

Democracy, Ethnic Fragmentation, and Internal Conflict

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Confused Theories, Faulty Data, and the
"Crucial Case" of Papua New Guinea

Two countervailing themes have dominated world politics over the past decade: the continuing spread of democratic government and the explosion of intercommunal ethnic violence around the globe. In many cases, rising levels of internal conflict, particularly ethnic conflict, have accompanied transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy.¹ The collapse of authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia has resulted in a threefold increase in the number of democratic regimes around the world.² Despite recent backsliding in a number of regions, major transitions to democracy continue to occur in pivotal states such as Indonesia, Nigeria, and Russia. At the same time, however, the world has witnessed a change in the nature of armed conflict, toward intrastate violence and ethnic conflict. Most violent conflicts today occur not between states but within them: Of the 110 major armed conflicts between 1989 and 1999, only 7 were traditional interstate conflicts. The remaining 103 took place within ex-

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1. See Renée de Nevers, "Democratization and Ethnic Conflict," in Michael Brown, ed., *Ethnic Conflict and International Security* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

2. This process has naturally encouraged a considerable literature dealing with democratic transitions and their consequences, and the relationship between institutional choices and the consolidation of democracy. See, for example, Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter, *Transitions to Democracy: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Larry Diamond, Juan Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., *Democracy in Developing Countries: Africa* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1988); Diamond, Linz, and Lipset, eds., *Democracy in Developing Countries: Asia* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1989); Diamond, Linz, and Lipset, eds., *Democracy in Developing Countries: Latin America* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1989); Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991); Larry Diamond, Juan Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., *Politics in Developing Countries: Comparing Experiences with Democracy*, rev. ed. (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1995); Larry Diamond and Mark F. Plattner, eds., *The Global Resurgence of Democracy* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); and Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Towards Consolidation* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

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isting states, mostly focused around ethnic issues.³ Between them, these parallel processes of democratization and ethnic conflict have defined the international agenda in the post-Cold War period. They have also refocused both scholarly and policy attention on the relationship between democratic politics, ethnic group demography, and internal conflict.⁴

One issue that has not received sufficient scholarly attention is the effect of different *types* of ethnic division on political stability and democratic performance. Like Tolstoy's unhappy families, ethnically divided societies tend to be divided in different ways. For example, divided societies can be fragmented into many contending groups (e.g., Papua New Guinea and Tanzania) or balanced between a few similarly sized ones, which can then be broken down into bipolar (e.g., Fiji and Cyprus) or multipolar (e.g., Bosnia) configurations. They can feature dominant majorities (e.g., Sri Lanka) or dominant minorities (e.g., Rwanda). Minorities can be based on indigenous or other homeland societies, or on settler diasporas (e.g., Russians in the Baltics). Ethnic groups can be divided by international boundaries between several states (e.g., Kurds) or entirely encapsulated by a single state. Groups can be territorially concentrated or widely dispersed. The nature of the ethnic divide can thus have a significant influence on the way ethnic conflicts are manifested and consequently on the capacity of the political system to manage them.

As is discussed below, many scholars and policymakers appear to believe that increasing ethnic diversity undermines a state's democratic prospects. This article challenges that presumption. It looks at the relationship between ethnic fragmentation and democracy from two perspectives. At a comparative level, it examines the adequacy of the data collections used by a number of large-*N* comparative studies on this issue, and on the theories derived from them. At a case-study level, it analyzes the reasons behind the apparently anomalous democratic history of the South Pacific state of Papua New Guinea, which on many indicators is the most ethnically fragmented society in the world. Taken together, these macro- and micro-level perspectives raise serious questions about the adequacy of existing theories on the relationship between democratic politics and ethnic fragmentation. In particular, they suggest that the conventional wisdom—that ethnic fragmentation necessarily undermines

3. Peter Wallensteen and Margareta Sollenberg, "Armed Conflict, 1989–99," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 37, No. 5 (September 2000).

4. For a policy-focused approach to these issues, see Peter Harris and Ben Reilly, eds., *Democracy and Deep-Rooted Conflict: Options for Negotiators* (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 1998).

prospects for democracy—is wrong, and that under some circumstances, the presence of many ethnic groups can actually be a positive factor for democratic stability and persistence.

What We Know

Scholars have traditionally believed that internal ethnic divisions are detrimental to democratic stability. A classic example is the case against the likelihood of democracy in divided societies put forth by Alvin Rabushka and Kenneth Shepsle, who argue that would-be political leaders typically find the rewards of “outbidding” on ethnic issues—moving toward increasingly extremist rhetoric and policy positions—greater than those of moderation.⁵ Democratic prospects are undermined by the strong tendency toward politicization of ethnic demands, which in turn often leads to zero-sum, winner-take-all politics in which some groups are permanently included and some permanently excluded. Because ethnic identities tend to be highly salient in divided societies, unscrupulous would-be ethnic leaders—“ethnic entrepreneurs”—have a strong incentive to harness these identities as a political force and to use communal identity as the base instigator of voter mobilization. This often leads to divisiveness and conflict because the demands of one group generally come at the expense of others. Because demands based on outbidding are often easier to maintain than those based on accommodation, politics in divided societies can quickly become characterized by centrifugal pressures, in which the moderate political center is overwhelmed by extremist forces. The failure of democratic politics is often the result.

