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Protests and Conflict

Fabio Andrés Díaz Pabón
Department of Political and International Studies, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa
International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Hague, Netherlands

"You and I are now in confrontation, but I see no Violence."
Bantu Stephen Biko

Abstract

It is argued that civil war and protests are mutually exclusive processes. However, the prevalence of protests and their proximity with or simultaneity to armed conflict contradicts this idea. Conflict and confrontation involve different types of interactions between the state and its opponents, which can involve protests, mass mobilization, clashes, and even armed conflict. Thus, we can understand conflict as existing in a continuum. Analyzing protests and protestors as related to armed conflict may serve to widen our understanding of conflict. This chapter presents the case for linking protest with a wider understanding of conflict, considering its links with other categories of contestation such as arme conflict.

We can thus envision different types of contestation as being related. If we consider this possibility, we can then analyze processes of escalation and de-escalation between different expresions of contestation. This chapter reflects on the similarities and differences between different categories used to understand contestation, focusing on the categories of protests, civil conflict, and civil war. I claim that while a distinction between protests and armed violence is often made on the basis of the degree of violence involved in these processes, this in itself does not mean that these forms of conflict are disconnected. Through focusing on the nature of their political claims, we can understand these processes of contestation as related to each other. Thus, we can analyze how mass mobilization escalates into armed conflicts, and we also observe cases of post agreement scenarios where mass mobilization follows the signature of peace agreements (a de-escalation process). Evidence from the case of South Africa is presented to illustrate this.

Keywords

Contestation · Civil war · civil Conflict · Protests · Protest campaigns · Social movements

Protests, Protestors, Civil Violence, and Civil War

This chapter argues that although protests and armed violence can be seen as different

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manifestations of conflict, they undertake a similar action: they challenge the state. This chapter limits the focus of his research to protests and conflict contesting the notion of state in a particular country. Thus, if we focus on the action of contestation of the state, we can understand different processes of contestation as possibly interconnected with each other (Jacoby 2007; Krause 2016; Dudouet 2013).

Conflicts are manifestations of the negotiation of particular social contracts between the state and different "publics" in particular territories (Tilly 2006; Tarrow 2011). Hence, the visibility of different actors such as protestors in the streets, or soldiers belonging to armed groups challenging the state, can be seen as the explicit manifestation of a conflict relating to a particular state (Della Porta et al. 2017). The difference between these actors and manifestations is how they undertake contestation, and how they challenge the current sociopolitical arrangement within a society.

We must remember that the terms we use to distinguish between different types of conflict and the actors undertaking this challenge are to an extent theoretical constructs whose purpose is to help us describe and understand specific types of political contestation (Tarrow 2011). The use of these categories, such as "protest," as opposed to "civil conflict" or "civil war," has afforded us a detailed understanding of the specific conditions that define the emergence of particular performances, actors, agendas, and claims set into motion. This definitional separation between these categories has led to the study of social processes of contestation as independent from each other – often within different disciplines. However, this does not necessarily mean that different categories used to understand forms of contestation do not relate to each other, or that these different types of conflict operate in isolation from each other.

Thus, we can explore protests, civil conflict, and civil war as related. The case of South Africa is instructive: it demonstrates how one form of conflict can feed into another in a process of escalation from protests to armed conflict, and in a de-escalation process from armed violence to protests after the fall of Apartheid.

Contention and Contestation as a Continuum

Understanding processes of contestation, such as protests, civil conflicts, and civil war, as related to each other is not a new idea. Scholarly work has presented evidence and argued the case for the analysis of such processes of contestation as related within both social movements and civil war literatures (Della Porta et al. 2017; Tarrow 2011; Tilly and Wood 2016; Hegre et al. 2017).

Analyzing the way(s) in which a protest can be connected to a civil conflict and civil war is perhaps best achieved through identifying such connections through focusing on the history of a particular country.

Identifying how a peaceful protest relates to a violent protest and an armed conflict is difficult due to the variability of repertoires, labels, and actors involved in such processes. Thus, when we describe these processes of conflict and protests, we typically describe them through reference to discrete events (a date, an episode, a place). The negative impact of this is that a focus on (single) events may lead us to overlook the conditions and preceding processes and events that produced these particular moments in history. We can thus end up describing events without considering their wider historical contexts.

We could use the analogy of stop motion animation to understand how events are actually woven together through time. In stop motion animation, a sequence of events is captured one frame – a photograph – at a time, but when different photographs are stitched together into a sequence, they present a continuous movement and link different images and apparently separate events into one continuous flow of motion. So it happens with history.

