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How do political tensions turn into ethnic conflicts?

Political scientist at the University of Konstanz's Zukunftskolleg works on explaining and predicting ethnic conflict escalations in civil wars

We all remember: in the context of the Arab Spring, Syrian citizens took to the streets in February 2011 to demonstrate for the democratisation of their country. However, the current civil war there has long since ceased to be about democratisation. Now it has rather become a fight between religious and ethnic groups. Political scientist Dr Sebastian Schutte, peace and conflict researcher at the Zukunftskolleg of the University of Konstanz, analyses this transition from a political conflict to a conflict between cultural groups. The foundation "Deutsche Stiftung Friedensforschung" funds his project with 88,000 euros.

A possible explanation for such changes in a conflict is that some individuals who have experienced violence themselves become hostile towards other groups. Schutte's theory is that hostility in individuals can result from projecting the behaviour of individual members of other groups onto the entire group - a conclusion that, although it is wrong, has often been observed in social-psychological research. If many individuals feel hostility at the same time, this might shift the lines of conflict.

To validate this thesis, Schutte will survey individuals in northern India and in Kenya over a longer period of time. In both regions smaller conflicts take place which cause tensions between groups. Even at this stage, Schutte faced ethical problems in his research project: "originally we had planned surveys in Afghanistan, too. But this would have been very dangerous for the participants. If anyone were to find out that they were taking part in a survey for a western research team, they might have been suspected to be spies."

Schutte developed a special computer system to conduct the surveys via SMS in India and Kenya. In both countries, not everybody has access to the Internet. An online survey, as is common in Germany, therefore would only reach a very small and specific part of the population, and the results could not be generalised. However, nearly everybody in India and Kenya has a mobile phone. As both countries offer a payment scheme via SMS, the participants of the survey can directly receive their reimbursements for participating.

If the results from the survey confirm his theory, Schutte intends to study in a second phase whether the mindset of individuals really contributes to political developments. To do so, he will combine existing data sets on conflicts. If it turns out that his model can reliably "predict" past cultural civil wars, then it may also be possible to make predictions for the future. Schutte's long-term vision is to develop interventions and recommendations for policy which will contribute to contain hostilities and maybe even prevent large-scale conflict escalations.

Facts

The German foundation "Deutsche Stiftung Friedensforschung" will fund the survey in India and Kenya from October 2016 to October 2017 with 88,000 euros. Sebastian Schutte has been a research fellow at the Zukunftskolleg of the University of Konstanz since 1 August 2016, where he had been a postdoctoral fellow since 1 June 2014.

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