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Democratic Institutions and Civil War Outcomes: Case evidence from Sri Lanka

Abstract

Do democratic institutions influence civil wars outcomes? Most scholarly research remains focused on democracies and the risk of civil war. Through this paper, I study democratic institutions and their potential to win civil wars, arguing that democratic institutions imposing vertical constrains can win civil wars in the long term. Not only is it important to ascertain the regime type that is at the highest risk of civil war, but also to identify the democratic institutions that can be instrumental in enabling the state to win civil wars. Drawing from the case evidence of Sri Lanka, I find that democratic states that leverage electoral institutions and suffrage, and enforce vertical accountability, can win civil wars in the long term. I contend that strengthening both democratic institutions and institutional capacity is critical to defeating civil wars.

Introduction

The inverted U-shaped curve that pegs regime type to the probability of civil war has been widely accepted by conflict scholars, and finds that hybrid regimes are at most risk of civil war as their political institutions have characteristics that oscillate between autocracy and democracy (Piccone, 2017). This explains that political institutions are fundamental to civil peace, and further investigation may be deemed necessary to understand which institutional characteristics are not only most conducive for preventing civil wars but also winning civil wars. This paper studies the case of Sri Lanka that won Asia's longest civil war, to understand and ascertain the democratic institutions and characteristics that can increase the probability of the state to win civil wars. In identifying the institutional characteristics, I study the potential

of democratic institutions that exert vertical constrains and vertical accountability on political leaders, and note their influence on civil war outcomes. I also draw out explanations for how democratic transitions in post conflict settings may be fundamental to stabilization.

This paper is divided into five sections: in the first section, I share scholarly research on democracy and civil war risks; in the second section, I present case evidence from Sri Lanka to explain LTTE's formation and approach, and the state strategy that won the civil war; in the third section, I state my theory that democratic institutions imposing vertical constraints through elections and suffrage win civil wars in the long term; the fourth section discusses the theory with substantiated evidence; I conclude in the fifth section.

Section 1: Literature Review on democracy and civil war risks

Several scholars have argued that political regimes that are neither fully democratic nor fully autocratic have a higher risk of political violence (Jones & Lupu, 2018). However, empirical support for the theory remains limited. Jones and Lupu (2018) find that while regimes in the middle are likely to be at a slightly higher risk of civil conflict, the institutional configurations that determine the propensity towards civil conflict, demand a deeper understanding. Some scholars contend that electoral institutions and the representation of diverse societal interests are key institutional factors, while others find that alternative institutional entities such as independent courts or autonomous parliaments are decisive factors (Dahl, 1971; Przeworski, 1991; Hegre et al., 2001; Snyder 2000; O'Donnell 1998; Schedler 2002; Gandhi and Przeworski 2006; Walter 2015). Fjelde et al. (2021) classify the former institutions as exerting vertical constraints on the incumbent, and the latter as exerting horizontal constrains on the incumbent, and find that institutions that exert both vertical and horizontal constraints on

incumbents are most conducive for mitigating civil conflict. In their view, such constraints ensure incumbents make credible commitments to potential agents of rebellion and uphold their commitments (Fjelde et al., 2021). According to Fearon (2011) and Acemoglu and Robinson (2006), competitive elections and extensive suffrage are essential institutional avenues that allow the public to make their majority preference heard, and hold incumbents accountable on instances of transgression, thereby alleviating commitment problems. Further, Myerson (2008) finds that strong and autonomous legislatures and judiciaries can play a critical role in monitoring incumbents' actions and facilitating coordinated action to veto incumbents when they fail to uphold the promise of the office or transgress, thereby alleviating commitment problems. In the absence of credible horizontal constraints, Fjelde et al. (2021) find that incumbents may renege on political promises, thereby undermining the electorate and electoral rights.

