

Understanding peace and restraint amidst ethnic violence: Evidence from Kenya and Kyrgyzstan

Sarah Jenkins

The recent local turn in peace and conflict research has revealed significant sub-national variations in the onset, intensity, and duration of violence in conflict settings, and uncovered complex patterns of participation and non-participation at the individual level. Situated within this research agenda, this paper seeks to understand the emergence of small pockets of peace and individual acts of restraint during episodes of ethnic violence. Based on qualitative research undertaken in two diverse contexts – Kenya and Kyrgyzstan – the paper argues that strong, crosscutting social ties mediate and contain boundary hardening processes, creating opportunities for peace and restraint on the ground. The paper makes three key arguments: that pre-existing ties of friendship, trust and reciprocity render interpersonal violence more difficult and encourage acts of restraint; that extensive and intensive interethnic interaction disrupts and breaks down us-them distinctions that are the foundations of polarisation; and that crosscutting ties facilitate coordination and cooperation amongst community leaders, and ensure that appeals for peace resonate on the ground.

Keywords: Ethnic violence, peace, non-violence, restraint, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan

Introduction

Historically, the overarching concern of conflict research has been to uncover the causes of violence and to explain why organisations, leaders, and ordinary people instigate, perpetrate and participate in it. [1] Within this scholarship, there remains a strong tendency towards top-down, macro-level perspectives that ‘focus on a polarized view of society’, and that fail to capture the complexity of violence dynamics on the ground. [2] However, the recent ‘micro-theoretic’ turn in the field [3] has seen a welcome shift to theories that prioritise the disaggregation of conflict, and that have revealed significant subnational variations in the onset, intensity, nature, and duration of violence. Research into riots in India, for example, have sought to understand why some cities were affected, whilst others were not, arguing that ‘institutionalised riot systems’ [4], electoral incentives [5], and interethnic civic associations [6] help to explain the uneven distribution of violence. Peace research scholars have similarly identified ‘zones of peace’ and ‘non-war communities’ in the context of protracted civil wars. [7] These studies have pointed to the importance of social cohesion [8], and local leaders and governance institutions [9] in facilitating peace. Studies of civil war have examined the uneven, selective use of violence by rebel groups during conflict, exploring the ways in which

civilian-rebel relations can shape decisions over where violence is employed, against whom, and to what level of intensity. [10] And genocide scholars have begun to examine the complexities of individual participation in violence, identifying the role of social networks in driving recruitment and participation, [11] and exploring how group dynamics can influence individual choices to participate. [12] This paper contributes to this growing field of research in its focus upon the micro-level dynamics of ethnic violence, and it seeks to make two key contributions: firstly, it examines the relatively underexplored role of social ties in influencing individual choices to restrain or selectively employ violence. Secondly, it aims to help bridge the macro-micro disjunction that persists in the field, [13] by exploring how macro-level factors – in this case ethnic polarisation – are affected by micro-level social relations, and how this shapes the socio-spatial patterns of violence and peace. [14]

Thus, drawing upon episodes of ethnic violence in Kenya and Kyrgyzstan, the paper addresses the following question: How can we understand localised peace and individual restraint amidst ethnic violence? As such, it speaks to two of the key problematics central to this special issue; namely, understanding the uneven distribution of violence across space, and understanding individual restraint. The paper's departure point is that ethnic violence must be understood as a socially embedded phenomenon, and it argues that strong, crosscutting social ties create both the conditions for, and the processes of, peace and restraint. The paper, then, is particularly interested in exploring Busher et al.'s fourth 'internal brake' on violent escalation within their typology: boundary softening. That is, the breaking down of clear us-versus-them distinctions, resistance to generalisations about opposing groups, and the maintenance of social contacts across the conflict divide. [15] In this respect, the paper reflects upon how cross-ethnic social ties can serve to shape patterns of restraint at the individual, group, and elite levels.

The cases

Kenya has been plagued by a divisive ethnic politics since the colonial era as communities have benefitted disproportionately from having one of their own in – or close to – the seat of power. In this context of ethnicised neo-patrimonial politics, of potential marginalisation and exclusion, and of substantial horizontal inequalities elections have become high-stakes, winner-takes-all games that have repeatedly been a catalyst for violence. The December 2007 polls sparked some of the worst ethnic violence the country has ever witnessed. These elections pitted the incumbent Kikuyu president Mwai Kibaki and his Party of National Unity (PNU)

against an alliance of leading politicians from Kenya's other major ethnic groups – including the Luo, Kalenjin, Luhya, Kamba, and Coastal communities – under the leadership of Raila Odinga and the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM). Given these party fault lines, the elections came to be understood as 'all against the Kikuyu', and with Kibaki trailing in the opinion polls many believed that it was impossible for him to win if the elections were free and fair. The campaigns were heated and anti-Kikuyu sentiment high leading into the election day. Significant delays and serious irregularities in the counting process, followed by a hasty announcement of Kibaki as the winner, sparked immediate violence and protest that quickly spread across the country. The next two months saw members of the Kikuyu community targeted by ODM-affiliated groups, and the former engage in revenge attacks, as the country spiralled into violence that left approximately 1300 people dead and over 700,000 displaced.

