Secessionism

Identity, Interest, and Strategy

JASON SORENS

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding Secession

I would remind you that we once had a civil war in our country, in which we lost on a per capita basis far more people than we lost in any of the wars of the twentieth century, over the proposition that Abraham Lincoln gave his life for, that no state had a right to withdrawal from our Union.

Bill Clinton on Boris Yeltsin's Chechen campaign,
Moscow, 21 April 1996

Bill Clinton's comments quoted above and the mostly critical media response that followed illustrate the contested nature of secession. Secession is the withdrawal of territory and the people living on that territory from the sovereignty of an existing state and the establishment of a newly independent state with sovereignty over that territory and its people.[1] Secession is a rare phenomenon. One can count the number of countries affected by internationally recognized secession since the end of World War II on two hands: the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Pakistan-Bangladesh, Yugoslavia, Indonesia, Sudan, and Ethiopia-Eritrea.[2] At the same time, secessionist political parties and secessionist insurgencies are common, and they have had profound effects on the countries in which they occur. Armed self-determination movements are the primary cause of ethnic violence in the world today, and, since the 1980s, at least half of all ongoing civil wars in any given year have been secessionist.[3]

As the Soviet Union was breaking up, the idea of secession accomplished through the democratic process fired imaginations around the world. As a 4 September 1991 *Guardian* story noted,

> Nationalist fervour in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia has stirred the separatist and hardline regional movements that underpin and fragment Italian politics. German-speaking separatists in the Alto Adige region, bordering Austria, have rekindled

> a long-dormant cause by demanding to be cut loose from Italy. Union Valdôtaine, the usually tame nationalist party governing the Aosta Valley, bordering France and Switzerland, yesterday set in motion procedures for seceding. The calls follow renewed activism by militant separatists in Sardinia, and the increasing power of the Lombard League.[4]

Minority nationalists and secessionists from Indonesia to Ethiopia likewise took heart in the fall of the Soviet Union. The extreme violence that shortly thereafter accompanied Yugoslavia's breakup caused some scholars and policymakers alike to reconsider a liberal attitude toward secessionism. Others argued that it was precisely Yugoslavia's attempt to hold itself together by force, along with Croatian and Bosnian refusal to allow Serb secession, that was responsible for the violence.

Since the early 1990s, fears of a worldwide secessionist contagion have not materialized, but a steady drip-drip of secessions, recognized and unrecognized, has continued: East Timor in 1999, Montenegro in 2006, Kosovo in 2008, and South Sudan in 2011. Secession and autonomy movements continue to possess remarkable staying power throughout the world, and, as we shall see, change the course of politics even when they do not reach their ultimate goal of independence.

Chechnya is an example of the dilemmas posed by secessionist politics. Boris Yeltsin's intervention in Chechnya, which occasioned Clinton's quotation, led to a series of further interventions as the region remained unstable. Under Vladimir Putin, the Russian military successfully targeted moderate Chechen nationalists such as Aslan Maskhadov for assassination. As the moderate nationalist leadership died out, a new strain of virulent Islamic extremism took hold in Chechnya, and new leaders emerged who had no qualms about targeting civilians in bloody incidents like the Beslan school hostage-taking.[5] The continuing restiveness in Chechnya seems to be an indication of the failure of Russian policy. On the other hand, other Russian regions with aspirations to wide-ranging autonomy, if not independence, have not rebelled, and Russia's harsh treatment of Chechnya has arguably deterred them from doing so.

Should Russia allow Chechnya to secede, and, if so, by what procedure? The issue is complicated by the fact that a majority of Chechens may prefer to remain part of Russia. The Dudayev government

that originally declared independence did not take power in free and fair elections. What caused Chechnya to develop a strong secessionist movement in the first place, and why did Chechens take up arms, while other unhappy regions turned away from the option of independence? Finally, why do some governments, such as those of Canada and Great Britain, rule out military suppression of democratic secession attempts, while other governments, such as those of Russia and Turkey, pledge to use overwhelming force against all secessionists? These are the sorts of questions this book seeks to answer.

This is a book about secession, but more particularly secession*ism*. I define "secessionism" broadly to include movements that aim at substantial territorial autonomy for a minority group and do not rule out independence in the future. The evidence shows that most secessionist movements try to foster some ambiguity about their aims. The Tamil rebels of Sri Lanka – Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) – insisted on total independence in the 1980s and 1990s but in the early 2000s dropped that aim in favour of "federalism," only to return to uncompromising independentism when peace negotiations broke down. The Kurdish parties of Iraq clearly would support independence if they thought they could achieve it (more than two million Kurds signed a petition demanding a referendum on independence[6]), but at the moment they are content with far-reaching autonomy, because a move to full independence could provoke a foreign-policy crisis with Turkey and the United States.

