The Microdynamics of Conflict Escalation:
The Case of ANC-IFP Fighting in South Africa in 1990

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Abstract

*T*his paper seeks to understand the relation between local and national conflict dynamics by
looking at four arenas of conflict between the African National Congress (ANC) and the
Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) in South Africa in 1990. The analysis shows that what started off as
local conflict often escalated when national actors were brought in, locating agency at both the centre
and the periphery. These insights are in line with other research on the microdynamics of war, offer
novel insights into civil war as a complex phenomenon, and have implications for how we design
conflict resolution mechanisms.

Introduction

In the late 1980s, violence escalated in South Africa with KwaZulu-Natal at its epicentre. One of
the instigators of violence at the local level was the Umbumbulu township leader Sipho Mkhize, a
local warlord. Accounts on his affiliations vary. He was known for engaging in local conflicts on
the base of kinship, political affiliations, and economic incentives, as well as being an Umkhonto
weSizwe member who actively supported the African National Congress (ANC) in subsequent
violence (Mathis 2013, 433–434).

Previous accounts of apartheid-era violence tend to distinguish between factional fighting
at the local level and political violence associated with the national anti-apartheid struggle (for an
overview of this perspective see Guelke 2000, 246-249). However, as the example above
illustrates, such binary categories of mutually exclusive motivations are neither based on real-
world experience, nor useful for understanding intrastate conflict. A growing number of research
reports highlight that civil wars are often a complex mix of local, regional, and national conflicts;
solving but one of them is often not enough in order to achieve long-term peace (e.g. Autesserre
2006; Mathis 2013).

Yale University Professor of Political Science and initiator of the inofficial microdynamics
of war research programme, Stathis N. Kalyvas, understands violent conflict as the result of an
alliance between the different levels of aggregation in which the centre offers the tools of coercion
in exchange for mobilized local support in the periphery (Kalyvas 2006, 365).[4] Therefore,
violence is often the result of a successful centre-periphery alliance.

This paper will explore whether the theory developed by Kalyvas can explain the escalation
of violence in South Africa. By focusing on the microdynamics of civil war, this paper seeks to
explore how conflicts at the centre and the periphery relate to each other through a short case
study of the outbreak of armed conflict in South Africa between the ANC and the Inkatha
Freedom Party (IFP) in 1990. Four expressions of the violence will be studied: (1) the conflict
over black local authorities (BLAs), (2) the conflict in the homelands, (3) the conflict in the

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[4] In this paper the terms national/centre and local/periphery will be treated as synonymous.

townships and squatter camps, and (4) the issue of the so-called "third force" (TRC 1998, 584–585).

Theory

According to Kalyvas, civil wars are frequently interpreted as binary conflicts along an overarching issue dimension, what he calls the master cleavage. This master cleavage is often described in religious, ethnic, or political terms. While this might be the main driver of conflict at the central level, conflict dynamics at the supranational and local levels are a complex and ambiguous interaction that include political, ethnic, religious, and highly private identities (Kalyvas 2003, 475–476).

In many conflicts, actors at the local level articulate their grievances in the language of the master cleavage for strategic reasons. This does not mean that we can infer local identities and actions from the central to the local level. Instead, in the words of Kalyvas, "the distribution of allegiances across the population and the violence that takes place are often (though not always) a function of preexisting local rivalries whose connection to the cleavage that informs the civil war is tenuous and loose" (2003, 479). Individuals often use situations of civil war to avenge enemies or to opportunistically take control over valuable resources. What may appear to be political conflicts inferred from the national level might actually be local power struggles or long-going family or personal conflicts. As the anthropologist Jonathan Spencer notes in an analysis of local politics in Sri Lanka, "people were not necessarily enemies because they were in different parties; more often they had ended up in different parties because they were enemies" (Spencer 1990, cited in Kalyvas 2003, 479).

As a result of this logic, Kalyvas argues that we should understand the micro-foundation of civil war as an alliance between the centre and periphery, where the centre offers the tools of coercion (violence) to local actors in order to recruit and motivate local support and gain access to local knowledge, control, and resources. This enables local actors to win advantages over adversaries they could not otherwise win. Violence is then a form of selective benefit that produces collective action, a resource rather than a means of coercion (Kalyvas 2003, 486). As such, alliances are an interaction between local and national actors, simultaneously a bottom-up and top-down process. While they are not necessarily a cause of conflict in and of themselves, they increase the risk of conflict escalation because they both allow local actors to engage in violence and bring more actors into a conflict that is understood in terms conditioned by the master cleavage (Kalyvas 2006, 381–386). For example, Autesserre has shown that post-settlement violence in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo was often a function of local power struggles between actors who utilized their ties with regional, national, and even international actors to hurt their enemies, widening the scope of conflict and escalating small conflicts into larger ones (Autesserre 2006).