Just over two years later, an ongoing political crisis in the Central Asian country of Kyrgyzstan provided the backdrop for tensions between the titular Kyrgyz and the minority Uzbek communities in the south of the country. In April 2010, in the context of rising utility prices, increasing authoritarianism, and rampant corruption and criminality under President Kurmanbek Bakiyev's rule, opposition protests and riots broke out in parts of the country. These culminated in the overthrow of the regime on April 7 and the establishment of an interim provisional government. Seeking a base of support in a region where many Kyrgyz remained loyal to Bakiyev, and with remnants of the former regime attempting to recapture power from the south, the interim government reached out to prominent Uzbek leaders. Their support of the new regime, and their active resistance against Bakiyev and his supporters, led to a series of isolated communal clashes across the south of the country between April and May of that year. The vacuum of power and political jostling had tapped into existing tensions over unequal access to land, economic opportunities, and political power that had underscored Kyrgyz-Uzbek relations in the region since the end of the Soviet era. Tensions steadily rose and rumours abound that the Uzbek community – who were already seen as dominating economic activity in the urban centres across the region – were now seeking political power and autonomy. On the night of 10 June 2010, a confrontation between Kyrgyz and Uzbek men outside a casino in Osh city escalated rapidly, with large crowds gathering and engaging in violence. Fuelled by this incident, and by subsequent unfounded rumours that Uzbek men had raped Kyrgyz girls in a nearby university dormitory, the violence quickly spiralled. Groups of Kyrgyz from nearby villages descended upon Osh and other major towns and cities in the south, whilst Uzbek communities mobilized in response. The ethnic violence was short-lived, lasting little more

than a week, but it saw the destruction of large sections of the affected towns and cities, several hundred people killed, thousands injured, and tens of thousands displaced.

In both of these cases, despite the spread of intense ethnic violence, some neighbourhoods, villages, and towns managed to maintain peace, with members of otherwise conflicting communities uniting to protect one another. Moreover, amidst the violence there is evidence of more ambiguous patterns of participation and individual practices of restraint, as people made efforts to resist violence and protect friends and neighbours. These spaces of peace and forms of restraint demand further attention and understanding.

Methodology

This research adopts a multiple case study approach and employs an exploratory most different systems strategy in order to build theory. Kenya and Kyrgyzstan differ in a number of significant ways that could feasibly factor into shaping the nature and landscape of ethnic violence, including political history, regional dynamics, socio-economic structures, geographical features, and ethnic demographics. Despite these differences, both cases exhibited similarities in the patterns of violence and participation on the ground. The research was conducted in two distinct phases. The field research in Kenya was carried out over 10 months in 2009-2010, with over 500 semi-structured interviews conducted as part of the researcher's PhD fieldwork. It employed a subnational comparative approach, selecting field sites in Nairobi, Eldoret, and Nakuru that had experienced high levels of violence alongside those that did not. The research in Kyrgyzstan was carried out over the course of five weeks in June and July 2016, with fifty-nine semi-structured interviews conducted in that time. The intention was to utilise a similar within-case comparison methodology. However, the sensitivity of the research, and the high levels of fear and suspicion that were encountered, made this approach more challenging. Whilst an extended period of research could have facilitated the building of trust in key field sites – as it had done in Kenya – constraints upon time and resources made this impossible. Upon advice from key informants, the project design was altered to include only areas that had remained relatively calm during the 2010 crisis. These included three small towns or villages near to Osh (Aravan, Kenesh, and Kara-su), Kochkor Ata, a small town neighbouring conflict-ridden Bazar-Korgon, and Uzgen town. Secondary sources and literature have been used to compensate for the absence of primary data gathered in more violent contexts in this case.

In both cases, a mixture of purposive sampling (based on place of residence), and snowball sampling was used to mobilise respondents. Interviewees were asked to narrate their personal experiences of the respective episodes of violence in their villages or neighbourhoods, before a series of more specific questions were explored to capture everyday lived experience and relationships across the ethnic divide. The interview material was further supplemented by observation and secondary source material, including human rights documents and government reports. In both cases, a research assistant was employed to assist with mobilising respondents and with translation where necessary. Whilst central to the success of sensitive research, the presence of assistants nevertheless impacts upon the research process, particularly in relation to who is mobilised and how they might respond to particular questions or issues. [16] In Kenya, my main research assistant was a male, Nubian youth from Nairobi. His ethnic identity was fortuitous in that he was regarded by almost all interviewees as ‘ethnically neutral’ in relation to the violence. However, his gender identity undoubtedly impacted upon the recruitment of female respondents, as well as shaping their responses. In Kyrgyzstan, a young, female Kyrgyz student was employed. As a result, it is important to acknowledge that while interviews with many Uzbeks appeared open and honest, the presence of my Kyrgyz assistant may have restricted or influenced the information that these respondents provided, or the views they expressed. In addition, while my assistant’s gender may have helped mobilise Uzbek participants more easily than a male Kyrgyz assistant, it did render interviews with young men who had potentially been involved in violence more challenging. Snowball sampling methods did mitigate this issue to an extent, but these groups remain underrepresented. Despite these challenges and limitations, however, rewarding interviews were carried out across the ethnic divides in both cases, and the field research has elicited some important and significant findings that demonstrate meaningful similarities.

Social embeddedness and ethnic violence

Understandings of all human behaviour – including violence – must be attentive to the immediate social context in which it is embedded; [17] that is, in the complex array of social identities, ties, and relationships that make up our everyday lives. Processes of boundary hardening do not occur in a vacuum. Rather, they map onto existing social landscapes that can, in some circumstances, serve to undermine them and facilitate restraint. The subsequent sections explore three components of this process in the cases of Kenya and Kyrgyzstan, illustrating marked similarities across these two different cases. The first focuses on the

significance of strong ties of friendship in maintaining peace and shaping individual acts of restraint. The second explores how interethnic interaction can challenge ethnicised perspectives, rendering such spaces more resistant to damaging generalisations about ethnic others. And the final section explores how both vertical and horizontal ties amongst local leaders and their communities facilitated peace and solidarity across the ethnic divide.

Social ties, peace, and restraint

There is a widening consensus within the literature on social movements and political violence that pre-existing social ties play an important role in recruitment, radicalisation, and participation. [18] Recent micro-level studies of violent ethnic conflict, and particularly of the Rwandan genocide, have also drawn attention to this ‘dark side of social capital’, whereby involvement has been ‘linked to the interpersonal ties that bring and bind participants together.’[19] However, far less attention has been paid to how such ties might act as a restraint on violence escalation and participation. Indeed, people are embedded in multiple, complex, and often competing webs of social relationships that can pull in different directions, especially during periods of conflict and tension. Whilst some social ties can encourage violent action, others may mediate participation and build resilience. Stryker has suggested that the intensity of relationships becomes an important factor when such competing identities call for incompatible behaviour. [20] Following these lines, then, this section argues that strong interethnic social ties remain important during violent conflict, and can act as mediators in processes of boundary hardening and as restraints upon violence.

