

The remit of conflict-framing for conflict-resolution and peacebuilding: a selected comparison of cases in Nigeria, Rwanda, Sri Lanka and Myanmar

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Abstract: This paper examines the implications of framing a conflict for the peacebuilding process given the often divergent perspectives the conflicting parties have of the conflict. In this context, the paper focuses on the framing of armed conflicts in Nigeria, Rwanda, Sri Lanka and Myanmar as civil war or genocide and the implication of this framings for conflict resolution, reconciliation and peacebuilding. It mainly discusses what is framed as the “civil war” in Nigeria and “genocide” in Rwanda and uses both to examine armed conflicts in both Sri Lanka and Myanmar. **The main argument made is that conflict-framing does have implication for how a conflict plays out, its resolution and the post-conflict reconciliation phase**, and as such framing an armed conflict as genocide is useful if it is aimed at informing reconciliation not shaming and blaming. **Therefore, the need to frame the conflict should not overshadow reconciliation**, as findings way to resolve the differences between the warring parties is very important to instituting peace within the society. The paper thus concludes that the aim of framing and understanding the dynamics of a conflict should be geared towards instituting adequate reconciliation that will bring about lasting peace.

Keywords: Framing Conflict, reconciliation, genocide

Introduction

The characterization or classification of conflict as genocide or not, is a function of framing. Framing of conflict helps us to understand, interpret the world around us and organize complex phenomena into coherent, understandable categories. When we label a phenomenon, we give meaning to some aspects of what is observed. Thus, frames provide meaning through selective simplification, depending on the context, frames may be used to conceptualize and interpret, or to manipulate and convince. Putnam and Holmer hold that framing is vital to the negotiation process and are tied to information processing, message patterns. The characterization of conflict may be positive or negative, and parties to intractable conflict often construct characterization frames for others that significantly differ from how other parties view it. Each party to a conflict has its own perception and understanding of the conflict which often requires framing analysis. Framing analysis can be used by third party, parties to the conflict or individual stakeholders to better understand conflict dynamics. It can be used retrospectively (to understanding past conflicts) and prospectively (as a tool for better managing an existing conflict). Retrospectively, it seeks to better understand conflict dynamics in order to learn lessons for the future. Prospectively, it advances consensus building in both the conflict assessments and intervention stages.

Given the above background, this paper examines the importance of framing a conflict in relation to the reconciliation process. It seeks to address the main question of whether we should focus on framing a conflict or resolving the conflict, i.e. is it beneficial to focus on reconciliation rather than conflict framing?

In this context, the paper focuses on the framing of armed conflicts in Nigeria, Rwanda, Sri Lanka and Myanmar as civil war or genocide and the implication of this framings for conflict resolution, reconciliation and peacebuilding. It mainly discusses what is framed as the “civil war” in Nigeria and “genocide” in Rwanda and uses both to examine

armed conflicts in both Sri Lanka and Myanmar. The main argument made is that conflict-framing does have implication for how a conflict plays out, its resolution and the post-conflict reconciliation phase and as such framing an armed conflict as genocide is useful if it is aimed at informing reconciliation not shaming and blaming.

Reconciliation

According to Brouneus (2003) reconciliation is a social process that involve mutual acknowledgement of past suffering and the changing of destructive attitudes and behaviors into constructive relationships towards sustainable peace. Bloomfield et al (2003) assert that reconciliation is an over-arching process which includes the search for truth, justice, forgiveness, healing and so on. At its simplest, it means finding a way to live alongside former enemies - not necessarily to love them, or forgive them, or forget the past in any way, but to coexist with them, to develop the degree of cooperation necessary to share our society with them, so that we all have better lives together than we have had separately. It is both a goal and a process i.e. a goal – something a society aspires to achieve and a process – means to achieve that goal. Every society that has experienced violent conflict needs to ensure that a reconciliation process is put in place in order to address the causes of the conflict, deal with past (addressing human rights violations) so as to open up a new future where both parties co-exist. It is a process through which a society moves from a divided past to a shared future.

Finally, using Lederach's moral imagination to underscore the importance of reconciliation after violent conflict. He describes moral imagination as the capacity to recognize turning points and possibilities in order to venture down unknown paths and create what does not exist. To relate it to reconciliation, it is the capacity to imagine and generate constructive processes that are rooted in the day-to-day challenges of violence yet transcend these domestic patterns. To foster reconciliation, one must understand the dynamics of violence, the consequences and explore how the process can bring about change. Basically, reconciliation is as important as framing a conflict, but the process of reconciliation requires that one understands the conflict. Without understanding the pattern and dynamics of the violence, it would be difficult to generate constructive process that transcend the pattern.