When we observe accounts of protests or armed violence, we note that protests and violence are predominantly described in terms of particular events; however, in many cases, these descriptions fail to connect the particular protest event or armed clash with processes that preceded or followed the event described. For example, a protest may have been preceded by meetings at government offices, signing of petitions, community gatherings, etc.

It is no surprise then that protests – and in some cases armed clashes – are often described as "spontaneous." However, mobilization, be it armed or peaceful, requires organization, communication, and planning; its emergence may only be the first "visible" event of a large chain of events that preceded it. A contestation event may be a single frame in a stop motion sequence; we might be missing the movie plot, or process of contestation, through focusing on a single frame.

The milestones we use to identify and understand protests or civil war tend to signal the visibility of an event, and not the inception of these forms of conflict. Within societal processes, there is always a process underway beforehand and after the fact that requires our attention and analysis. Attempts to explain a wider pattern (a trend and a process) on the basis of separate observations may thus involve the extrapolation of a process on the basis of an event, as in trying to explain a whole movie via a single movie frame or a meme.

By contrast, understanding the processes in relation to the emergence of the events that we use as milestones should provide us with greater insights into the reasons and the histories that produce the emergence of a particular type of contestation (Goldstone 1998). This would allow us to see the movie plot and understand the movie as a whole. Then, understanding protests, civil conflict, and civil war as related, can facilitate the understanding of the processes in which these "events" take place, and the ways in which different forms of confrontation – protests, civil conflict, and civil war – relate to each other in time.

For example, the beginning of the Syrian civil war is marked by the emergence of a series of combats and violent clashes across the Syrian territory in July 2011; however, recorded protests against the regime took place since March 2011. There are two accounts of the civil war: one that claims that violence emerged spontaneously and without any "warning signs," and another that argues that it was the repression of protestors by the Syrian regime during the March–July period that mobilized groups in the country to decide wage war against the government (Della Porta et al. 2017).

What these different processes (civil wars, civil conflict, and protests) have in common is the contestation of existing social contracts. They either challenge the idea of the state with the explicit use of military force (civil wars and civil conflict) or demand reforms, recognition, and inclusiveness from public institutions, appealing to the intervention of the state in a less violent way (protests). In analyzing these processes, we can thus consider that both armed conflicts and protests aim for the reorganization of the state and the social contract, but operate with different repertoires, that can be more or less violent. A scale of contestation measured by the degree of violence taking place would have peaceful protests at one extreme and civil war on other extreme of this scale.

It is highly unlikely that social processes taking place in the same country are absolutely independent of each other, especially in the case of processes of contestation that escalate into and away from civil war. It is more likely that processes of contestation are related and condition each other. The presumed independence of protests and civil conflict is an assumption, which in some cases may not be valid.

The crux of the matter is then to understand how protests and armed conflict are or may be related. One approach to doing so is to identify the common properties shared by protests and civil wars, and use these common properties as the basis for analysis to ascertain whether and how processes of contestation are connected and examine the contexts under which processes of contestation are connected (Hegre et al. 2017; Dudouet 2013; Krause 2016). With this method, it becomes possible to argue that one form of conflict can be a positive and significant predictor of other forms of contestation within states under certain conditions (Cunningham and Lemke 2014). For example, a protest may start as a nonviolent but if the government is excessively intransigent, violent, or arbitrary, the situation

may escalate into violent protests or a non-negotiable demand for regime change, and even into open armed challenge to the state (Della Porta et al. 2017). It would also be possible to explain de-escalation transition dynamics between civil war and protests under particular conditions (Dudouet 2013).

Understanding Protests, Civil Conflicts, and Civil Wars as Connected

Different typologies of conflict and contestation commonly locate the state as the point of contention, as illustrated in common definitions of revolutions, protests, civil wars, and riots.

It is important to mention that conflicts related to animal rights (e.g., protests for animal rights) or protests targeting international organizations (protests against multinational organizations or cooperation) are not considered as belonging to this continuum of conflict. Whereas they constitute valid types of mobilization, this chapter excludes these on the basis that they do not relate directly to the state, or relate to a wider understanding of the social contract that includes new constituents and actors beyond the geographical boundaries of a particular state.