In both the Kenyan and the Kyrgyz crises, residents of ethnically mixed areas noted that their villages remained cool and calm despite being ‘surrounded by war.’ [21] In these areas, residents united across the ethnic divide to protect each other and their properties, establishing interethnic patrols and erecting and defending barricades together. When asked why they felt their areas had been more resilient to the violence, the majority of interviewees pointed to the intensity and strength of interethnic relationships, stating that, ‘when you live together and you know each other well and you interact all the time it is very hard to hurt them.’ [22] Ethnic heterogeneity in and of itself is not sufficient to foster and promote strong crosscutting social ties; indeed, high levels of segregation can persist in heterogeneous contexts. But, as Rydgren et al. note, when multi-ethnic settings encourage close, everyday interactions, interethnic friendships and ties of reciprocity are more likely to emerge. [23] Interviews with those living

in villages that remained relatively peaceful in both Kenya and Kyrgyzstan support this notion; they describe strong interethnic ties of trust, mutual support, and aid that have developed through prolonged daily interaction, and they attribute the maintenance of peace, in part, to the presence of these relationships. Thus, in ethnically mixed spaces, ties of loyalty and reciprocity can build social capital across the ethnic divide, discouraging residents from engaging in violence against one another. As Malthaner notes, ‘loyalty based on personal relations...can be very resilient.’ [24]

Whilst high levels of interaction and integration can promote the development of strong interethnic relationships, that is not to say that those living in more homogeneous settings do not also have ties that cross ethnic boundaries. Of course they do; and these relationships continue to matter during episodes of violence. In fact, pre-existing social ties appear to play an important role in shaping individual decisions to avoid, resist, mediate, limit, or selectively employ violence; not all ethnic others are considered to be equally legitimate targets. In both Kenya and Kyrgyzstan, friends, ‘good neighbours’, and individuals whose ‘otherness’ was more ambiguous, were often protected from attack. Friendships and close neighbourly relationships were the most oft-cited sources of restraint. Interview material from Kenya reveals countless examples of individuals secretly hiding friends or neighbours in their homes in order to protect them, and research in Kyrgyzstan illustrates a similar dynamic. [25] As one Luo youth surmises, ‘We were only fighting against those we didn’t know. If we had a friend who was Kikuyu we would protect him.’ [26] Similarly, individuals considered to be ‘good neighbours’ – those who helped others in the community – were also often protected from harm, whilst ‘bad neighbours’ were targeted. For example, a number of residents of Luo-dominated 4B, Mathare, spoke of a Kikuyu man who was not attacked and remained in the area throughout the crisis; they cited the fact that the man had a posho mill and a water tap, and in everyday life he ‘helped people a lot with these assets, so with that good relationship in the slums, he was safe.’ [27] Similarly, a group of Luo and Luhya youth in Kibera explain, ‘it really depends on how you stayed with someone’ prior to the violence:

LI: You know there was a man here. He had a very bad heart with people here. He was a Kikuyu and he had a water tap. He refused to give water to others here...

LYI: He was not a role model in the community...If you took water from his tap he’ll beat you up. So people remembered what he was like, and when the violence came it was “Let’s go and attack him.”

LI: But the lady of that man was a good woman. She would help people with *unga* [*flour*] and things. So when the people from Gatuikera came to burn the houses here, we, under risk, we helped her. We did not help him, but we helped her. [28]

In addition, local residents whose ‘otherness’ was blurred by virtue of their social connections or depth of integration into the majority community were also more ambiguous targets, and in some cases inspired acts of restraint. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, an elderly Uzbek man is reported to have been beaten by Kyrgyz youth in the Cheremushki microdistrict of Osh, but he escaped being killed, because ‘he speaks Kyrgyz well, he grew up in Otuz-Adyr village;’ [29] and in the Uzbek neighbourhood of Padavan, ‘all the houses were burned except one, where the wife of the owner was an ethnic Kyrgyz.’ [30] Similarly, in Kenya, a Luo interviewee in Mathare explained that his Kikuyu wife was not attacked by other residents because of ‘the way she is deeply in our system and she is talking fluently in Luo.’ [31] Moreover, against the electoral backdrop of violence in Kenya, political allegiances across the ethnic divide similarly blurred the boundaries of ‘otherness.’ Those who had supported the majority community’s favoured candidate during the electoral campaigns – openly rejecting the party associated with their own ethnic community – were more likely to inspire restraint. For example, one Kikuyu interviewee recalls,

The group came to me, eager to kill me, but when they saw me they said, ‘No, no, no, don’t hurt him, he’s a strong ODM supporter, he campaigned with us as a driver.’ So I managed to escape death that time. They asked me, ‘Are you able to make it to your place? Can we take you there, we can give you a guard?...I told them, ‘I’m ok, I’ll reach.’ They left me and continued chasing the others. They killed many of them.’ [32]

Thus, in some cases, the ‘us-them’ binary was softened by an individual’s social integration in, or political support of, the majority community, calling the legitimacy of violence against them into question, and encouraging forms of restraint.

The way in which restraint could be employed, however, differed across actors and contexts, and while some individuals were able to engage in open acts of resistance, others were far more constrained in their options. At the more visible end of the spectrum, some individuals were able to openly oppose, resist, and prevent imminent attacks against people they knew, appealing to other participants not to harm friends and neighbours. For example, upon encountering two Kikuyu friends being chased by a group of armed youth in his village, one Kalenjin interviewee recalls:

I told the crowd, ‘Please don’t kill them. I schooled with them before.’ Just because I’m well-known in the area, they stopped and they weren’t hurt. They told those two boys,

‘If it were not for this man, you would be dead by now, and just because we know this man, if we didn’t know him then both you and him would be dead, so just run and go.’[33]

What is notable here is the significance of the resister’s social ties with, and status amongst, the group: he is a well-known and respected figure. Indeed, in almost all related instances of successful outright resistance like this, the resisting figure was either an established and well-liked member of the attackers’ social group, or a well-respected authority figure within the community. Attempts by individuals to prevent attacks by *external* armed actors – or attempts by those with limited social standing amongst, or authority over, members of the attacking group – were extremely rare. Most interviewees noted that to openly resist in such circumstances would not only be ineffective, but could also lead to brutal, if not fatal, punishment. Thus, this form of restraint only occurred in very limited circumstances with quite specific group dynamics.