Genocide

According to article II of UN convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide, it is killing of members of a group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of a group, deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction, imposing measures intended to prevent birth within a group, forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. An important clause is the intent to destroy in whole or in part, a national ethnic, racial or religious group. Heorwitz defined genocide as a structural and systematic destruction of innocent people by a state bureaucratic apparatus". Fein defined it as the calculated murder of a segment or all of a group defined outside of of the universe of obligation of the perpetrator by a government, elite, staff or crowd representing the perpetrator in response to a crisis or opportunity perceived to be caused or impeded by the victim. Chalk andJonassohn defined it as a form of one-sided mass killing in which a state or other authority intends to destroy a group, as that group and membership in it are defined by the perpetrator. All definitions have different delimitations, but one constant factor is the intent to destroy, while the UN definition does not enjoy general acceptance, Chalk and Jonassohn argued that the UN definition applied the term genocide to a variety of unrelated situations such as ethnocide, cultural assimilation etc. Others observed that there was a brushing aside to exclude political groups, this was done to secure ratification by member states that feared their internal suppression of dissents might be subject o external interference under the convention. We can go on and on concerning the conceptual dispute of genocide, but it raises the question of why is it so important to accurately define what genocide is, should much effort be placed on framing what qualifies as genocide? The next section addresses this question using two case studies in Africa in order to provide a background on how to analyze the Sri Lanka and Rohingya cases.

Discussion

Framing or reconciliation?

The world has witnessed lots of armed conflict which involves massive loss of lives, destruction of properties and levels of harm within the society. As much as there are loss of lives in most conflicts, they are not all classified as genocide due to the difference in the intent of the parties to the conflict. What differentiates genocide from conflict like civil war is the intent of one party to destroy the other. Conflict must be acknowledged and defined by disputants. It may be difficult, however for disputants to agree on what is in dispute in shared conflict since they may experience, frame the same conflict in quite different ways (Kaufman et. al 2017). Thus, the importance of framing a conflict for the purpose of reconciliation cannot be overemphasized, as failure for the conflicting parties to

agree on framing can negatively affect the reconciliation process. Looking at a conflict in and itself to understand the intricacies as regards what sort of conflict it is, the causes, will go a long way in easing the reconciliation process. As ambiguity of what a conflict is can lead to wrong prescription of resolution mechanism. When a conflict is classified as genocide, it seems it draws benefits for the affected populace, unlike when classified as for instance a civil war. Thus, the semantics of classifying conflict as genocide must abide by the UN “intent to destroy” of one group by another. With comparison of Nigeria and Rwanda we can analyze if it is productive to focus on framing a conflict or go beyond it and kick start the reconciliation process and then apply this to Sri Lanka and Rohingya.

Nigeria

The Nigerian civil war, also known as the Biafran war is to date the major intra-state armed conflict in post-colonial Nigeria. It was waged between July 6, 1967 and January 15, 1970 between the federal military government led by Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon and the Biafran secessionist group led by Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu. It was caused majorly by the announcement made by the south eastern region of Nigeria to secede from the larger entity of the Nigerian state. The war has been tagged many things such as an ethnic conflict seeing as it was implicitly between the Igbo secessionist group (Biafra) and the Hausa/Fulani led Nigerian government, a genocide considering the massive lives that were lost, a personality clash between Lt. Col Gowon and Lt. Col Ojukwu amongst many others. The fact is the political instability in the country (which was newly independent) contributed to the escalation of the conflict. Particularly, the call for secession made by the Igbos was seen as a threat to the unity of the Nigerian state necessitating the FMG to take military action **to defend the unity of the Nigerian state**. The conflict lasted for three years resulting in massive loss of lives, destruction of properties and other major effects within the country. The war ended with the Biafran secessionist suffering major loss, as the number of casualties was recorded at 1-3million either as a result of starvation or killing by soldiers. Famine and blockade were employed by the Nigerian soldiers as a means of warfare against the landlocked Biafran state.