The methods of this book are those of institutionalist comparative politics and international relations. For the most part, I do not consider the individual-level psychology of ethnic hostility itself, nor do I examine the historical emergence of nationalism over the *longue durée*. Rather, this book assumes that there are ethnically and nationally distinctive groups, and that there are leaders within those groups who have to decide whether to make demands for institutional change and whether to organize violence to achieve their ends. Ethnic differences and hostilities do not automatically create a demand for secession or a serious risk of violence. Contextual factors such as geography, economics, and political institutions will explain why some group leaders choose the "exit" option rather than "voice" or "loyalty" within the existing politico-territorial settlement.[7]

Despite its timeliness, the topic of secession has received short shrift in empirical political science. A vast literature on ethnic conflict

and its regulation exists, but little of it treats secession as a phenomenon distinct from "ethnic politics," "ethnic violence," or "minority nationalism" in general. Indeed, most existing empirical work on secessionism has treated the phenomenon as merely a particularly intense form of ethnic conflict. Both in the abstract and in practice, however, secessionism has distinct origins.

The argument of the book comes in three stages, addressed under the headings "identity," "interest," and "strategy." Within the historical context of the modern state, ethnicity and nationality – distinct concepts serving similar functions – emerge as super-tribal forms of collective, political identity, deeply rooted in the circumstances of human evolution. Ethnic and national identification often trumps other categories of political identity, such as class, because it constitutes a potential unifying and distinguishing characteristic for an autonomous political community. Within every *ethnie* lies the kernel of an independent state. Every territorially concentrated people with its own myth of common origins, usually based on language, independent history, or even political ideology, is potentially secessionist. Very few secessionists in history have lacked either strong cultural distinctiveness or territorial concentration.

Most potentially secessionist peoples do not ever spawn movements for independence. Only when *identity* is coupled with *interest* does a popular desire for independence come about. If a people can be better off economically, culturally, and politically as the core of an autonomous political jurisdiction, then secessionism emerges; otherwise, even a politically aware *ethnie* will pursue other political goals such as recognition and representation within the existing political arrangement. Speaking of collectives as if they were unitary actors does, of course, distort reality. Within every ethnic group, there are individuals who identify more and less with the group and who support and oppose secession. But the more the group can expect to gain, as a group, from independence, the more individuals within the group will support it. At this stage of the argument, the "costs and benefits" of independence are an empty vessel into which we must ladle substantive theory. The real contribution of this book is to argue that the costs and benefits of independence for a community depend on the central government's ability to commit credibly to adopting policies beneficial to that community. If the government cannot commit in this way, autonomy or independence becomes a desirable solution to at least some members of the minority community.

However, even when popular desires for autonomy or independence emerge, they do not automatically translate into political action. Individuals must overcome the collective action problem to organize secessionist movements. Governments can use various techniques, from electoral systems to repression, to discourage such organization, or they can try to reduce latent secessionism by making concessions. Furthermore, even when a secessionist organization exists, it faces a choice between peaceful, democratic means of pursuing their goals and rebellion. Moving from latent to active secessionism and from active secessionism to insurgency lies within the domain of *strategy*.

The main focus of this book is positive (explaining why things are the way they are) rather than normative (arguing why things ought to be a certain way). However, the empirical results are relevant to policymakers' attempts to reduce ethnic violence. The conclusion discusses some of these implications.

Much of the recent literature on ethnic conflict, both scholarly and popular, has emphasized the downsides of democracy or democratization in the context of ethnically diverse societies.[8] The literature on civil wars has emphasized state strength and the lure of natural resources as explanations for violence but has generally downplayed any ameliorative effect of democracy.[9] Additionally, some scholars have argued that government accommodation of separatists simply encourages more of them to rebel.[10] This book's argument for a more concessionary approach to secessionist movements seems to fly in the face of that evidence. I do not so much challenge those earlier findings as to argue that context matters. Secessionist movements are different from other kinds of ethnic and nationalist movements in their sources and demands, and secessionist civil wars are different from other civil wars in their solutions.

This book finds that governments that have explicitly ruled out military suppression of democratic secession have suffered far less ethnic rebellion than governments that have declared their eternal indivisibility. I call this solution "quasi-legal secession," because it does not necessarily entail a unilateral right of secession in the constitution, which is extremely rare. In addition, decentralization reduces rebellion in the short run but has no further impact in the long run. Another interesting fact is that newly independent countries have less ethnic violence than older countries. In most places, a majority of the local population opposes secession, because they

consider the risks of independence to be too great. With few exceptions, only groups that have suffered severe repression, such as Kurds in Iraq and Kosovo Albanians, display near-unanimous support for independence.[11]

On the basis of this evidence, I infer that a constitutional right of secession would substantially decrease ethnic violence around the world without significantly increasing the risks of actual state breakup in most countries – and, when countries do break up, further ethnic conflict is the exception rather than the rule. A constitutional right of secession would instead result in widespread devolution of power, allowing minorities to obtain rights of self-government in the areas most important to them. However, most governments are unlikely to pursue the solution of legalizing secession, because they are willing to accept substantial violence in order to decrease the risks of state breakup even slightly. Even so, there are reforms that even countries that prohibit secession could adopt to reduce secessionist violence, such as increasing checks and balances in the central government.