Another visible form of restraint involved the choice to moderate violence against acquaintances when encountered on the battlefield. For example, in the midst of one of the most horrific acts of the Kenyan violence, where thirty-five people were burned alive in a church in Kiambaa, one interviewee explained that his mother had managed to escape the fire, and as she was running away, the Kalenjin mob attacked and robbed her. One of his former classmates from school was part of the attacking group. As she fled, ‘she heard someone call her and when she looked back he was calling her to come....he told her that they would take her phone and money, but that he would give her the title deeds and her ID “because we know you.”’ [34] The circumstances under which individuals could exercise such restraint, however, was again significantly limited by the immediate group dynamics; when individuals were confident of their social standing and respect within the group, they might choose to exercise restraint such as this. But in contexts of greater uncertainty, such acts could invite reprisal or accusations of treachery, and individuals often felt they had little opportunity to exercise restraint. Indeed, one Luo resident of Mathare illustrates this clear tension. In his everyday life before the violence, he spent much of his time playing football with Kikuyu friends from the neighbouring village, and as such was not as well-integrated with residents of his own community. He was also married to a Kikuyu. When the violence broke out, he initially held back from participating in attacks against and looting of his Kikuyu neighbours. However, his lack of participation in the violence soon drew attention and accusations of being traitor:

There came a time when they asked me, ‘Why aren’t you joining us? Have you been sent with Mungiki [*a gang associated with the Kikuyu*] so that they can know our plans?’ I said ‘No’, but they know that this place [that I come to] is a Kikuyu place and they see me here every day, and so they thought, ‘This guy is planning something for us.’ So I decided to join them, I had a panga and I was with them, we were going door to door, looting and breaking. [35]

Thus, unless an individual was well-known and well-respected by members of the attacking group, open resistance, restraint, or non-participation in violence was very risky.

Consequently, individuals most commonly utilised more subtle and covert forms of restraint, finding ways of protecting the lives and livelihoods of their friends and neighbours out of sight of other participants. As noted, above, many individuals in both the Kenyan and Kyrgyz cases hid people within their homes; others protected their properties, preventing their destruction or looting by outsiders by pretending that they owned or had appropriated them. [36] Others passed information on to friends in nearby villages, warning them of the time and place of upcoming attacks, or giving them code words to pass roadblocks safely. As one Kalenjin interviewee stated, ‘You are told to cut communication because this isn’t friendship now, this is about community. But you can’t sit there knowing your friend is there, you have to call him.’ [37] These patterns support Lee Ann Fujii’s research on the Rwandan genocide, where she found that out of sight of leaders and other participants, individual Hutu often acted upon pre-existing social ties, helping and protecting Tutsi friends and neighbours. However, when surrounded by other participants, their options were more limited. She concludes that ‘it was social ties, not ethnic membership, that patterned processes of recruitment and targeting.’ [38] My own research demonstrates similar dynamics.

Thus, as Asal et al. note, ‘who you know and how well you know them impacts what you do.’ [39] In ethnically mixed neighbourhoods and villages, where everyday interactions are high, close interethnic relationships can form and render violence against one another much more difficult. In more homogenous contexts, friendships and other close social ties of reciprocity continued to shape forms of participation, encouraging resistance, restraint, and assistance across ethnic lines. However, people’s options were often significantly constrained by the immediate social context, and open resistance was largely only possible when social ties amongst perpetrators themselves were strong, either through friendship or a relationship of authority. In the absence of these, individuals exercised restraint in more subtle and covert ways, protecting and assisting friends and neighbours secretly.

Everyday ethnicity and continuums of violence

This section moves beyond the level of the individual and of interpersonal relationships to examine the ways in which social relationships shape the everyday construction of ethnicity and perceptions of self and other. It argues that ethnicised perspectives, prejudices and resentments – the very ‘stuff’ of polarisation and boundary hardening – are produced, circulated, and reinforced more intensively in largely homogeneous contexts, whilst extensive interethnic interaction can reduce ‘negative ethnicity’ in daily life. [40] Attention to these everyday expressions of ethnicity are important, as episodes of ethnic violence do not emerge in isolation from them, but rather are part of a continuum of ethnically conflictual behaviours; indeed, violence is more likely in contexts where pre-existing polarisation is high. [41] Thus, this section seeks to strengthen the bridge between the macro- and micro-levels of analysis by exploring how everyday social relations on the ground interact with a key macro-level driver of the conflict: ethnic polarisation

In both Kenya and Kyrgyzstan, expressions of negative ethnicity, prejudice and resentment permeate everyday life, pervading TV, radio, print and other media, and infusing discourse between people on the ground. These expressions contribute to the construction and maintenance of us-them distinctions and form the foundations of polarisation and boundary hardening in times of political tension. Indeed, the very act of ‘speaking prejudice’ perpetuates it, reinforces it, and further embeds it within mentalities and consciousness. As one Kenyan news article surmises:

We have...left unchallenged our ethnic stereotypes to the point of allowing hate speech to thrive in our conversations. We have accused our political leaders (and rightly so) of making hate speeches in public gatherings, but we are all engaging daily in the same sin. [42]