Popular scholarly opinion suggests that there is an inverted-U relationship between democracy and armed conflict, but different mechanisms have been invoked by various scholars to explain this (Hegre et al., 2001; Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Gleditsch & Ruggeri, 2010; Mueller & Weede 1990, Hegre et al. 2001). Davenport (2007) establishes a hierarchy, stating that mass-based political institutional components are more important to ensure domestic democratic peace as compared to elite-based political institutional components. Acknowledging however that the impact is larger when both increase in tandem. The author states that institutional components relating to participation and competition impose accountability on the incumbent from the citizens' point of view, whereas independent courts and legislatures impose accountability from the non-incumbent elite actors' standpoint. While this conceptualization rests on the premise that courts and legislatures mostly protect the rights of elite groups, it allows us to reconfigure the hierarchy of institutional features that facilitate

mobilization capacity and are instrumental in forming mass-based opposition, used by incumbents to co-opt and win civil wars (Fjelde et al., 2021).

We understand from scholarly literature that institutional concessions, be it electoral rights or judicial and legislative rights, are essential components of democratic politics that limit incumbent's attempts to monopolize power and observe limits on their authority (Weingast, 1997; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006; Gandhi 2008; Fearon, 2011; Boix and Svolik, 2013). Such institutional concessions are therefore instrumental in helping regimes stay in power, given that are able to dissolve potential threats by appeasing distinct groups of society (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006; Gandhi, 2008; Walter, 2009; Boix & Svolik, 2013). Coppedge et al. (2011) contend that strong institutions are the bedrock of a liberal democracy, but evidence provided by other scholars asserts that both the existence as well as the weight of different institutional provisions may be substantially varied across regime types (O'Donnell, 1998; Slater & Arugay, 2018; Luhrmann et al., 2020).

Vertical constraints in particular are designed to keep incumbents accountable and responsible by transferring power from relatively narrow elites to a majority (Boix, 2003; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006; Przeworski, 2006; Mukand & Rodrik, 2017). Competitive multi-party elections and extensive franchise rights ensure that political leaders align their interests with the interests of their principals – electorates, or face a high probability of being removed and replaced from political office (Fjelde et al., 2021). Cheibub and Hays (2017) and Bartusevicius and Skaaning (2018) find that both competitive multi-party elections and extensive franchise rights collectively provide the citizens bargaining power to extract political concessions, and therefore mitigate the risk of civil war and dissolve civil conflict. Davenport (2007) finds political pluralism to be fundamental to civil peace and notes that regimes that practice political pluralism are less likely to incite anti-regime mass mobilization.

Section 2: Case evidence from Sri Lanka

The Srilankan civil war, classified as one of Asia's longest-running civil wars, continued for 26 years, from 1983 to 2009 (Bajoria, 2009). The premise of the civil war was ethnic conflict between the majority Sinhalese population, constituting approximately 82 percent of the population and the minority Tamil population, constituting approximately 9 percent of the population (Census, 2001). The two groups – Sinhalese and Tamils are divided along linguistic and religious characteristics. The Sinhalese are mostly Buddhists and speak the Sinhala language, while the Tamilians are mostly Hindus, speaking the Tamil language (Anandakugan, 2020). The roots of this contemporary conflict can be traced back to British imperialism. During the colonial period, the British favored the Tamilian population, causing resentment among the Sinhalese population, who consequently strived to marginalize the Tamilians, post colonialism (Anandakugan, 2020). After Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948, the Sinhalese population not only began occupying senior posts in government, but also started drawing policies that would institutionally disenfranchise the Tamilians. The Sinhala Only Act, is one such bill. Passed in 1956, the bill characterized Sinhala as the only official language of Sri Lanka (Anandakugan, 2020). Similar strategies were deployed to improve education opportunities for Sinhalese over Tamilians, and legislators developed programs resembling affirmative action for the Sinhalese (Anandakugan, 2020).