SECESSIONISM AS A VARIANT OF NATIONALISM

As mentioned previously, the book uses the terms "secession" and "secessionism" to refer to all movements seeking extensive self-government for their territories, whether or not they explicitly endorse full independence. No country has complete independence in the sense of being free of all foreign political ties, influence, or obligations. Self-government is really a sliding scale, from full centralization (complete lack of self-government) to full independence (complete self-government). Every governing unit falls somewhere between those two extremes. Nevertheless, a key concept is that of sovereignty, the legal right of a governing unit to pursue actions in some area without being overridden by some higher power. Some regions possess internal sovereignty but not external sovereignty. For instance, the Isle of Man controls its own taxes, budget, and local laws, but does not have the ability to make treaties, declare war, or conduct foreign affairs – Great Britain does those things for the island. US states are considered sovereign in constitutional law because they enjoy autonomy in certain reserved areas where the federal government cannot overrule or usurp them. To be more

precise about my definition of a secessionist movement, I will say that a secessionist movement is an organization that:

a) supports at least internal sovereignty covering a wide range of policy areas for a territory that does not yet possess it, and
b) does not explicitly oppose the eventual attainment of external sovereignty as well.

We can think of secessionism as a type of nationalism, where nationalism is an ideology or set of practices emphasizing and promoting the unity, autonomy, and identity of the nation.[12] Nationalists promote the nation as a potential political community that is distinct from other political communities, that is unified in the sense that it contains no rival political communities within it, and that should have the autonomy to pursue its own destiny and preferences. In turn, the definition of "nation" might be "a human community with a shared commitment to unique political institutions for the whole community."[13] Nations should not be identified with states, because what makes the issue of secession interesting is the fact that many peoples who consider themselves nations do not have states at all (Basques, Scots, Baloch, and so on). Moreover, nations should not be restricted to "politically conscious ethnic groups,"[14] for not all politically conscious ethnic groups desire unique political institutions (African-Americans, for example), and not all nations have an ethnic component or myth of common descent (the "American nation," for example, is a civic not ethnic nation).[15] Not all nations desire an independent state either; sometimes the desire for unique, common political institutions finds satisfaction in some kind of substate autonomy. Because most important political institutions require exclusiveness over a certain territory, only groups with a territorial claim can be nations, because only those groups can aspire to common political institutions. In this book, I use the terms "regional group," "territorial minority," and "minority nation" interchangeably.

Figure 0.1 presents a typology of nationalist movements and shows where secessionism fits in. Nationalist movements can be based on either an advantaged group (often a majority) or a disadvantaged (often a minority) group. "Advantaged" and "disadvantaged" here refer to possibilities of political control of the state, not economic

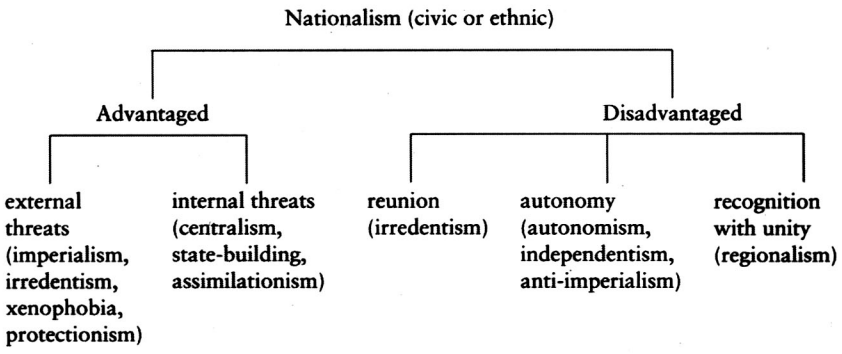

Figure 0.1
Typology of Nationalist Movements

well-being: an advantaged group controls the state, while a disadvantaged group does not control the state.

