



## **CRISE CONFERENCE ON DECENTRALIZATION, FEDERALISM AND CONFLICT**

Department of International Development, University of Oxford  
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### **PANEL V: SPECIAL AUTONOMY AND COMPLEX POWER-SHARING**

#### **1. The emerging practice of 'complex power-sharing' in the settlement of ethnic conflicts**

**Stefan Wolff, University of Nottingham**

##### *Abstract*

The paper examines the institutional designs of several conflict settlements and assess the significance of self-governance institutions and their combination with other conflict resolution mechanisms. Synthesising this discussion, it concludes by outlining the role that self-governance can play as part of an emerging conflict resolution practice that is best described as "complex power-sharing". It is argued that none of the three main theories of conflict resolution fully capture the current practice of complex power-sharing, but liberal consociationalism seems to be the one theory that is most open to incorporation of elements of integrationist power-sharing and power-dividing. Liberal consociationalists and integrationists also share some common ground in terms of the principle of preferential electoral systems. However, the empirical evidence presented in this paper indicates that executive inter-ethnic power-sharing is a component of all institutional designs discussed.

#### **2. The role played by 'power-sharing' in promoting and maintaining the principles of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement**

**Matt Cannon, University of Limerick**

##### *Abstract*

Nationalist and ethnic conflicts are a continuing source of tension in the post-Cold War period. The underlying factors contributing to conflicts include threat perception, ethnic security dilemmas, lack of trust and a desire for regional autonomy between nationalist/ethnic groups. In order to resolve these conflicts the challenge is to find solutions which address the core factors which drive the conflict. Federalism and decentralisation have been highlighted as approaches that could ameliorate the conflict. At the heart of many ethnic conflicts is the concept that devolution of power to one ethnic group is unacceptable to the competing identity. In ethnic conflicts where territory is disputed between different political/cultural identities 'special autonomy' packages in the form of power-sharing can provide an alternative to devolution.

Power sharing can establish trust and reduce the ethnic security dilemma by providing multiple forums of representation, promoting overlapping identities, and pooling sovereignty. An agreement between governments that highlights the need for a co-operative approach to the governance of a region leads to increased access to governmental policymaking, with each party having a stake in government, and leads to a reduction in political tension and conflict. In this scenario former

antagonists are forced to work together and make decisions by consensus turning the former antagonists into partners.

Power-sharing in the form of the British-Irish Peace Agreement (Good Friday/Belfast Agreement) of 1998 presents an opportunity to examine the role played by 'special autonomy' packages in dealing with conflict. The proposed paper will examine the underlying reasons for the emergence of power-sharing in Northern Ireland. The paper will then examine the overall impact of power-sharing in Northern Ireland and the role played by this arrangement in successfully containing ethnic conflict in the region. The paper will address some of the difficulties faced by efforts at power-sharing in Northern Ireland in order to determine whether 'special autonomy' packages could be a viable long-term solution for ethnic conflicts in developing countries.

### **3. Special autonomy as a conflict resolution mechanism: The experience of Southeast Asia** **Graham Brown, CRISE**

#### *Abstract*

This paper examines the experiences of federalism and 'special autonomy' in three Southeast Asian countries: Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia. Of the three countries, Malaysia is politically federal but with a highly centralized distribution of powers, particularly in the fiscal dimension. In contrast, Indonesia and the Philippines are unitary states, but both have also implemented fiscal decentralization measures that afford local governments far greater autonomy from the central government than in Malaysia. All three countries have also implemented 'special autonomy' arrangements - although not always using that terminology - for local governments in regions which, for a variety of historical, political and socio-economic reasons - have been the site of troubled relations with the central government. By comparing these experiences of decentralization, federalism and 'special autonomy', I argue that special autonomy arrangements have largely been a failure in the region due to two related factors. Firstly, special autonomy agreements have almost always been entered into with at best reluctant acceptance by both the national and local elites and, as such, are not seen as a permanent solution to regionalist movements by any of the parties involved. Related to this is the second factor undermining special autonomy, which relates to on-going disputes over interpretation of the 'spirit' of such agreements and the technicalities of their implementation. Crucial here is the fact that once such agreements are entered into, local elites often have few bargaining chips to play against the national government short of the renewed threat of secession or violence. It is suggested that structures of federalism and decentralization appear to be more successful in mediating regional discontent. It is argued, however, that the impacts of decentralization and federalism can only be understood with reference to the particular constellation of local politics in the regions in question. Where local politics is dominated by political 'strongmen', decentralized structures of power appear more open to elite capture and the concomitant entrenchment of often countervailing interests between national and local elites.