In summary, this paper will treat centre-periphery alliances as the independent variable that drives conflict escalation as the dependent variable by bringing in more actors and mobilizing a larger segment of the population (see also Brosché and Elfversson 2012; Odendaal 2013). Based on this theoretical framework we should expect the following hypothesis to hold true:

Hypothesis: Intergroup violence is more likely to escalate if actors in the periphery interact with actors at the centre and the centre offers the tools of coercion to periphery actors (i.e. a centre-periphery *alliance* exists).

Research Design

This paper will evaluate the explanatory power of the aforementioned hypothesis through a case study of the outbreak of violent non-state conflict in South Africa during 1990. This aspect of the transition from apartheid to democracy has been largely overlooked in previous research, despite the fact that the number of deaths has been estimated as high as 15,000 (Guelke 2000, 241). Even though violence occurred between several actors during the transition period, this paper will focus solely on the non-state conflict between the ANC and the IFP. This dyad was chosen because it accounts for most of the violence during the transition period (UCDP 2013a).

In order to test the hypothesis, I examine the existence of centre-periphery alliances. Alliance is understood as a transaction where actors at the centre supply actors in the periphery with the tools of coercion (e.g. weapons, military gear, police support) in order to gain local support. Four arenas of conflict identified by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) are studied in order to identify the existence of such an alliance prior to the outbreak of violence (TRC 1998, 584–585).[5] The analysis relies on the TRC report along with other, well-regarded secondary sources. As pointed out by Kalyvas, the master narrative of a conflict provides for *ex post* simplification, wherefore the complexities of civil war tend to become less salient over time (2006, 386). Thus, it is worth keeping in mind that we are more likely to underestimate than overestimate the relative importance of alliances.

Introduction to Case Study

During the 20th century, apartheid South Africa was marked by racial oppression and segregation through white minority rule. Popular opposition against the apartheid regime started in 1912 when the ANC was formed. An initially unarmed opposition turned violent in 1961 when the ANC formed its armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, and launched an armed struggle against the government. Following its most violent period between 1981-1988, negotiations began in late 1989 and the violent conflict between the government and the ANC ended (UCDP 2013b).

In 1990 another conflict arose between two non-state actors: the ANC and the IFP. Incompatibilities between these two antagonists dated back to the Soweto uprisings of 1976 when the two groups had forwarded competing views on how to bring down the apartheid regime. By then the ANC had launched its armed campaign, while the IFP founder, Chief Buthelezi, believed in a more pragmatic opposition. Noting the predatory nature of many other African "freedom fighters," Buthelezi viewed the prospect of ANC majority rule with caution (UCDP 2013a). Furthermore, the unbanning of the ANC and its reentry into South Africa threatened the Inkatha support base, culminating with violent confrontations in Sebokeng in 1990 (Simpson 2012, 625). Widespread violence between the actors ceased in 1996 following the first democratic elections in 1994 and the transition to majority rule (Guelke 2000, 241; UCDP 2013a).

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[5] These different expressions of violence were identified as those most prominently referred to in the TRC report. This does not mean that these were the sole expressions of violence or necessarily the most important, but since the ambition of this article is explorative, the four selected expressions serve the purpose of suggesting whether my theory holds promise.

Centre-Periphery Alliance

The following analysis is based on four prominent expressions of ANC-IFP violence as identified by the TRC (1998, 584–585, 627): (1) violence against local authorities, (2) violence in the homelands, (3) hostel and squatter camp violence, and (4) so-called 'third force' violence.

Black Local Authorities (BLA)[6]: Dissatisfaction with the BLAs began in 1983-1984 as poor living conditions sparked protests against increasing tariffs (Kane-Berman, 1993, 37). While these protests were locally rooted, the ANC began to play a key role. According to them, the BLAs were an extension of the apartheid state. Action, both violent and non-violent, against the local authorities became part of an overall strategy aimed at rendering the apartheid state ungovernable. On the other hand, the IFP saw BLAs as capable of improving the lot of the township dwellers. Violence against black councillors escalated between 1985 and 1991. In February 1991 the IFP made a public declaration to protect black councillors through armed resistance, providing them with both traditional weapons and modern arms (Kane-Berman, 37–39). The IFP's commitment to defend these institutions by arming local residents militarized what was originally a conflict over local governance. The path from periphery conflict to centre-periphery alliance and subsequent escalation is well summarized by Chris Hani, the late leader of the South African Communist Party:

> "We [the ANC] moved out to attack the institutions of white minority rule… During this phase many councillors were killed… Inkatha moved in by [recruiting] councillors. An attack on councillors came to be seen as an attack on Inkatha" (cited in Kane-Berman 1993, 39).

What was initially a local conflict became intertwined with the national struggle, bringing in new actors and weapons and thus escalating the conflict.

The homelands[7]: Although low-level political violence was prevalent in the homelands prior to 1990, the unbanning of the anti-apartheid movements in 1990 saw actors within the homelands increasingly involved in the political game. Homeland leaders, political parties, security forces, and BLAs, all with their own political agendas, were now competing for power, maneuvering between dominant players at the state centre (TRC 1998, 613). The ANC needed the operational space provided by the homelands and thus had an interest in securing local support. The IFP, who previously enjoyed strong support in the homelands (particularly Natal), viewed any ANC advancement into its constituencies with growing suspicion.