Advantaged-group nationalisms (or "statist nationalisms") are conservative in that they seek to maintain the security of the nation against threats external or internal. Examples of externally oriented statist nationalisms are imperialism (where the purpose of imperialism is the glory or enrichment of the nation), irredentism (that seeks to annex territories held by other states), xenophobia (where the concern is to exclude immigrants or foreign influences), and protectionism. The term "economic nationalism" typically refers to protectionist policies aimed at keeping foreign goods and investment out of the country.[16] Statist nationalism directed against internal threats generally advocates policies of assimilation or expulsion toward immigrants or national minorities, or both, and of concentration of power in the hands of the central government. Typically, statist nationalist movements combine concerns about both external and internal threats; examples include Kemalism in Turkey, the National Front (FN) in France, Dixiecrats in the Jim Crow South, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India. Statist nationalisms can be either ethnic or civic: arguably, French nationalism in the moderate form of traditional Gaullism represents the interests not of the French "ethnic group" but of the French civic nation as conceived in post-Revolutionary terms, while the extreme form of nationalism endorsed by the FN takes on a more ethnic character. Soviet nationalism was

more civic than ethnic, because it was more about loyalty to the Soviet state than subservience to the Russian ethnic group.

Disadvantaged-group nationalisms (typically called just "minority nationalisms")[17] focus on one of three demands: reunion, autonomy, or recognition with unity. Minority nationalists seeking unity with another country are minority irredentists, while the advocates of reunion in the retrieving state would be statist irredentists.[18] Irredentism usually requires interstate warfare or threat of warfare to be satisfied. As a result, it is much less likely to be satisfied than secessionism, which can achieve its end peacefully. Recently, movements that would otherwise be irredentist often take on a secessionist ideology instead (e.g., Kosovo, Nagorno-Karabakh). This book rarely deals with classic cases of irredentism where secessionism is not an option (e.g., Northern Ireland), but it does address those cases where leaders can plausibly exchange irredentist claims for secessionist ones.[19] Three types of movements make autonomy demands: autonomist, independentist, and anti-imperialist movements.

Independentist and anti-imperialist movements demand full independence, while autonomist movements may settle for wide-ranging control over internal affairs without the external sovereignty that independence implies. Anti-imperialist or decolonization movements enjoy international sanction under Articles 73 and 74 of the United Nations (UN) Charter and the 1960 Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, which together recognize the right of all non-self-governing territories under colonial administration to independence. Because of this internationally recognized right, decolonization conflicts were not so much battles over "whether" but "when" and "how" the territories in question would become independent. Anti-colonial movements thus present a special case and are largely excluded from this book; however, this book does examine both independentist and autonomist movements and considers them both under the general term, "secessionism." The book also does not directly examine "regionalists," groups that seek recognition and limited self-government within a state but explicitly oppose wide-ranging sovereignty and seek assistance from the central government in their economic and political development.[20] Examples of such groups include the Frisian National Party (FNP) in the Netherlands, the contemporary Dravidian parties of south India, and the Andalucist Party (PA) in Spain.

Even where secession movements follow national boundaries and adopt the rhetoric of national self-determination, the motivating factors for secession go beyond mere ethnic or national difference. Some territorially concentrated minority groups opt for the secessionist solution, while others do not, and the reasons have to do with the kind of self-government that would benefit the minority group. The findings presented in this book suggest that secessionism has different origins from other types of ethnic conflict.

GOVERNMENTS VERSUS SECESSIONIST MOVEMENTS

Outbreaks of secessionism appear to occur in worldwide cycles, but these cycles reflect political circumstances rather than some natural rhythm. During the period of decolonization, the rhetoric of self-determination (a principle never intended to apply to secessionists within integrated states) inspired minority nationalist movements in Western Europe and North America, while the decolonization process itself often involved contested borders, as the abortive secessions of Katanga and Biafra showed. Less well known are the cases of several princely states in the Indian subcontinent that sought to declare their independence but were incorporated into India and Pakistan by force of arms. The only successful secession between 1944 and 1991 was that of Bangladesh from Pakistan.[21] The high tide of secessionism in advanced democracies appeared to be the late 1970s and early 1980s, as the Scottish, Welsh, and Quebecois nationalists thereafter went into short-term decline (only to rise again in the 1990s). However, the fall of the Soviet Empire soon unleashed disintegrative forces in Eastern Europe. Not only did the USSR, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia break up but countries that relied on the Soviet Union for military and financial support found themselves suddenly in a position of weakness. Ethiopia's communist regime fell to a coalition of opponents, including the Eritrean secessionists, who won their independence. Moreover, the United States also lost interest in propping up repressive noncommunist regimes and stepped up a campaign to promote human rights, democracy, and a vaguely defined principle of self-determination internationally. As a result of this policy and of economic crisis, the Suharto regime in Indonesia fell, and East Timor gained its independence shortly thereafter.

Some observers have argued that the wave of secessions in Eastern Europe and elsewhere bolstered the older secessionists of Western