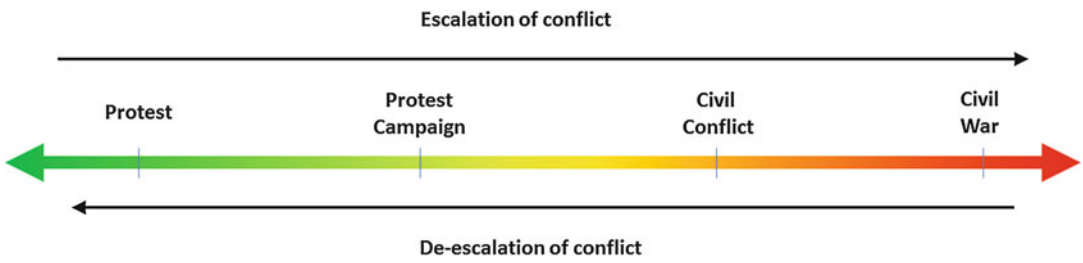
The definitions of different types of contestation predominantly have two main characteristics. Some definitions center on measurement, focusing on the amount of participants (in the case of protests) or casualties (in the case of civil war). Other definitions foreground description of the processes taking place, describing general phenomena without distinguishing between the severity of these processes. The first set of definitions classify particular types of conflict and offer and enable their measurement against a clear scale (a protest requires a certain number of participants to be considered as such); the second set of definitions surface description of a sociopolitical processes, but, through failing to discuss the magnitude of a type of conflict, renders different types of conflicts indistinguishable from each other.

This presents a dilemma with regard to specificity and generalizability. For example, a protest with five participants may be placed in the same category as a protest of hundreds of thousands of participants. While these protests may belong to the same category, they are different in important ways. Generic descriptions such as "a process of social mobilization against the state" can include both civil war and protests, and might bring together a hodgepodge of different types of events that under a single label.

Thus, I argue that understanding particular phenomena and greater definitional specificity can be achieved through attaching measurement criteria to those definitions that describe processes, and attaching a descriptive criterion to those definitions that measure processes. So, for example, assessing forms of conflict using a measuring scale of the degree of violence, from protests to civil war, can provide insights into the process of contestation of the social contract, and allow for a measure of their severity.

If we sort definitions by the degree of "disorder" or "severity" of violence, this enables us to develop a scale of the degree of contestation taking place in the state – a continuum extending from less disruptive to more disruptive or less violent to more violent conflicts. Using this scale, we could consider the forms of contestation in a particular country (such as protests, civil conflict, and civil war) as related (see Fig. 1).

If we bring our attention to the nature of the claims used in processes of conflict, we can see in some cases that protests, violent protests and armed violence can have similar claims. Using this lens can also help us understand the presence of violence in protests as well, as protests have historically involved clashes, confrontations, and violence (Tilly and Wood 2016; Tarrow 2011). Thus assuming that the form of conflict (violent or not) supersedes the nature of the claims by those mobilizing a protest can lead us to ignore how different forms of protests (peaceful or violent) are indeed connected. Thus observing processes of contestation as connected via the nature of their claims, rather than using the lens of the way in which discontent is manifested, can allow us to analyze how different manifestations of conflict can be connected.



Protests and Conflict, Fig. 1. Relation between "different" forms of contestation. (Source: Own elaboration)

The case of South Africa illustrates how forms of contestation can connect to each other in processes of both escalation and de-escalation.

South Africa and the Connection between Protests and Civil Conflict

The chapter has presented the claim that different forms of contestation can be studied as related to each other. The case of South Africa illustrates the connections between types of contestation, in fact showing how a process of escalation and of de-escalation may take place between different types of conflict. There was a gradual escalation of contestation towards civil conflict during Apartheid, followed by a process of de-escalation from civil conflict to protest after the end of the Apartheid government.

The Apartheid regime institutionalized segregation and racism after the arrival of the National Party (NP) to power in 1948 (Simpson 2016). Whereas racism informed the arrival of the NP, the institutionalization of racism meant that the rights of people of color were (further and more aggressively) limited within the legal framework. Segregation and racism preceded the arrival of Apartheid, as illustrated by legislation like the Natives Land Act of 1913 – which expropriated land from Black South Africans. However with Apartheid, the limitation of voting rights and the extension of political closure to any dissent to these policies in 1948 was indicative that not only economic, but also political exclusion was being actively sought (Gerhart and Glaser 2010). A series of systems of segregation were implemented, such as the Bantu Education system, and the creation of "Bantustan homelands," which aimed to make South Africans of color non-citizens in their own country, while the police and military were mobilized to enforce exclusion, intimidating and repressing opponents to these measures.

The process of escalation into conflict was preceded by a series of memorandums and pleas to the government by citizens and organizations across the country that deployed different protest campaigns. These mobilizations attempted to persuade the Apartheid state to hear the claims of the wider population of South Africa (Gerhart and Glaser 2010) and recognize the rights of South Africans of color.