The focus here is not the war itself, it is the classification of what the war is, which is one of the major shortcomings of the FMG which affected the reconciliation process. The FMG instituted the 3Rs (rehabilitation, reconstruction and reconciliation) pronouncing that there was “no victor no vanquished” immediately after the war ended. The proclamation of the 3Rs as the framework for resolving the conflict failed to start from the very first beginning which is understanding of the nature of the conflict. The absence of a panel or commission to investigate what happened, frame the conflict and prescribe how to prevent future occurrence contributed to the shortfalls of the 3Rs. Reconciliation was kickstarted without the need to understand the conflict, the causes of the conflict and framing the conflict. Thus, the inability to focus on the conflict in and of itself created confusion as to what the armed conflict, was it a civil war, was it a genocide or was it political war? These questions took center stage as there was no definite classification of the conflict, finally the tag civil war was imposed on it.

The implementation of the 3Rs was rapid as the country has been drawn into a state of quagmire, it was quite easy for the process to be carried out. The smooth implementation did not translate to positive result as it birthed a forced peace. As known reconciliation is a long-term process that involves collaboration between the conflicting parties, what happened in Nigeria differed from this. There have been questions concerning the efficacy of the post-war reconciliation as not ensuring the re-integration of the Igbos and to have erased the happenings of the war. Before his death, Chinua Achebe published his long-awaited memoir of the conflict, in its closing pages he was dismissive about the official reconciliation claims as according to him ‘the Igbos were not and continue not to be reintegrated into Nigeria’ (Achebe 2012:233). In recent light of genocide studies, the actions of the FMG as regards blockade has been seen as genocidal. As the blockade prevented relief supplies to the starvation-stricken Biafran territory. Using the intent to destroy frame, the war was equated to genocide on these basis; famine was instrumental to the war’s operational unfolding which prompted the Biafrans to argue that the government was genocidal in its approach. The blockade and famine unleashed on the secessionist granted the FMG a natural win as relief supplies were not allowed into the eastern region. Second, the genocidal accounts of the victims were muted for the smooth institutionalization of the 3Rs. Writers such as Chinua Achebe in his ‘There was a country’; a personal history of Biafra noted that genocide did happen during the war. To corroborate his account, another world-renowned writer Wole Soyinka, in “The man died” (1971) stated that Biafrans have indeed been victims of genocide even though he did not support the secession. Heerten and Moses argue that intrinsic to the conflicting perceptions of the war was the politics of naming, there is a considerable semantic and political difference between labelling the conflict as an insurgency, as the FMG initially did, as a civil war or as a genocide. As classification of the conflict as a genocide would be a huge loss for the FMG even through they won the war, they will be met with major backlash from the domestic and international community. Particularly, as there would be no justification for their actions in light to terming it a genocide, but the term civil war confers this mutuality on the war in terms of the provocations, loss and

might. Which in the sense of the war is false, as the Nigerian forces has the upper hand in terms all the above. When news of the starvation and pictures of the situation was released, it gained massive sympathy and attention in the international community. Harten and Moses wrote that contemporaries around the world witnessed the emergence of the Biafran babies, readers were confronted with photograph of starving children which made headlines. Leading to support for the Biafran forces, as African states pledged their support for the cause.

In April 1968, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania recognized the secessionist state citing humanitarian concerns as the grounds for this decisions. The Biafrans home and abroad played the genocide card as part of their campaign against the FMG, with allegation of genocide against the FMG becoming the core of the secessionist propaganda. The easterners made comparison with the holocaust to draw attention to their situations, this gained ground in the genealogies that cast Igbos as the Jews of Africa, even as one of Israel's lost tribe. This analogy was used to by the leadership to secure support of the population and to build loyalty to Biafra by emphasizing the threat of a common enemy, the risk of extinction. This approach worked as support for the Biafran state grew outside of the political community, NGOs volunteered to send reliefs, alternative channels were discovered to transport food and ammunition into the region. During the war, Biafrans took charge of the framing of the conflict by trying so hard to secure what they deemed as the correct interpretation of the facts. Thus, while the Biafrans viewed it as a genocide, the FMG saw it as a mutual war fought. It then boils down to the agreed representation of what the conflict should be termed and the responsibility and the to be assumed therefrom.