Separatist group LTTE's formation and rise

In 1976, such discriminatory practices triggered the formation of the separatist group, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), commonly called Tamil Tigers, that was a consolidation of a number of Tamil nationalist groups (Bajoria, 2009). At the time, the south, west and central regions of Sri Lanka were predominantly occupied by the Sinhala population, whereas the North and East were a Tamil-dominant territory, and the Tamil Tigers sought to

formally separate the populations along those geographical boundaries by setting up a separate Tamil State – Tamil Eelam (Anandakugan, 2020). The LTTE started an insurgency by conducting low-intensity attacks in the Tamil-dominant regions to disrupt the control of the Sri Lankan government (Haelig, 2017). This was made possible through the support of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) – a political party that legitimately represented the Tamil community, and provided financial and material support to the LTTE (Haelig, 2017). The TULF also mobilized political efforts to negotiate for the independence of the Tamil people but by 1983, in the absence of a political solution, the LTTE abandoned the political movement, and the Tamil insurgency ensued (Haelig, 2017).

A full-scale civil war against the Sri Lankan government through the use of suicide bombings, assassinations, kidnappings and pitched battles was quickly adopted by the LTTE, causing high scale collateral damage (Haelig, 2017). Both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government, largely used military-based counterinsurgency (COIN) measures, with LTTE deploying lethal warfare tactics and conventional military capabilities, and the Sri Lankan government and the Sri Lankan army retaliating with brute force (Haelig, 2017). A unique aspect of the Sri Lankan civil war is the involvement of Indian peacekeeping forces and Indian intelligence agencies as well as the financial support extended by the Tamilian diaspora towards LTTE's budget (Haelig, 2017).

The rise of the LTTE is noteworthy. To have developed combat capabilities that had the potential to defeat state military, as it did many times during the 26-year long civil war, and to have done so with limited manpower, along the constrained space of an island state, positions LTTE as a unique insurgent group that unlike other insurgent groups, neither had state sponsorship nor had access to national resources (Rodrigo, 2019). According to Haelig (2017), the LTTE leader, Villupillai Prabhakaran, ran the insurgent group with three distinct goals – the creation of a separate state for Tamilians; earning a dignified position for the Tamil

nationals; and winning the right to self-determination. Haeling (2017) further explains that the LTTE insurgency combined traditional guerrilla methods with terrorism, conventional military responses and political violence, and targeted civilians, the military and the government, especially using suicide bombers and vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices.

LTTE's structure, strategy and approach

Velupillai Prabhakaran, the LTTE leader, deployed an insurgency strategy that was unique, in that, it persevered over 26 years of civil war. The LTTE positioned itself as a military organization with a separate political wing that looked into recruitment and a finance wing that interacted closely with Tamil civilians to build a detailed database for extortion activities (Trawick, 2007). The framework of the LTTE was hierarchical and pyramidal – Prabhakaran acted as chief but gave sub-group leaders considerable power, and had a two-tier structure of military and political elements (Ziegler, 2017). A central governing committee was formed to oversee the political and military aspects, under the leadership of Prabhakaran, while the subordinates were tasked with gathering political and military intelligence (Ziegler, 2017). The distribution of power was planned and organized, resembling a formal military set up.

The LTTE were able to establish a fully-functioning military – a ground force called the Tigers, a naval force called the Sea Tigers and an air force called the Air Tigers, and what is noteworthy is that the organizational powers were distributed in a way that if one of the branches would be lost to war, the military operations could continue smoothly with the overlapping power structures (Ziegler, 2017). The cadre, the lower level military officers in the LTTE were specifically trained in conducting suicide attacks, bombings and guerrilla warfare against the Sinhalese. Ziegler (2017) further explains that even though the Sea Tigers lacked their own harbors, they launched boats off tractors and trailers, which worked in their favor making such operations mobile and discrete. Similarly, the Air Tigers had limited access to

helicopters, planes and aircraft systems but managed to assert considerable control over the Sri Lankan air space (Ziegler, 2017).

Military capacity notwithstanding, the LTTE expanded their operations into terrorist tactics, complementing and supplementing the military tactics being used, and pioneered the use of suicide vests and belts, and suicide bombers (Ziegler, 2017). Pape (2009) points out that the LTTE carried out more suicide attacks than Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad, accounting for nearly 168 suicide attacks between 1980 and 2000. Additionally, the use of women and children by the LTTE was a unique tactic, unanticipated by the Sri Lankan government.