Although few scholars argue that ethnic divisions are a positive force, there is debate about whether different degrees of ethnic heterogeneity can help or hinder democracy. The most common contention is that increasing levels of ethnic fragmentation make democracy more difficult. Indeed arguments for a negative relationship between ethnic fragmentation and democracy have a long and venerable lineage in political science. Some of the greatest political thinkers have argued that stable democracy is possible only in relatively homogeneous societies. John Stuart Mill, for example, thought that democracy was incompatible with the structure of a multiethnic society, as “free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities.”⁶

5. Alvin Rabushka and Kenneth A. Shepsle, *Politics in Plural Societies: A Theory of Democratic Instability* (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1972).

6. John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1958[1861]), p. 230.

Gabriel Almond's seminal 1956 article "Comparative Political Systems" explicitly posited a relationship between ethnic fractionalization and rising conflict.⁷ This was a prevalent view among many scholars and policymakers through the 1960s, with the perils of tribalism and ethnic division frequently cited as the root causes of democracy's failure in the many newly independent states of Africa and Asia.⁸ Since then, a series of cross-national studies on the effect of ethnic heterogeneity on political stability have concluded that as the number of ethnic groups in a state increases, the prospects for sustainable democracy decreases. One of the first such studies, Robert Dahl's *Polyarchy*, utilizing data collected in the 1960s, concluded that although democracy in highly fragmented countries was not impossible, "pluralism often places a dangerous strain on the tolerance and mutual security required for a system of public contestation," and hence "a competitive political system is less likely in countries with a considerable measure of subcultural pluralism."⁹ Around the same time, Rabushka and Shepsle found that one of the "striking regularities" among ethnically fragmented societies was that "democracy frequently gives way to forms of authoritarian rule."¹⁰ Arend Lijphart argued in his work on consociational democracy, *Democracy in Plural Societies*, that the optimal number of groups for peaceful ethnic conflict management is three or four, with conditions becoming progressively less favorable as numbers increase because "co-operation among groups becomes more difficult as the number participating in negotiations increases."¹¹

Probably the most sophisticated study to date of this issue remains G. Bingham Powell's *Contemporary Democracies*, a cross-national multivariate analysis of factors affecting democratic prospects utilizing data from twenty-nine democracies. Powell found a positive relationship between ethnic fractionalization and government instability, with greater levels of instability correlated with higher levels of ethnic fractionalization. He also found a strong positive relationship between increasing fractionalization and high rates of death by violence.¹² Powell's study is not the only one to draw a direct statisti-

7. Gabriel Almond, "Comparative Political Systems," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 18 (1956), pp. 391-409.

8. See, for example, David A. Low, *Eclipse of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 272-273.

9. Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1971), pp. 109, 111.

10. Rabushka and Shepsle, *Politics in Plural Societies*, pp. 177-178.

11. Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 56.

12. G. Bingham Powell, *Contemporary Democracies: Participation, Stability, and Violence* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 44-46.

cal relationship between increasing ethnolinguistic fractionalization on the one hand and decreasing democratic prospects on the other. More recently, for example, cross-national studies by Jan-Erik Lane and Svante Ersson (1990) and Axel Hadenius (1992) also found a negative correlation between ethnic diversity and democratic persistence.¹³ In general, particularly among policymakers there is still a common presumption that “ethnic hatreds” created by communal cleavages are the chief cause of ethnic conflict, making it “reasonable to suppose that, *ceteris paribus*, the extent of intra-societal ethnic and religious hatred is related to the extent of their respective degrees of fractionalization.”¹⁴ This presumption extends across the social sciences: “Both economists and social scientists have postulated that such fractionalization is unambiguously conflict-enhancing.”¹⁵ A recent and prominent advocate of this orthodoxy has been the U.S. private foundation Freedom House, which publishes an annual ranking of democracy and freedom around the world. Its 1998–99 report found that “countries without a predominant ethnic majority are less successful in establishing open and democratic societies than ethnically homogenous countries,” and that monoethnic countries are twice as likely to be ranked “free” as are multiethnic ones.¹⁶

By contrast, a few scholars argue that ethnic fragmentation may actually assist prospects for democracy in multiethnic states. In cases where there are many small and geographically concentrated groups, for example, it may make little sense for them to devote energy to political activity much beyond their locality—meaning that, “from the standpoint of ethnic conflict, much of the pressure is off the center.”¹⁷ Thus one explanation for the democratic success of India—a country that on many indicators is the most “deviant” of all the established democracies—has in large part been the product of that diversity itself, “for at the national level . . . no single ethnic group can dominate.”¹⁸

13. Jan-Erik Lane and Svante Ersson, *Comparative Political Economy* (London: Pinter, 1990), p. 138; and Axel Hadenius, *Democracy and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 116–117.