Rwanda

The Rwandan case is entirely different from the Nigerian case in terms of framing and the after effect but similar in their initial chain of events. Rwanda is one of the countries in Africa with a high population density, it became famous following the 1994 Rwandan genocide which saw the killing of more than a million people within a span of 100 days. Rwanda also experienced a civil war which was between 1990 and 1994, the first phase of the war ended with the signing of the Arusha accord in 1993, while the second phase which is also the Rwandan genocide took place between April 1994 to July 1994. The war was manifestation of the tribal clash between the Hutu and the Tutsi as regards political power in the state. The assassination of the then President Habyarimana kickstarted the war in the 1990, the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) launched an attack on the country citing the need for change of leadership and need to balance the ethnic tensions. The first phase was a mutual war between the RPF and the government which ended with the Arusha peace accord. The genocide was very obvious as it was the deliberate killing of one group by another. Many historians argue that the genocide was planned in advance of Habyarimana's assassination, as the genocide was organized by members of the core Hutu political elite many of whom were top government officials. The RPF was mostly made up of the Tutsi refugees whose families fled to Uganda after the 1959 Hutu revolt while the Hutu dominated the government. the killings started following the assassination of Habyarimana on grounds of ethnicity. Just like the Nigerian case, the genocide was coordinated by the government the only different is that this was more overt and planned.

There was a crisis committee which was headed by Theoneste Bagosara who doubled as the principal authority coordinating the genocide, he issued the orders to kill Tutsi as a retaliation for the assassination of the president. In the capital Kigali, the genocide was led by the presidential guide, they set up roadblocks checking people's national identity which included ethnicity. The genocide though was organized and carried out by the government got massive buy-in from the people, as Gerard Prunier ascribes the mass complicity of the population to a democratic majority ideology in which Hutu had been brainwashed to see the Tutsi as dangerous enemies. The genocide ended with a victorious retaliation from the RPF and intervention from the international community. Just like Nigeria the terming of the conflict genocide drew tremendous response from the international community as regards intervention, there was not much interest in the Rwandan civil war but when news of the massive killings got out there were quick responses to the situation. The intent to destroy is particularly obvious in this case as the killings were planned and almost systematic in its execution. Not only did the government back the killings, it channelled state resources towards the act by employing the military and other state agencies to actualise the killings. Opposed to Nigeria, the term genocide was stamped on the killings as there was no other concept that could justify the organized killings of one group by the other. Thus, the problem of framing did not arise during and after the conflict as if there was a consensus. The framing informed the institution of the post-conflict reconciliation notable of which was the gacaca court system. The acknowledgement that one group was the perpetrator of the heinous crime made it easier to devise the form of reconciliation needed to resolve the damaging effects of the conflict. Particularly, it gave direction to the reconciliation process which in turn yielded positive returns.

The understanding of conflict is very important to the successful initiation of a conflict resolution strategy. In peace studies, to achieve a long-term peace, there is need for local ownership which stems from understanding the context, this poses a bottom-up approach towards the problem. Rwanda realising this, put in place processes that were locally owned and implemented by the people, instituted the traditional court system which is known as the gacaca system to address the grievances between the conflicting parties.

Sri Lanka

Applying the argument on reconciliation or framing to Sri Lanka would be a function of understanding its context. The Sri Lanka crisis started with the Tamil tigers demanding for their self-determination and independence from the larger Sri Lankan state. In 1983, the first offensive was carried out by the liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) which was the umbrella organization fighting for the Tamil's independence. The liberation struggle lasted for over 29 years with the Sri Lankan military defeating the Tamil Tigers in 2009. After the end of war, the then President of Sri Lanka Mahinda Rajapaksa, after several calls for it, instituted the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission to understand the conflict from the first ceasefire agreement in 2002 to the end of the war in 2009. The LLRC did not deliver a report that was satisfactory to both parties as, it only sought to justify the actions of the Sri Lanka government (Boyle, 2013).

Following the defeat of the LTTE by the military, allegations of crimes against humanity and genocide started pouring in against the Sri Lankan government. Various national and international organisations embarked on the quest of understanding the conflict so as to attach the appropriate frame. **While it is important to understand a conflict for the sake of framing, it is necessary for this framing to kickstart a reconciliation process.**

Rather what we see in the Sri Lankan case, is the LTTE sympathisers attempt to prove that the Sri Lankan government committed genocide towards the Tamil people, while avoiding the reconciliation process. It is therefore important to focus on reconciliation as much as framing for there to be sustainable peace.