### **4. Ethiopian federalism: Autonomy and conflicts in the Somali Region** **Asnake Kefale, University of Leiden**

#### *Abstract*

Federalism is increasingly adopted in multiethnic countries as instrument of mitigating ethnic conflicts. As a result, many multi-ethnic countries, which were unitary and centralist in the past are 'transforming' themselves into federations

through a process, which has been referred to as 'federal restructuring'. Despite the strong promotion of federalism as an alternative way of managing ethnic conflicts, the record of federalism in terms of ethnic conflict management is mixed. The presence of both successes and failures among federations in addressing ethnic conflicts calls for examining how federal restructuring processes change (a) the nature of relationships between the political 'center' and the new ethno-linguistic 'regions' and (b) how provision of autonomy influence inter ethnic or inter group relationships within the new 'ethno-linguistic' regions. This paper, however, considers the second aspect, i.e. the impact of autonomy in changing inter-ethnic relationships by taking one of the nine federating units, i.e. Somali region of the Ethiopian ethnic federation.

### **Comments from the discussant: Matt Gibney**

All the papers deal with the use of complex power sharing and special autonomy arrangements (or both) in deeply divided societies, short of conflict and succession.

The papers together contribute to our understanding of:

the adequacy of the major theoretical approaches to divided societies (in particular, consociationalist and integrationist approaches);

they highlight some key (and often underconsidered actors) in determining whether stability and peace will be achieved;

and they adopt different ways of looking at complex power sharing and special autonomy ranging from an individual case to a virtually global approach.

In my comments I want to pull out—very briefly—what I see as one or two interesting issues in each paper and pose some questions.

**Matt Cannon's paper** reflects on the role, successes and difficulties of power sharing in Northern Ireland in the aftermath of the Good Friday agreement. It is an interesting and insightful paper.

One important issue raised by it runs across all the papers here: the tension between the need to accommodate ethnic divisions for the sake of peace and viability and the desire not to further reinforce and entrench them.

The tension interestingly evident here: because Cannon argues that integrationist pressures from sections of c.society have grown as the success of power sharing in reducing violence has been achieved. This gives rise to a kind of stalemate where integrationist pressures are both generated and hindered by the consociational structure of arrangements and elite interests in maintaining them. As if the structures themselves create unrealistic expectations.

For someone like Cannon who believes that power sharing can only contain conflict, not resolve it, this is a particularly unfortunate state of affairs.

A sense of greater optimism is created by Cannon's highlighting of the role of external actors, particularly the EU in, if I've got this right, providing a kind of a way out of this stalemate.

The EU has made steps in this direction by both encouraging grassroots initiatives that integrate society across ethnic divisions and (though some further clarification

would be helpful here) in providing an arena and identity that is outside the federal structure and state boundaries.

It would be interesting to elaborate more on the EU's role here, and also consider whether its involvement might, while welcomed in some sections of society, be a source of resentment in others? It might be seen as a partisan actor.

**Stefan Wolff's** paper takes a very different approach, though it is also concerned with complex power sharing.

The paper analyses how states across the globe have attempted to deal with self-determination conflicts and finds complex power sharing, albeit in different forms and combinations, very much in evidence. It is an intelligent and impressively wide-ranging paper.

A key observation is that theoretical boundaries between consociational, integrationist and power-dividing approaches are not respected by states in practice as they "pick and mix" to deal with their challenges.

Wolff reaches a number of interesting conclusions about the practice of complex power-sharing—showing how vertical division is often substitutable for horizontal division, but not vice-versa; the importance of safeguards against arbitrary government interference, etc.

It struck me in reading this paper, however, that there is a tension between the author's explicit attempt to show how widely used power sharing is and a more implicit desire to show that power sharing is actually a successful way of dealing with divided societies. But wide use and even agreement on its use by parties to conflict only points to its popularity not its success.

To show the success of complex power sharing we need, as I'm sure Stefan will agree, some clear criteria. I think we then need to look far more closely at individual cases to see the kind of problems and issues that emerge and to assess the sustainability of the arrangements.

It is this kind of close analysis that, I think, brings us to **Graham Brown's** paper.

This paper draws on 3 countries in the SEA region—Indonesia, Malaysia and the Phillipines—to consider special autonomy arrangements.

Brown offers a far more pessimistic reading of these arrangements than Wolff, at least with regards to the chance of long term success.

The reasons for this pessimism emerge from a detailed analysis in the countries in question, stemming from contextual and motivational considerations. According to Graham, the main problem with special autonomy arrangements in SEA is that they haven't been seen by the parties involved as *permanent* resolutions to ethnic conflict. --Instead as temporary arrangements that provide breathing space for further manoeuvring. (stalemate)

He argues that unlike federal arrangements which foster simultaneously a distinct local identity and a common national one, special autonomy leaves intact an alternative and competing vision of the nation state to the rest of the national community.

As there is no real integration of identities at national level, demands for succession are unlikely to go away.

Graham also shows the importance of the character and structure of local politics (as opposed to institutional arrangements) in determining the viability of special autonomy arrangements.

This is a provocative and lively.

I wasn't really clear at the end of this piece, however, about the process by which federalism (of the kind Brown seems to be advocating) might reconcile regional nationalism with a broader and real recognition of membership in a nation state. Are new institutions guaranteed or likely to supplement a distinct regional identity with a multicultural national identity, and thus take the sting out of the regional one? From another angle don't the local states in federal structures also have all the trappings of the n/state he sees so worrying in Aceh—a flag, a governor, a national song (think of Texas)?