However, the occurrence of negative ethnicity is shaped by socio-spatial dynamics. Whilst relatively common and frequently unchallenged in in-group communication – or at least when a particular group constitutes a clear majority – in more ethnically mixed contexts it is far less acceptable; and when it does occur, it is often subject to local disciplining and contestation. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, interviewees indicated that whilst prejudice and discrimination is commonplace in segregated cities, such as Osh, in their own neighbourhoods and villages – where interethnic friendships and marriages are pervasive – it is not as apparent, and is challenged when it does occur. In Uzgen, for example, several interviewees noted that visible interethnic tensions are quickly addressed:

If there are rumours about misunderstandings or that someone is saying that one ethnic group is better than others, the city people stand together to stop it or to quell the rumours. [43]

Wa-Mungai's analysis of the use of ethnic stereotypes in Kenya illustrates a similar point, highlighting the ways in which the articulation of prejudice and derogatory language is more constrained in ethnically mixed social settings. [44] This policing of negative ethnicity and prejudice plays an important role in building and maintaining trust and tolerance between members of different ethnic groups. As Kutmanaliev notes, 'the absence of any bridging communication and contacts between residents of the Kyrgyz and Uzbek neighborhoods [in Osh] increased their perceptions and feelings of hostility, uncertainty [and] mistrust.' [45] Thus, following the findings of intergroup contact theory, I suggest that increased, positive, intergroup interactions can reduce prejudice and intolerance between different communities. Consequently, in ethnically mixed contexts, appeals to ethnicised prejudices and resentments at times of political tension find far less resonance than in ethnicised spaces, where the circulation of prejudice, intolerance and resentment infuses everyday life.

Processes of boundary hardening are not limited to the pre-violence period however; indeed, violence itself often plays a constitutive role. Yet, the immediate social context again can work either to facilitate and encourage participation in violence, or to slow and restrain it. In more ethnically homogeneous spaces, for example, interactions with and observations of, co-ethnics and their responses to the crisis can tap into feelings of pride, duty and solidarity to the ethnic group. As one interviewee recalls:

As we talked, a group of Kikuyu passed our place...singing songs...and every Kikuyu in the area was told to rise up and defend their country, their rights, their land, their farms and their family, what our forefathers left, because there is no way that it can be taken from us, it is for us to defend it...I was going to defend my people. I couldn't stay in the house because I'm the child of heroes. [46]

Moreover, as events are discussed and stories of atrocities committed by opposing ethnic groups are circulated, or as rumours of impending attacks spread, feelings of anger, hatred or fear can intensify and reify ethnic boundaries even further. Indeed, the movement of IDPs, and the stories that they relate can compel others to action. One Kenyan IDP, for example, recalls fleeing to an area where violence had not yet spread:

They asked how things were there in Eldoret. I told them how the Kalenjin and Luo were killing Kikuyu there and I didn't know they were getting angry at my story...When it reached night, I saw them coming with a box of knives and I wondered what they were for. I heard them say that 'This knife, we must use it to circumcise the Luo here.' [47]

Thus, intra-ethnic interaction and the visibility of suffering can heighten the salience of ethnicity and strengthen the inclination to react to violence against the community. As a result, boundary hardening, and the impetus to participate in violence against ethnic others, spreads more rapidly in ethnicised areas. In ethnically mixed settings, however, whilst individuals may experience feelings of ethnic duty, solidarity, anger, fear, or resentment as violence unfolds, they are not exclusively reinforced through interactions with those in close proximity; rather they are tempered by ethnic others and subject to contestation and debate. Consequently, these spaces are more amenable to local appeals for peace and restraint, either by other residents or by local leaders.

The local structure of social ties, then, can serve to facilitate or mediate boundary hardening processes in periods of political tension and transition. In segregated contexts, relatively clear us-them distinctions and ethnic polarisation mark everyday life, rendering them more vulnerable to escalation along these lines at moments of uncertainty. Ethnically mixed spaces, on the other hand, facilitate the development of softer, more blurred boundaries between ethnic others, and as such, the boundary hardening processes upon which violence depends find less resonance. As McDoom points out, 'Where you live matters because what your neighbours think, say and do also matters.' [48]

Leadership and pockets of peace

While the social structures and relationships of everyday life can make peace and restraint possible, these conditions in and of themselves cannot wholly prevent or constrain violence; some form of organisation is required to sustain peace. Community leadership is crucial in the prevention of conflict escalation. [49] In both Kenya and Kyrgyzstan, prominent local figures from across the ethnic divides played a key role in fostering and maintaining calm within their communities. They engaged in a wide range of activities to maintain peace, including going house to house to preach peace; communicating amongst each other and with leaders in neighbouring villages to quell rumours; coordinating the building of barricades; establishing patrols within villages and neighbourhoods; negotiating with external armed groups; and strictly controlling and disciplining movement within their community. While the specific actors involved, and the tactics they favoured, differed across contexts, their respective

successes in facilitating peace and resilience was dependent upon strong vertical and horizontal social ties between themselves and their communities.

In the Kyrgyz context, a wide range of formal, semi-formal, and informal governance actors adopted leadership roles in mobilising for peace, including district administration officials, police chiefs, NGO activists, neighbourhood committee heads, and other prominent members of the local community. [50] My interviewees emphasised the importance of village *aksakals* (elders) in particular, noting that ‘the fact that the *aksakals* got together and said they would not fight anyone, that kept the peace here.’[51] The success of these actors depended heavily upon strong vertical ties with local residents; it was important that they both knew and were well known by their communities. Indeed, Khamidov et al. note that community leaders and officials in Aravan were able to prevent violence due to their personal relations with many residents, but the lack of comparable vertical ties in Osh made peace efforts ineffective. [52] Moreover, these actors play a central role in managing community issues in everyday life, and are particularly prominent in dispute resolution activities. As such, they are already recognised as leaders in the maintenance of social harmony. This traditional authority and legitimacy ensures that their appeals for peace are more likely to be heeded at times of tension. [53] As one interviewee noted, ‘the elders’ court here is very powerful and everyone listens to them.’ [54] Contrastingly, Kutmanaliev points out that in certain areas of Osh, there is an absence of this sense of traditional authority and of ‘community leaders who are recognized as such by the majority of residents’; he notes that this contributed to their lack of resilience to violence. [55] Thus, where elders and other community leaders know, and are well-known by, local residents, and where they already have established positions of authority in governing everyday life, there exists a greater capacity for encouraging restraint. In rural villages in Kenya, similar dynamics were noted as residents asserted that, ‘the elders told us that we must unite in this village.’ [56] Just as in Kyrgyzstan, elders in these contexts enjoy significant levels of authority and respect, and are central figures in managing local conflicts and community activities in everyday life. This facilitated the resonance of their appeals for peace when violence erupted. However, in urban slums, while elders, religious leaders and other traditional authority figures are present and active to an extent, their role and authority has been diluted by the presence of other informal governance actors. Indeed, in these highly insecure settings, gangs and vigilante groups often play a greater role in protection, security and dispute resolution within their communities. [57] When the violence erupted, it was these ‘boys of the area’ [58] who often took the lead in imposing peace within their territories. Indeed, it should be noted that such

