

Abstract

What are the conditions under which political decentralization instead of preventing can actually foster ethnic violence? Political decentralization is considered to reduce ethnic violence and demands for ethnic separatism, by granting contending groups control over political, social and economic affairs. However, in practice decentralization has been comparatively effective in reducing ethnic violence in some places while in other cases, political decentralization created conditions for violence. While some ethnically diverse regions manage to maintain a veritable record of peaceful relations between ethnic groups, others experience enduring violence. Countries like Aland Island, South Tyrol, India and Indonesia contained ethnic violence by providing politically autonomous regions and devolving decentralized powers to different separatist ethnic groups. On the other hand, there are cases in South Asia, particularly, some regions in Northeast India, northeastern region in Sri Lanka and the northern region in Bangladesh where political decentralization has not produced effective outcomes and in some cases this led to conflicts and recurring ethnic violence. Variation of the relationship between political decentralization and ethnic violence across time and space therefore constitute an unresolved puzzle in the field of ethnic conflict prevention.

Two sets of theories of conflict prevention are applied to understand the relationship between ethnic violence and conflict prevention. One set of theory explains the success of political decentralization as a conflict reducing mechanism while the other set explains the failure of decentralization as a preventive measure. Therefore, the main objective of this research is to analyze the relationship between political decentralization and ethnic violence. With this objective, the research aims to understand the factors that may contribute to ethnic violence in politically decentralized areas and therefore to understand the variations in the outcome of the conflict prevention mechanism. The study has incorporated data from primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include data collected during fieldwork between 2013 to 2015 and briefly in 2016 in Assam, Tripura and Manipur. For the primary sources the study conducted in-depth interviews of political leaders, violence affected communities, officials of decentralized institutions and government officials. Relevant government documents are also used as a source of information. Secondary sources consist of books, articles, and journals. The research is based on qualitative and comparative methods with a sub-national level analysis in a politically decentralized area. As far as the cases are concerned, the study focuses on Bodoland with references drawn from Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao districts in Assam.