The state responded through wider censorship, legal harassment, and the closing of public spaces for voices of dissent. The state banned several political parties, such as the South African Communist Party (SACP), the African National Congress (ANC), and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), among others, in 1960. This closure of peaceful political means informed the decision by different groups to pursue armed means of contestation to challenge the status quo (Simpson 2016).

Before the emergence of an armed struggle, the ANC and other organizations in the country used different repertoires to appeal for changes to the system of segregation and racism. These included appealing to the rules and the constitution of the country as well as challenging them explicitly and were met with different degrees of success. Ultimately, despite the might of the state and a period of consideration, the ANC (and other groups) decided to adopt an armed struggle campaign against the state; the ANC established its military wing, Umkonto we Sizwe (MK), escalating the conflict.

This military campaign by armed challengers to the state was pursued alongside protest, and a campaign of civil resistance can be described as a civil conflict. In spite of the armed challenge to the state, the South African state was still able to dismantle attack and disable armed units that attempted guerrilla warfare in South Africa (Simpson 2016).

This "low intensity" conflict was also shaped by the conditions that made guerrilla warfare difficult in South Africa. These included strong state control over the borders, the absence of mountainous or jungle terrain, and the strong counter insurgency capacity of the state. These elements, as well as the political emphasis of the ANC on its broader struggle, made the military campaigns less of an end and rather a means by which to pressure the South African government to change its ways (Simpson 2016). The armed struggle and the civil conflict that took place in South Africa was accompanied by a campaign of protests against the Apartheid regime in South Africa and overseas, mixing military actions (mostly sabotage actions and some attacks to police or military garrisons) with a strong political campaign and mobilization of civil society. This process can be described as a gradual escalation from protest to a civil conflict.

The de-escalation of conflict took place after the government realized that the proxy wars and conflicts in Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho, Zambia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe (Rhodesia at the time), and Angola, were unsustainable. The South African government in the 1970s and the 1980s found itself fighting large-scale battles and irregular warfare outside of its borders, while responding to the increasing civil disturbances, protests, and sabotage within the borders of the country. This challenge, as well as the recognition of the unsustainability of the Apartheid scheme, brought the ANC and the South African government to negotiations (Gerhart and Glaser 2010).

The political landscape changed with the unbanning of several political parties and the signing of peace agreements. This was preceded by a democratic opening, and led to a gradual de-escalation of the conflicts, during which the intensity of armed conflict declined. The first democratic elections in the country that granted voting rights to all adult South Africans was held in 1994, bringing the ANC to power with Mandela as President.

After Mandela's presidency, two main periods emerge, the Mbeki and Zuma presidencies: these saw a reduction in the consultation of different constituencies – an unexpected outcome of a one party democracy. Protests partially decreased after the demise of the Apartheid regime; however, popular protests increased and reemerged in the 2000s to give voice to popular demands without resorting to armed confrontations. The new wave of protests that began in the early 2000s has been characterized by protests articulating claims demanding the fulfillment of the commitments of the 1994 constitution, especially relating to the provision of public services. Citizens, unions, and other constituents have been mobilized. This increase in mobilizations illustrates how the cessation of conflict facilitated a shift from civil conflict to protests (see Fig. 1).

Conclusion

Civil wars, civil conflicts, and protests have been presented sometimes in the literature as completely different forms of contestation. However, while they speak to the state in different ways, they adopt the state as a focal point of contention. This commonality in contestation of the state opens the question of whether further connections between these processes exist, and whether they can be understood as connected to each other.

The chapter has presented the basis for understanding protests, civil conflicts, and civil war as related to each other. In doing so, the chapter has made the case for understanding protest, protest campaigns, civil conflict, and civil wars with reference to the state and as belonging to a continuum in order to analyze the possible relations between these forms of conflict.

Understanding processes of contestation as related to each other allows us to bring together insights from the social movements literature and the civil wars literature in order to understand the elements that condition the ways in which

different processes of contestation are connected in particular states.

If we aim to understand how escalations from protests to civil war take place, or to analyze how de-escalations away from civil war take place, we need to inquire into the conditions that define these transitions and their path dependence (Goldstone 1998). I argue that the structural arrangements of states condition the emergence of and transitions between different repertoires of contestation and their evolution.

The case South Africa provides preliminary evidence on the possibility of the connection between these different processes in both the escalation and the de-escalation of conflict.

Cross-References

► Conflict and Conflict Resolution

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