groups relied much more heavily on repression, violence and threat than governance actors who enjoy more traditional authority. [59] As one vigilante leader notes:

In the post election, this place was not affected because it is mixed up [ethnically], and we have a vigilante group. I was steering heading the vigilante group. We didn't sleep and we didn't allow anyone to come in... We decided if you start war here then we will put you out of this community and we were strong... There were some who wanted to do that, they formed a group wanting to start that but we were many and we were strong. [60]

Members of these vigilante groups were not necessarily bystanders during the violence and a number admitted to engaging in violence and looting activities outside of their own neighbourhoods; however, they strictly disciplined any agitators within their own territories, and prevented external groups from entering the area in order to protect their properties and livelihoods.

The capacity for leaders to establish, impose, and maintain peace, then, relies on a foundation of authority, alongside strong vertical ties to local residents; they must know and be well-known within their communities. Yet, horizontal ties that cut across the ethnic divide are also crucial amongst leaders, and in both the Kenyan and Kyrgyz violence they served three key purposes. Firstly, they provided opportunities for communication, building confidence and reassurance that no attacks were being planned. [61] Indeed, open communication and the flow of information at the leadership level helps prevent the emergence of a 'security dilemma' between ethnic communities. [62] Secondly, the visibility of interethnic cooperation amongst leaders establishes a norm of tolerance, sets an example for ordinary citizens to follow, and gives appeals for peace and friendship greater credence. As one interviewee in Aravan notes, 'the leaders did a big job at preserving peace...[they] showed tolerance.' [63] Thirdly, the multi-ethnic nature of leadership within these spaces facilitated negotiations with external armed groups from either side of the conflict divide, allowing leaders from the same ethnic group to confront them and dissuade them from entry. One interviewee in Nigeria, Mathare, for example, explains, 'we were protecting both tribes, whoever would come here. So when the Luos came we put Martin [*a Luo*] there and he talked to them, and then they just know that we were together. So we had no problems with anyone.' [64].

Thus, informal governance actors utilised their pre-existing ties and connections to build trust across the ethnic divide, to inspire norms of tolerance and cooperation, and to protect the area from external attack. However, their capacity to mobilise residents for peace, and to silence any local agitators was dependent upon the presence of cross-cutting ties amongst residents

themselves. Indeed, one of the key ways in which leaders brought communities together was through appeals to a common identity that transcended the ethnic divide. In her research in Nigeria and Indonesia, Krause similarly argues that leaders ‘supported proactive “we-thinking” and alternative framings to the dominant conflict identities of Muslim versus Christian. [65] This bears striking similarities to leadership appeals in Kenya and Kyrgyzstan, where leaders worked to construct more territorially-based identities. As one Kenyan interviewee recalls, ‘Here our elders in this community called everyone and told us, “You are not a Luo or a Nandi or a Kikuyu anymore. We are Kenyans. We must come together to take care of our community.”’ [66] Such appeals have greater resonance in ethnically mixed areas. Finally, but importantly, in low-segregated areas, whilst there may be some local agitators, it is much harder for large, armed, mono-ethnic groups to form and to overwhelm advocates for peace than in more homogeneous spaces.

Conclusion

While there has been a welcome shift to micro-level perspectives of conflict and peace in recent scholarship, the factors shaping individual acts of restraint amidst violence remain underexplored, and the connection between macro-level conflict drivers – such as ethnic polarisation – and micro-level dynamics are not well understood. This paper has sought to address this gap, and to better understand the emergence of pockets of peace and individual choices to restrain, limit or selectively employ violence during episodes of ethnic conflict. The multiple case study approach and the most-different-systems strategy helps to build confidence in the applicability and transferability of the findings to other contexts; indeed, this paper has shown that there are striking similarities in the role of social ties across the two very diverse cases of Kenya and Kyrgyzstan. In both contexts, strong, cross-cutting social ties facilitated forms of peace and restraint in three key ways. Firstly, they rendered interpersonal violence more difficult, encouraging individuals to avoid, limit or prevent acts against friends and neighbours. The ways in which they could exercise restraint, however, were constrained by group dynamics and the immediate social context; indeed, in the absence of a strong social standing amongst members of the attacking group, individuals tended to seek more subtle and covert forms of restraint. Secondly, cross-ethnic social ties can disrupt and challenge negative us-them distinctions in everyday life, rendering ethnically-mixed neighbourhoods more resilient to the polarising narratives upon which violence depends. And thirdly, horizontal ties

amongst local leaders, and strong vertical to their communities facilitate leadership coordination and appeals for peace. Thus, episodes of ethnic violence ‘are not fought in social vacuums. They are fought in social landscapes.’ [67] Social ties can strengthen boundary-softening processes and act as an internal brake on violence escalation.

Funding

The research carried out in Kyrgyzstan was generously funded by the Peace Research Grant Program of the International Peace Research Association Foundation.