Furthermore, the LTTE received substantial financial support from India, in particular from the state of Tamil Nadu and from Tamil expatriate populations in other countries that helped LTTE establish a global financial and shipping network (Rodrigo, 2019). Financial support aside, the international network enabled the transfer of infantry weapons, explosives, night vision equipment, and wireless communication systems to the LTTE (Rodrigo, 2019).

The state's challenge

It took nearly three decades for the Sri Lankan government to defeat the LTTE, but there were several military operations, successful and unsuccessful ones, launched in the intervening years. According to Hashim (2010) the Sri Lankan security forces lacked the military, intelligence and combat capacity, and suffered from a lack of institutional coordination and cooperation between the varied security branches, to plan a united fight against the LTTE. Furthermore, divided support from the center meant that the security forces were insufficiently funded and procurement of weapons necessitated engaging in corruption (Hashim, 2010). The politics at the center added another complex dimension, wherein the security forces would be compelled to undertake operations for purely political goals even when the military preparedness was low (Hashim, 2010). The Sri Lankan government was also

unable to counter the global fund-raising efforts of the LTTE and the international propaganda campaigns. All attempts of negotiation and ceasefire continuously failed due to the dire trust deficit between the insurgents and counterinsurgents – where ceasefires were strategically leveraged as rearming pit stops to prepare for the next conflict.

How the state won the civil war

Jalal (2011) points out that to win civil war, a state needs more than military power, it needs popular support. To this effect, the Sri Lankan state began coalescing public support to mobilize domestic as well as foreign resources, by consistently holding elections (Jalal, 2011). The Sri Lankan government conducted elections in both, the Tamil-majority as well as the Sinhala-majority provinces, despite efforts by the LTTE to disrupt such efforts. In response, the LTTE enforced a boycott on participating in elections in their own communities, that negatively impacted their popularity (Jalal, 2011). LTTE's continued efforts to disrupt elections cultivated public disillusionment, and affected public opinion that increasingly began to empathize with the state (Jamal, 2011). Within months of capturing the Eastern province from the LTTE, the state held provincial elections – this was a unique approach devised by a state, given that most states hold elections after an initial stabilization period (Jalal, 2011). However, the state chose immediate democratization over stabilization to avoid public dissent from coalescing.

The state also devised a cultural shift in conventional military operations and adopted guerrilla methods through a new form of combat – Special Infantry Operations (Jalal, 2011). Through extensive training the teams were able to penetrate deep into the insurgent territory and employ hit-and-run tactics against the insurgents (Jalal, 2011). The state was therefore able to apply psychological tactics and specialized warfare to immobilize LTTE commanders.

Given that the large-scale international support for the LTTE granted the insurgency operatives international legitimacy, it became increasingly important for the state to delegitimize the rebel group (Jalal, 2011). Not only was the LTTE at its peak bringing in more than $200 million per year in international financial support, it was also extensively lobbying itself as a freedom movement (Jalal, 2011). However, a series of unfavorable events were instrumental in LTTE losing their legitimacy. The LTTE made a wrong strategic move in assassinating the Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi – given that India was a strong supporter of the LTTE and sympathized with the insurgent group (Jalal, 2011). Furthermore, the 9/11 attacks on the United States, created an environment where there was little tolerance towards terrorism (Jalal, 2011). Taking advantage of the political climate, the state government engaged in diplomatic efforts and facilitated foreign visits to the country, in pursuit of establishing the LTTE as a terrorist organization (Jalal, 2011). The state succeeded in its efforts, and won the support of 32 countries in designating the LTTE as a terrorist network, not only delegitimizing the insurgent group but also cutting them off the vast international financing network (Jalal, 2011).

In an attempt to dissolve the insurgency, the state also took to divide-and-rule tactics, inciting division within the group and were instrumental in the defection of a key LTTE operative that commanded the Eastern province (Jalal, 2011). The state offered the commander immunity from prosecution, and protection from other LTTE commanders in exchange for military intelligence and on-the-ground reconnaissance to defeat the LTTE (Jalal, 2011). Subsequently, they supported the commander in organizing a Tamil political party and named him Sri Lanka's minister for national integration (Jalal, 2011). Nearly 26 years later, the Sri Lankan state government defeated the LTTE in 2009.