Rohingya

This is quite a unique case when discussing the subject of framing or reconciliation. Just like the Sri Lanka case is similar to that of Nigeria, in terms of context of the conflict, Rohingya is similar to Rwanda as it has been adjudged to be a clear case of ethnic cleansing and state-sponsored genocide. Several stakeholders such as the United Nations, United State of America, United Kingdom etc. have openly condemned the gross human rights abuses and violations meted out on the Rohingya people by the Myanmar government. The crisis is based on the contestations about the legitimacy of the Rohingyas as Myanmar citizens, particularly questioning if they belong to Myanmar or they are illegal immigrants. The Myanmar government is arguing that they are not citizens of the country because they entered into the country illegally from Bangladesh, making them of Bengali descent. Kinseth (2019) argues that the Tatmadaw have worked for decades to rewrite history and characterize the Rohingya minority not as a legitimate national "ethnic group," but rather as a horde of outsiders and illegal migrants posing a threat to the very fabric of Myanmar society, a history that is false.

While on the other hand, research has shown that the Rohingyas have been inhabiting present day Myanmar way before the country's colonization in the 19th century thus making them legitimate citizens. Leitch (2014) contends that despite the Tatmadaw's efforts to erase Rohingya ethnic group identity, there is ample evidence of Rohingyas' long and rich history in Myanmar's Northern Rakhine State. Not only have the Rohingya long self-identified as a distinct ethnic group, but the government itself recognized them as such just decades ago. This contestation has led to the Burmese government and people to perpetrate different forms of discrimination and victimization against the Rohingya Muslims, notable of which is the denial of citizenship status and rights to the people. Levels of state sponsored violations have also been perpetrated, also the massive displacement of the Rohingya Muslims from the Rakhine state where they are predominantly based. On genocide, Kinseth(2019) stated that the genocidal actions of the Burmese government manifested in 2017 when the most brutal clampdown against the Rohingyas resulted in tens of thousands of deaths. He went further to argue that using the UN 'intent to destroy' and acts that qualify as genocide, four out of five have been perpetrated against the Rohingyas. It then points to the fact that it is important to acknowledge that what is happening to the Rohingya people is beyond clampdown on illegal immigrants and tilting towards intentional persecution of an ethnic group. Framing is important in this case, as trying to not properly understand the context will negatively affect the process of reconciliation. Importantly, we should be truthful to acknowledge facts as in the Rohingya case rather than trying to justify gross human right abuses and other bodily violations that is being perpetrated

Conclusion

Drawing from the cases above, the proper framing of a conflict is very important to the reconciliation process. However, such framing must be geared towards reconciliation instead of framing to blame and gain. It is detrimental to ignore the nature of a conflict as it affects the reconciliation process. Nigeria epitomizes this well, 50 years after the Biafran war, there are still agitations from different groups for the secession of the south-east from Nigeria. This renewed call for secession is a function of the failure of the FMG to properly address the conflict rather than pretend the situation was under control. Lodge argues that one of the flaws inherent is the conscious silence that succeeded the war following the Federal Government policy of ‘No Victor No vanquished’ and the lack of a thorough process to address the problem. **The absence of any sustained effort in providing restorative justice or symbolic reparation may matter more to successor generations whose experience of the war is imaginative and inherited rather than direct’** (Lodge,2018). There was no active effort in understanding the nature of conflict and addressing the conflict in and itself as the government was more occupied with **reconstruction and negative peace**. On the other hand, Biafra terming the conflict as a genocide did yield some positive result for their cause as they were able to position the spotlight on their struggle. The privilege of which they are still benefitting from today as seen in the activities of IPOB and MASSOB. Benefits do arise from framing a conflict as genocide, but it is only accurate when it fits within the ‘intent to destroy’ frame. The accurate understanding of a conflict eases the reconciliation process not only the execution but the achievement of a stable peace as experienced in Rwanda. Thus, Nigeria is a perfect example of a country that did not focus on understanding the nature of the conflict and just went ahead with the reconciliation process. While Rwanda epitomizes a country that acknowledged its conflict as a genocide and took appropriate reconciliatory measures. However, we must note that in the Rwandan case, **the main victim of the genocide, the minority Tutsis took over government after the conflict and that is an important factor to consider in giving agency to the framing and reconciliation processes.**

Finally, the Sri Lanka and Rohingya cases are relatively new compared to the African cases, as they occur in the 21st century, with Rohingya still ongoing. This provides for some nuances different from that of Nigeria and Rwanda. But overall, the contexts are similar and the approach also, it is important to understand the conflict to ensure the right framing. **However, the need to frame the conflict should not overshadow reconciliation**, as findings way to resolve the differences between the warring parties is very important to instituting peace within the society. The aim of framing and understanding dynamics of a conflict should be geared towards instituting adequate reconciliation that will bring about lasting peace.

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