign funded NGOs in many Eastern European countries has shown this clearly. But in the long run, such organizations will provide a political infrastructure that helps establishing ties across ethnic divides and foster political integration.

The final, but more problematic option for enhancing nation building is to politically support groups that fight for a more inclusionary regime and that are themselves built on a multi-ethnic coalition. As history shows, highly exclusionary, minority-dominated regimes such as in contemporary Syria can often only be overcome through armed struggle. Peaceful transitions such as in South Africa 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 the new rulers of the land after a violent regime change are not simply turning the tables, excluding the hitherto dominant groups from political representation in national government. Again, a good example is how Shii political elites in Iraq marginalized Sunni politicians after the American invasion. Many other examples from around the world could be cited.

Insisting on power sharing arrangements, despite all its well-documented flaws,[7] might therefore still be the best option available for outside forces with some leverage in the local political arena. Few observers today would harbor the illusion that this is an easy to accomplish

task. The difficulties of implementing such arrangements against the will of major political forces are well illustrated by the case of Iraq, and perhaps even more dramatically in the case of Bosnia, which would have long fallen apart if left to its own fate. Policy makers should therefore reject the idea that it is legitimate and feasible to "teach other peoples how 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 and majorities on an equal political footing.

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