Section 3: Theory

I theorize that democratic institutions matter for civil war outcomes and rest this paper on the hypothesis that democratic institutions can win civil wars in the long term. In particular, I argue that democratic institutions impose vertical constraints that are instrumental in winning civil wars. This paper refers to vertically constraining institutions as democratic institutions that facilitate elections and extend suffrage, thereby giving representation to broad societal interests, as well as enforcing vertical accountability. I define my independent variable as democratic institutions imposing vertical constraints and my dependent variable as winning civil wars. In this paper, I find that vertical constraints imposed by democratic institutions ensure that political leaders make credible commitments to separatist actors and extend them bargaining power to negotiate their interests. Conflict resolution therefore becomes a possibility as democratic institutions enforce political action that is in the collective interest of all actors – including insurgents.

In the case of Sri Lanka, evidence on how the State won the 26-year long civil war, substantiates this theory. After several failed attempts to end the civil war, the state used electoral institutional components of democracy to delegitimize the separatist movement and win popular support to defeat the LTTE. The case reveals that democratic institutions through electoral mandates extend an alternative to violence. This encourages separatist actors who have a lower tolerance for violence to choose institutional channels for expressing dissent. Sustained efforts endorsing institutional components of elections and suffrage not only help win popular domestic support but also international support that is beneficial for winning civil wars. I theorize that there is a positive relationship between democratic institutions imposing vertical constraints and winning civil wars.

Section 4: Discussion

In evaluating the state strategy of the Sri Lankan government to win the civil war against the LTTE, this paper finds strong support for democratic institutions and inclusive political processes, as factors that can dissolve civil conflict. Vertically constraining democratic institutions can extend bargaining power to rebel groups to express dissent through democratic channels and voice their concerns through legitimate means. Democratic institutions offer the opportunity to insurgent groups to resolve grievances and hold political leaders accountable to their commitments.

Sri Lanka deployed a four-fold strategy to win the civil war against the LTTE: winning popular support; improving warfare tactics; coalescing international diplomatic support; and employing divide-and-rule tactics. Recognizing that the combination of military strategy and democratic institutional factors made the win possible, I contend that by prioritizing winning popular support over asserting military strength, the state put democratization to test. It engaged in elections in both Tamil-majority and Sinhala-majority provinces, signaling to Tamilians that their concerns would be heard. Engaging in consistent elections, despite the boycott exerted by the LTTE and doing so within months of winning the Eastern province in particular, allowed the state to establish a non-violent alternative for the insurgent actors to consider. This was made possible by vertically constraining democratic institutions that played a fundamental role in delegitimizing the insurgent group, domestically and internationally. Furthermore, by maintaining a democratic status quo and mobilizing democratic institutional elements, the state was not only able to win popular domestic support, but was also able to coalesce international support that was instrumental in labeling the LTTE as a terrorist organization, and impacted LTTE's financial access and resources. With the international support, also came the international media coverage that favored the end of the civil war. It is

clear that had the state only engaged in militaristic power, it would have failed yet again, in the face of LTTE's guerrilla warfare tactics, its vast arms network, its substantial financial donors and the expansive proto-state it had succeeded in building.

By quickly installing democratic institutions and mobilizing democratic instruments, the Sri Lankan government resolved post-conflict instability efficiently and promoted the non-violent alternative at scale. They were therefore able to leverage their political capacity and create favorable conditions to tackle potential public unrest through democratic institutional components.

Section 5: Conclusion

Through this study, I conclude that there is a positive relationship between democratic institutions imposing vertical constraints and winning civil wars. I find that to win civil wars, regimes should focus on strengthening democratic institutions and institutional capacity. A strong state capacity that assures inclusive political processes can reduce the trust deficit between the state and the insurgent actors, and encourage the insurgent group to engage in a non-violent alternative to fight for its interests and preferences. It is essential to note that in strengthening democratic institutions, the state would be well positioned to not only win civil wars, but also to prevent them.

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