Notes

Notes

[1] Scott Straus, 2012, ‘Retreating from the Brink: Theorizing mass violence and the dynamics of restraint’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 10:2, pp. 343-362, p. 344

[2] Jeremy Allouche and Patrick Anderson Zadi Zadi, 2013, ‘The Dynamics of Restraint in Côte D’Ivoire’ *IDS Bulletin* 44:1, pp. 72-86, p. 77; cf. Lee Ann Fujii, 2009, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of violence in Rwanda*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 9.

[3] Stathis N. Kalyvas, 2008, ‘Promises and Pitfalls of an Emerging Research Program: The Microdynamics of Civil War’, in Stathis N. Kalyvas, Ian Shapiro, and Tarek Masoud (eds), *Order, Conflict and Violence*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 397-421, p. 399.

[4] Paul Brass, 2003, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*, Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press

[5] Steven Wilkinson, 2004, *Votes and violence: Electoral competition and ethnic riots in India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[6] Ashutosh Varshney, 2002, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, New Haven CT: Yale University Press.

[7] See for example, Landon E. Hancock and Christopher Roger Mitchell (eds), *Zones of peace*, Boulder, CO: Kumarian Press; Mary B Anderson and Marshall Wallace, 2013, *Opting out of war: Strategies to prevent violent conflict*, Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers; Ed Garcia, 1997, ‘Filipino zones of peace’, *Peace Review*, 9:2, pp221-224; Philipp Naucke, 2017, ‘Peacebuilding upside down? How a peace community in Colombia builds peace despite the state’, *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie sociale*, 25: 4, pp. 454-469; Landon E. Hancock, 2017, ‘Agency and peacebuilding: the promise of local zones of peace’, *Peacebuilding*, 5:3, pp. 255-269; Victoria Sanford, 2003, ‘Peacebuilding in a War Zone: The case of Colombian peace communities’, *International Peacekeeping*, 10:2, pp. 107-118; Allouche and Zadi, ‘The Dynamics of Restraint.’

[8] Oliver Kaplan, 2017, *Resisting War: How communities protect themselves*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

- [9] Jana Krause, 2018, *Resilient Communities: Non-violence and civilian agency in communal war*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Ana Arjona, 2016, *Rebelocracy: Social order in the Colombian civil war*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- [10] Stathis N. Kalyvas, 2006, *The Logic of Violence in Civil Wars*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Jeremy Weinstein, 2006, *Inside Rebellion: The politics of insurgent violence*, New York: Cambridge University Press; Nils Hägerdal, 2019, 'Ethnic cleansing and the politics of restraint: Violence and coexistence in the Lebanese civil war', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 63:1, pp. 59-74; Reed M. Wood, 2014, 'Opportunities to kill or incentives for restraint? Rebel capabilities, the origins of support, and civilian victimization in civil war', *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 31: 5, pp. 461-480.
- [11] Omar Shahabudin McDoom, 2013, 'Who killed in Rwanda's Genocide? Micro-space, social influence and individual participation in intergroup violence', *Journal of Peace Research*, 50:4, pp. 453-467
- [12] Lee Ann Fujii, 2008, 'The Power of Local Ties: Popular participation in the Rwandan genocide', *Security Studies*, 17:3, pp. 568-597; Lee Ann Fujii, *Killing Neighbors*.
- [13] Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence*, p. 4.
- [14] McDoom draws attention to this gap, noting that it remains unclear precisely how 'macrovariables' like ethnicity affect micro-level outcomes. Omar Shahabudin McDoom, 2014, 'Antisocial Capital: A profile of Rwandan genocide perpetrators' social networks', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 58:5, pp. 865-893, p. 890.
- [15] Joel Busher, Donald Holbrook, and Graham Macklin, 2019, 'The internal brakes on violent escalation: a typology', *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, 11:1, pp. 3-25, p. 16-17.
- [16] See Sarah Jenkins, 2018, 'Assistants, guides, collaborators, friends: The concealed figures of conflict research' *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 47(2), pp. 143-170, for further discussion of the role of research assistants in conflict research.
- [17] Mark Granovetter, 1985, 'Economic action and social structure: The problem of embeddedness', *American Journal of Sociology*, 91:3, pp. 481-510.
- [18] Joel Busher, 2015, 'What part do social networks play in radicalisation?', *Radicalisation Research*, available at <https://www.radicalisationresearch.org/debate/busher-social-networks/> [accessed 16 June 2020].
- [19] Omar Shahabudin McDoom, 2014, 'Antisocial Capital: A profile of Rwandan genocide perpetrators' social networks', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 58:5, pp. 865-893, p. 889.
- [20] Sheldon Stryker, 1968, 'Identity Salience and Role Prominence: The relevance of symbolic interaction theory for family research', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 30:4, pp. 558-564.
- [21] Interview with coastal province youth, Nigeria, Mathare, Kenya, 19 May 2010.
- [22] Interview with elderly Kyrgyz woman, Kochkor-Ata, Kyrgyzstan, 18 June 2016
- [23] Jens Rydgren, Dana Sofi, and Martin Hällsten, 2013, 'Interethnic Friendship, Trust, and Tolerance: Findings from two North Iraqi cities', *American Journal of Sociology*, 118:6, pp. 1650-1694, p. 1659.

