

## CONFLICT IN DIVIDED SOCIETIES

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### Summary

During the 1990s, the number of communal conflicts grew with the resurgence of deepening divisions in heterogeneous societies. This article understands conflict in divided societies in terms of collective action based on the perception of threats and opportunities. Divisions in modernizing societies have deepened due to inequality in political and economic rewards and institutional access. Groups have to be mobilized for political action, and they can be formed around class, race, and ethnicity. Identity plays an important role in promoting a shared sense of meanings in social life. Many communal conflicts result from the failure to meet the prevailing expectations of modernization and nation building to fulfill the visions of a large political community. Popular mobilization is often instigated by the institutional exclusion of underprivileged social categories. Destructive violence can be managed by creating political mechanisms and processes for accommodation and compromise.

### 1. Introduction

Conflict in a divided society can be understood according to relations between socially defined groups. Identity differences, along with political and economic inequality, constitute an important source of social divisions. Endemic instability and collapse of a hegemonic multi-nation state system follows intergroup conflicts. A heightened sense of group identity engenders the aspirations for and claims to separate political entity.

Ethnic, racial, and religious groups are organized around their shared identity and seek gains for their group members. In pursuing their quest for well-being and power, they draw their strength from cultural bonds derived from a common set of values and customs, a shared sense of destiny and historical traditions. While intergroup conflict

may be ascribed to the rational pursuit of organized group interests, individual anxiety, fear, and insecurity are a fertile soil for the growth of extreme group movements.

This article focuses on social hierarchies based on race, ethnicity and class, group competition, and mobilization. Despite the ethos of modernization, political and economic rewards and institutional access have not been equally distributed among groups. In a contemporary social struggle, communal identity and solidarity is a more powerful factor than narrowly based interests. Ethnic, religious, or racial communities can be organized for collective action, following perceptions of threats and opportunities.

## **2. Race, Ethnicity, and Class**

In recent decades, the number of political conflicts has been growing with the resurgence of deepening divisions along ethnic, racial, class, and religious lines. It is, in part, attributed to the fact that the efforts to build a homogeneous society have largely been a failure in the modern world. The structure and functioning of systems of racial and ethnic stratification are often intertwined with class distinctions, contributing to complications in a modern society.

In class and racial divisions, blacks often constitute the bottom layer of society. In Caribbean and Latin American countries, those in the upper echelons are light skinned whereas those in the lower social ranks generally have darker skins. In Brazil, being black largely means being poor, while blacks advancing to the middle and upper class cease to perceive themselves as black. Social and political hierarchies of the apartheid period in South Africa were based on a racial classification, with whites having greater legal rights and political representations than other racial groups. In the post-apartheid era, while blacks have gained political power, the private economic sector still remains dominated by whites. Even in the United States, despite the successful assimilation of the upper class of minority groups, racial divisions are visible along different income levels.

Political and economic inequalities, associated with ethnic and racial categories and a lack of upward mobility, contribute to social disharmony. In Northern Ireland, for instance, the predominant political and economic power of the Ulster Protestant elite generates the resentment of many Catholics. In Lebanon, the Christians' economic superiority fueled antagonism in Muslim communities. There is an uneasy ethnic balance in Malaysia, where the Chinese control economic sectors and the ethnic Malays have political power. Feelings of deprivation among many Islamic northerners in Nigeria derive from the economic success of the Christian Ibos.

Class and ideological distinctions are often superimposed on ethnic or racial conflicts. Indigenous Indian populations in Guatemala, Ecuador, and Peru belong to the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy as peasants while whites or Mestizos, people of mixed racial background, hold key positions of political and economic influence. Latin America has seen deep-seated peasant resentment against the white-Mestizo power structure. Indigenous populations have been discriminated against, and upward mobility

requires the abandonment of their own culture. Popular protests against political oppression and economic exploitation have taken place over the centuries.

The political and social consciousness of the poor has been raised through various forms of class struggle. It is often the peasant class that suffers most from government repression in internal strife, as peasant communities are seen as a breeding ground for leftist armed struggles. In Guatemala, during the decades of revolutionary insurrection, thousands of peasants in the country's indigenous communities were massacred in the successive military governments' campaign of genocide. Indigenous villages in Peru suffered a heavy death toll during the military's war against the Maoist Shining Path guerillas.

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### Biographical Sketch

**Ho-Won Jeong** is on the faculty of the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, USA, and also serves as editor-in-chief of *Peace and Conflict Studies* and senior editor of *International Journal of Peace Studies*. His current research interests include peace building, environmental policy making and identity politics. He has published several books and numerous journal articles in the field of conflict resolution, development, and environmental issues. Dr. Jeong is the author of *Peace and Conflict Studies: An Introduction* (2000). He has also published three edited books,

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