In early 1990, local actors became increasingly willing to engage in political brinkmanship to assert their power. At the same time, the TRC found substantial evidence proving that the IFP, ANC, South African Defence Force, and regional governments had armed these actors (TRC 1998, 704). While some conflicts were local manifestations of the national struggle, other conflicts were only loosely connected to the anti-apartheid movement if they were connected at all. Allying with stronger actors had become a way of taking control of traditional authorities, resources, and businesses or settling personal disputes (Mathis 2013, 428–433). In 1990, violence

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[6] The black local authorities were introduced in 1982 and were a form of local governance structure for black South Africans similar to those enjoyed by the white population.

[7] Homelands, or *bantustans* as they were also called, were specific territories set aside for the black population as part of the policy of apartheid.

flared in the homelands. What was previously a low-intensity local conflict quickly became a nationalized civil war (Guelke 2000, 241).

Hostel violence and squatter camps: Due to the structure of apartheid, migrant workers from Natal living in single-sex hostels or squatter camps around Johannesburg constituted the poorest and most marginalized labor force (Taylor and Shaw 1998, 14). Township residents viewed many of these migrant workers as outsiders, and the hostile urban environment drove migrants to unite around their common Zulu identity. Abject poverty had already led to conflict and mutual suspicion between migrant workers and township residents during the township unrest of 1974-1975. As the ANC made its reentry into official politics in 1990, IFP leaders identified Zulu migrants as a perfect springboard for penetrating the urban Transvaal and gaining national support (TRC 1998, 628). Squatter camp residents lacked legal rights to the land and thus held only *de facto* control through their ability to defend it. Turning to local warlords who, in turn, sought the protection of the IFP, became a way to maintain territorial control (Guelke 2000, 248–249). Thus, the escalation of violence around hostels and squatter camps in 1990 was, at least partly, the result of local actors trading security for support in a centre-periphery alliance.

The "third force": The "third force" refers to certain elements within the South African security establishment that were involved in covert operations aimed at destabilizing the ANC and fostering national anarchy during democratic transition. This was first disclosed through the infamous Inkathagate in 1991 when it was revealed that the government had secretly financed and armed the IFP (Sparks 1995, 157; TRC 1998, 704). In fact, one of the TRC's most conclusive findings regarding non-state violence was, paradoxically, that the state had been involved to a great extent.

If we understand the covert funding and arming of the IFP by the "third force" as an alliance, this can explain the outbreak of the violence. Prior to the unbanning of the ANC, the IFP had little interest or need for coercive support. Following its conflict with the ANC over constituencies in 1990, this need became more acute.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper set out to explore the complexities of civil war in South Africa by looking more specifically at how centre-periphery alliances can lead to the escalation of violence. Although this paper has not studied the extent to which centre-periphery alliances caused the escalation of violent conflict between the ANC and the IFP, it suggests that such alliances worked as a catalyst for escalating conflict by enabling local groups to engage in intergroup violence and, as a result, draw in more actors. Due to the complex nature of the situation in South Africa during the early 1990s and the limited scope of this investigation, we should be careful in drawing too far-reaching conclusions. Instead, these findings should serve as a starting point for further investigation into the mechanisms of centre-periphery alliances.

A number of observations are worth mentioning. Kalyvas argues that "the locus of agency is as likely to be at the bottom as at the top" and that civilians are not to be treated as "passive, manipulated or invisible actors" (2003, 481). The benefit of this approach is that it explains the complexities of the conflict, especially the fact that violence continued despite national leaders calling for peace, inclusive negotiations, and, eventually, elections and the introduction of democracy (Guelke 2000, 242). This pinpoints the importance of paying attention to local conflict dynamics and micro-level theory as opposed to assuming intentions from the centre alone.

Although I support the efforts made by Kalyvas to link macrodynamics with microdynamics and identify the locus of agency at several levels of analysis, one must not forget that simplification is a virtue when constructing theory. While oversimplification might lead to dubious conclusions, under-simplification risks creating theories that are too complex to be pragmatic. In the words of Magnus Öberg, "[i]n the end, the question is not if we should simplify, the question is which simplifications are most fruitful for the problem at hand" (2002, 68). The challenge for Kalyvas and others concerned with the micro-foundations of civil war is to create a framework through which we can understand the complexities of civil war without creating theories as intricate as reality.

The purpose of this examination was suggestive rather than explanatory, and no definite conclusions can be drawn from the results presented above. With research on conflict microdynamics still scarce, both this paper and more elaborate research initiatives have pointed to the importance of focusing on conflict resolution mechanisms at the local level. Failing to do so could lead to high humanitarian costs resulting from local antagonism and incomplete or unsustainable peace settlements (see e.g. Autesserre 2006, 25). Future attempts to understand what part local actors play in the escalation of conflict should be made, both to increase our understanding of these processes and, hopefully, to save lives.

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