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THE COLONIAL PAST IS STILL RELEVANT

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‘The intellectual history of colonialism is littered with many a wilful cause of more recent conflict’ | Photo Credit: T. SINGARAVELOU

As a writer who, in some circles, is blamed (or credited, depending on your point of view) for having brought colonialism once again into the public consciousness, it may surprise some that I concede the limitations of anti-colonialism as a relevant discourse in the 21st century. Thankfully, it is no longer fashionable in most of the developing world to decry the evils of colonialism in assigning blame for every national misfortune. Internationally, the subject of colonialism is even more passé, since the need for decolonisation is no longer much debated, and there are, after all, no empires left. Yet, it would not be wise to consign colonialism to the proverbial dustbin of history. As I have pointed out in my writings and speeches, much of what we are is a product of the colonial era, and many of our ills can be traced directly to the impact of imperialism and the policies of colonial rulers. Colonialism remains a relevant factor in understanding the problems and the dangers of the world in which we live.

To begin with, residual problems from the end of the earlier era of colonisation, usually the result of untidy departures by the colonial power, still remain dangerously stalemated. The dramatic events in East Timor in 1999 are no longer fresh in the memory, and the more recent woes of neither Afghanistan nor Myanmar, can be attributed to colonialism. But no closure seems in sight in western Sahara, Jammu and Kashmir or in those old standbys of Cyprus and Palestine, all messy legacies of colonialism. Fuses lit in the colonial era could ignite again, as they did in the Horn of Africa, between Ethiopia and Eritrea, where war broke out over a colonial border that the Italians of an earlier era of occupation had failed to define with enough precision, and, more recently still, between the government of Ethiopia and its Tigrayan minority.

But it is not just the direct results of colonialism that remain relevant: there are the indirect ones as well. The intellectual history of colonialism is littered with many a wilful cause of more recent conflict. One is, quite simply, careless anthropology: the Belgian classification of Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda and Burundi, which reified a distinction that had not existed before, continues to haunt the region of the African Great Lakes. A related problem is that of motivated sociology: how much bloodshed do we owe, for instance, to the British invention of “martial races” in India, which skewed recruitment into the armed forces and saddled some communities (Punjabi Muslims, for instance) with the onerous burden of militarism? And one can never overlook the old colonial administrative habit of “divide and rule”, exemplified, again, by British policy in the subcontinent after 1857, systematically promoting political divisions between Hindus and Muslims, which led inexorably to the tragedy of Partition. Such colonial-era distinctions were not

just pernicious; they were often accompanied by an unequal distribution of the resources of the state within the colonial society. Belgian colonialists favoured Tutsis, leading to Hutu rejection of them as alien interlopers; Sinhalese resentment of privileges enjoyed by the Tamils in the colonial era in Sri Lanka prompted the discriminatory policies after Independence, that in turn fuelled the Tamil revolt.

A “mixed” colonial history within one modern state is also a potential source of danger. When a state has more than one colonial past, its future is vulnerable. Secessionism, after all, can be prompted by a variety of factors, historical, geographical and cultural as well as “ethnic”. Ethnicity or language hardly seem to be a factor in the secessions (one recognised, the other not) of Eritrea from Ethiopia and the “Republic of Somaliland” from Somalia. Rather, it was different colonial experiences (Italian rule in Eritrea and British rule in Somaliland) that set them off, at least in their own self-perceptions, from the rest of their ethnic compatriots. A similar case can be made in respect of the former Yugoslavia, where parts of the country that had been under Austro-Hungarian rule for 800 years had been joined to parts that spent almost as long under Ottoman suzerainty. The war that erupted in 1991 was in no small measure a war that pitted those parts of Yugoslavia that had been ruled by German-speaking empires against those that had not (or had resisted such colonisation).

Boundaries drawn in colonial times, even if unchanged after independence, still create enormous problems of national unity, especially in Africa. Civil conflict along ethnic or regional lines can arise when the challenge of nation-building within colonially-drawn boundaries becomes insurmountable. Where colonial constructions force disparate peoples together by the arbitrariness of a colonial map-maker’s pen, nationhood becomes an elusive notion. Older tribal and clan loyalties in Africa were mangled by the boundaries drawn, in such distant cities as Berlin, for colonially-created states whose post-independence leaders had to invent new traditions and national identities out of whole cloth. The result was the manufacture of unconvincing political myths, as artificial as the countries they mythologise, which all-too-often cannot command genuine patriotic allegiance from the citizenry they aim to unite. Civil war is made that much easier for local leaders challenging a “national” leader whose nationalism fails to resonate across his country. Rebellion against such a leader is, after all, merely the reassertion of history over “his” story.

State failure in the wake of colonialism is another evident source of conflict, as the by-product of an unprepared newly-independent state’s inability to govern. The crisis of governance in many African countries is a real and abiding cause for concern in world affairs today. The collapse of effective central governments — as manifest in Sierra Leone and South Sudan recently, and in Liberia and Somalia before that — could unleash a torrent of alarming possibilities: a number of “weak states”, particularly in Africa, seem vulnerable to collapsing in a welter of conflict.

Underdevelopment in post-colonial societies is itself a cause of conflict. The uneven development of infrastructure in a poor country, as a result of priorities skewed for the benefit of the colonialists, can lead to resources being distributed unevenly, which in turn leads to increasing fissures in a society between those from “neglected regions” and those who are better served by roads, railways, power stations, telecommunications, bridges and canals. Advancing underdevelopment in many countries of the South, which are faring poorly in their desperate struggle to remain as players in the game of global capitalism, has created conditions of desperate poverty, ecological collapse and rootless, unemployed populations beyond the control of atrophying state systems — a portrait vividly painted by Robert Kaplan in his book The Coming Anarchy, which suggests the real danger of perpetual violence on the peripheries of our global village.

Even in the third decade of the 21st century, therefore, it seems ironically clear that tomorrow’s

anarchy might still be due, in no small part, to yesterday's colonial attempts at order. I have no wish to give those politicians in post-colonial countries, whose leadership has been found wanting in the present, any reason to find excuses for their failures in the past. But in looking to understand possible future sources of conflict in our times, we have to realise that sometimes the best crystal ball is a rear-view mirror.

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