Ethnicity is not Enough: Reflections on Protracted Secessionism in the Third World

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The Cold War had a perverse consequence. It helped to consolidate the political map that resulted from the Second World War and decolonisation. Between the great protagonists, and their lesser followers, it was tacitly agreed that, whatever the principle of national self determination might mean in theory, in practice it was not to be used to threaten the territorial integrity of existing states, or of colonies which acquired statehood as the result of the withdrawal of European imperial power from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific islands. (Mayall: 1990: 55-7) It was so used by those who felt that the post war dispensation ignored their rights and aspirations; but with the dramatic exception of Bangladesh² such threats were to no avail. The ‘end’ of the cold war has revealed the extent to which this dispensation is accepted as neither just nor permanent, not merely within the former Soviet empire but also in many other parts of the world.

It may not be an exaggeration to suggest that we are on the threshold of a period in which the basis of state legitimacy will once again be fiercely contested internationally, as it was in the mid nineteenth century and immediately following the first world war. This prospect gives rise to two questions: what should be the relationship between nation and state, and, as a matter of fact, under what circumstances are national groups likely to persist in efforts to secede from states in which they are currently encased? If the identity of nations (with a potential for independent statehood) was unproblematic, it would be possible in theory (although no doubt difficult in practice) to separate these questions, the one normative, the other empirical. With nationalism, however, everything except the nature of the central claim—that nation and state should coincide—is contested. A rigorous separation is virtually impossible: if some groups just are permanently unassimilable within existing states, then this must have an impact on the legitimacy of the state itself.

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In this article our intention is to raise questions which may help to differentiate between those third world states in which separatism seems to be endemic, from those in which it is not. Such questions cannot sensibly be divorced from the wider political debate about the nature (and justification) of the principle of national self determination, since it is to this that the local protagonists themselves constantly refer. We begin, therefore, by looking briefly at the relationship between nationalism and the contemporary international order.

A Liberal/Realist Consensus

The conventional interpretation of national self determination within the United Nations organisation—that it is an inalienable human right, but one which cannot legitimately be invoked to challenge the sovereignty of existing states—represents a rare consensus between liberal and realist international thought. Historically, the elevation of national self determination to its present position as the primary political principle in international society is inseparable from the attack on dynasticism and, therefore, from the democratic theories which underlay that attack. (Mayall: 1989: 303-4)

Not all nineteenth century liberals accepted the necessity of a marriage between nationalism and democracy—Acton in particular was convinced that it was fatal—but most did. John Stuart Mill argued that where national consciousness and the desire for free institutions developed simultaneously, it was virtually impossible for democracy to flourish if the state contained two national groups of approximately the same size; but he also advanced the view of national self determination as a human right on the grounds that it was impossible to make sense of the idea of freedom if one denied the right of people to choose with which of the various groups of human beings they should associate. The problem with this typically liberal combination of positive and normative arguments was that it appeared to open up a prospect of almost infinite political fragmentation. In a famous passage Mill attempted to cut off this challenge to his theory at the pass: (1963: 549)

Experience proves that it is possible for one nationality to merge and be absorbed in another: and when it was originally an inferior and more backward portion of the human race, the absorption is greatly to its advantage. Nobody can suppose that it is not more beneficial to a Breton, or a Basque of French Navarre, to be brought into the current of ideas and feelings of a highly civilized and cultivated people—to be a member of the French nationality admitted on equal terms to all the privileges of French citizenship, sharing the advantages of French protection, and the dignity and prestige of French power—than to sulk on his own rocks, the half savage relic of past times, revolving in his own little mental orbit, without participation or interest in the general movement or the world. The same remark applies to the Welshman or the Scottish highlander, as members of the British nation.

At first sight, Mill’s argument seems relevant to many embattled third world states. Implicit within it is the belief that education holds the key to the transfer of loyalties from the parochial ethnic group to the enlightened nation-