- [24] Stefan Malthaner, 2015, 'Violence, Legitimacy, and Control: The micro-dynamics of support relationships between militant groups and their social environment', *Civil Wars*, 1:4, pp. 125-445, p. 442.
- [25] Neil Melvin, 2011, *Promoting a Stable and Multiethnic Kyrgyzstan: Overcoming the causes and legacies of violence*, Central Eurasia Project, Occasional Papers Series No. 3, New York, NY: Open Society Foundations. There are also references to similar activities in Norwegian Helsinki Committee, Memorial Human Rights Center, and Freedom House, 2012, *A Chronicle of Violence: The events in the south of Kyrgyzstan in June 2010 (Osh Region)*, available at https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Report_2_12_ENG_net.pdf [accessed 28 September 2020]
- [26] Interview with Luo youth, Kianda, Kibera, Kenya, 15 November 2009
- [27] Interview with Luo youth, 4B, Mathare, Kenya, 9 May 2010
- [28] Group interview with three Luo and two Luhya male youths, Kianda, Kibera, 14 November 2009.
- [29] Cited in Norwegian Helsinki Committee et al., *A Chronicle of Violence*, p. 103
- [30] Cited in Norwegian Helsinki Committee et al., *A Chronicle of Violence*, p. 140
- [31] Interview with Luo youth, 4B, Mathare, Kenya, 2 May 2010
- [32] Interview with Kamba youth, Ronda, Nakuru, Kenya, 7 June 2010
- [33] Interview with Kalenjin youth, Kaptembwa, Nakuru, Kenya, 20 June 2010
- [34] Interview with Kikuyu youth, Kiambaa, Eldoret, Kenya, 20 January 2010.
- [35] Interview with Luo youth, Nigeria, Mathare, Kenya, 20 May 2010
- [36] Numerous examples related throughout Norwegian Helsinki Committee et al., *A Chronicle of Violence*.
- [37] Interview with male Kalenjin youth, Shabab, Nakuru, Kenya, 2 June 2010
- [38] Fujii, *Killing Neighbors*, p. 128-129.
- [39] Victor H. Asal, Na'ama Nagar and R. Karl Rethemeyer, 2015, 'Building Terrorism from Social Ties: The dark side of social capital', *Civil Wars*, 16:4, pp. 402-424, p. 420.
- [40] Koigi wa Wamwere, 2003, *Negative Ethnicity: From bias to genocide*, New York, NY: Seven Stories Press
- [41] See Jeffrey S. Kopstein and Jason Wittenberg, 2011, 'Deadly Communities: Local Milieus and the Persecution of Jews in Occupied Poland', *Comparative Political Studies*, 44:3, pp. 259-283 for an example of this argument in relation to Jewish pogroms.
- [42] John Mwazemba, 2008, 'Writer ridicules tribal stereotypes', *The Sunday Standard*, 10 February 2008.
- [43] Interview with elderly Kyrgyz woman, Uzgen, Kyrgyzstan, 22 June 2016.
- [44] Mbugua Wa-Mungai. 2007, 'Tusker Project Fame: Ethnic states, popular flows', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 1:3, pp. 338-358

- [45] Joldon Kutmanaliev, 2015, 'Public and communal spaces and their relation to the spatial dynamics of ethnic riots: Violence and non-violence in the city of Osh', *International Journal of Social Policy*, 35:7/8, pp. 449-477, p. 466.
- [46] Interview with middle-aged Kikuyu man, Langalanga, Nakuru 2 June 2010.
- [47] Interview with Kikuyu youth, Kapsoya, Eldoret, 12 February 2010
- [48] McDoom, 'Who killed', p. 465.
- [49] Krause, *Resilient communities*, p. 68.
- [50] See for example, Fryer et al.'s description of events in Kara-Suu, and Khamidov et al.'s detailed analysis of peace efforts in Aravan. Paul Fryer, Elmira Satybaldieva, Jeremy Smith and Joni Virkkunen, 2011, 'Indirect fall-out from the June 2010 events in Kyrgyzstan: the case of Kara-Suu', *EUCAM Commentary No. 14, June 2011*, available at <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/indirect-fall-out-june-2010-events-kyrgyzstan-case-kara-suu/> [Accessed 16 June 2020]; Alisher Khamidov, Nick Megoran, and John Heathershaw, 2017, 'Bottom-up peacekeeping in southern Kyrgyzstan: How local actors managed to prevent the spread of violence from Osh/Jalal-Abad to Aravan, June 2010', *Nationalities Papers*, 45:6, pp. 1118-1134.
- [51] Interview with young Kyrgyz man, Uzgen, Kyrgyzstan, 27 June 2016.
- [52] Khamidov et al. 'Bottom up peacekeeping', p. 1124.
- [53] Arjona similarly argues that communities that enjoy legitimate and effective dispute resolution institutions are more likely to be willing to oppose violence, and also to be able to unite in order to do so. See Arjona, *Rebelocracy*, p. 71.
- [54] Interview with young Kyrgyz man, Uzgen, Kyrgyzstan, 22nd June 2016.
- [55] Kutmanaliev 'Public and communal spaces', p. 488. Here, Kutmanaliev is discussing the Kyrgyz dominated apartment bloc neighbourhoods of Osh here. In the Uzbek *mahallas*, community leadership figures are significant.
- [56] Interview with young Kikuyu man, Kenya Service, Eldoret, 12 February 2010
- [57] Adrienne LeBas, 2013, 'Violence and Urban Order in Nairobi, Kenya and Lagos, Nigeria', *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 48, pp. 240-262, p. 244.
- [58] Interview with coastal province youth, Nigeria, Mathare, 19 May 2010.
- [59] That is not to say that elders and other leaders did not exert discipline and control. Indeed, in Uzgen a vast majority of my interviewees expressed that the aksakals strictly controlled their communities, preventing people from coming in, but also from leaving to go and fight in Osh or elsewhere.
- [60] Interview with young Kikuyu man, Kabiro, Kawangware, 1 March 2010
- [61] This was more prominent in contexts where large groups of youths from specific ethnic communities were present; in the ethnically mixed slums of Kenyan cities, for example, this was less of an issue, as groups in these areas were not comprised of any single community that could overwhelm.
- [62] Barry R. Posen, 1993, 'The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict', *Survival*, 35:1, pp. 27-47
- [63] Interview with young Kyrgyz woman, Aravan, Kyrgyzstan, 15 June 2016
- [64] Interview with young Kikuyu man, Nigeria, Mathare, 18 May 2010

[65] Krause, *Resilient Communities*, p. 72

[66] Interview with Borana youth, Kenya Service, Eldoret, 12 February 2010

[67] Kaplan, *Resisting War*, p. 34.