14. Paul Collier, *The Economics of Civil War* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Monograph, 1998), p. 3.

15. Paul Collier and Anke Hoefler, “On Economic Causes of Civil War,” *Oxford Economic Papers*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (1998), p. 571.

16. See Adrian Karatnycky, “The 1998 Freedom House Survey: The Decline of Illiberal Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (January 1999), pp. 117–118; and Freedom House, *Freedom in the World: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties, 1998–1999* (New York: Freedom House), pp. 9–10.

17. Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 37.

18. Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr., “India: The Dilemmas of Diversity,” in Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, eds., *Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Democracy* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. 72.

Other scholars have interpreted the democratic success of the Philippines as being facilitated “by ethnic compositions which make it difficult for any single ethnic group to predominate,” thereby encouraging the formation of multiethnic alliances.¹⁹ Similarly, some analysts see Indonesia’s surprisingly smooth ongoing transition from authoritarian rule as having been facilitated by the cross-regional and cross-ethnic character of the main political parties, making the quest for power at the center a matter of cross-ethnic bargaining and shifting multiethnic coalitions rather than a zero-sum contest between monoethnic party blocs.²⁰ In the same manner as those who contend that ethnic fragmentation and democracy are negatively related, these scholars can also point to large-*N* confirming studies, such as a recent regression analysis that found “little sign of any particularly detrimental effects of ethnic and religious fragmentation on state stability and performance.”²¹

Both of these arguments cannot be right—there is either a negative relationship between ethnic fragmentation and democratic prospects, or there is not. In the following pages I examine this issue from a micro- and macro-level perspective. At the micro level, I look at the surprising democratic success to date of the world’s most ethnolinguistically fragmented country—Papua New Guinea (PNG). PNG combines two unusual features that should make it a case of special interest to students of comparative politics. First, it boasts one of the developing world’s most impressive records of democratic longevity, with more than thirty years of continuous democratic elections, all characterized by high levels of participation and candidature, and numerous peaceful changes of government. This factor alone is enough to put it into a relatively rare category of developing countries that can also be classified as “established democracies.” Even more striking, however, is that PNG has combined this with extremely high levels of ethnolinguistic fragmentation and tribal violence. Ethnic conflict in PNG is predominantly a local-level phenomenon and, although local conflicts can eventually rise to challenge the state itself (as has occurred over the past year in PNG’s near neighbor, the Solomon Islands), this has never been a serious threat in PNG. As such, the PNG case functions as what Harry Eckstein called a “crucial case study” for theories that postulate a causal link

19. Harold Crouch, “Democratic Prospects in Indonesia,” *Asian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1993), p. 83.

20. The presence of broad, aggregative, and multiethnic political parties appears to be a crucial facilitating condition for democracy in many divided societies. See Benjamin Reilly, *Democracy in Divided Societies: Electoral Engineering for Conflict Management* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

21. Jan-Erik Lane and Svante Ersson, *Comparative Politics: An Introduction and a New Approach* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 204.

between ethnic fragmentation and democratic performance—in other words, a case study that provides the key test of a theory’s validity, and sometimes a more rigorous assessment than even a large-*N* comparative study.²² I argue that the primary reason for PNG’s democratic success is the sheer diversity of its ethnic structure, which virtually guarantees that no one group is able to single-handedly monopolize political power. My analysis suggests that under some circumstances, ethnic fragmentation may actually help consolidate democracy and that PNG’s extreme ethnic fragmentation may be the overriding factor in its democratic success to date. Indeed, rather than hindering democracy, PNG’s ethnic diversity may actually make democracy *possible* in an otherwise unpromising socioeconomic situation.

At the macro level, I also look at the adequacy of the data collections on this issue used by a number of the large-*N* comparative studies cited above, particularly those that utilize a numeric index of ethnic fragmentation as the basis for their analyses. My findings suggest some modifications to the accepted wisdom that ethnic fractionalization is negatively related to democratic longevity. In particular, I find that the ongoing linkage between ethnic fragmentation and state or democratic failure posited in much of the academic literature may have its roots in the faulty measurement of ethnic fragmentation by a succession of comparative studies that have relied upon one source: a Russian anthropology text of the early 1960s, *Atlas Narodov Mira* (The atlas of the peoples of the world). This was used as a data source by Charles Taylor and Michael Hudson in their *World Handbook of Political and Social Indicators*, published in 1972 and subsequently in different editions until 1983.²³ This index has been used as the basis for measuring ethnic fragmentation by many subsequent studies. As I discuss in the conclusion to this article, however, there are serious questions about the scope and reliability of the *Narodov Mira* data set. It is therefore worth reconsidering whether the conclusions of the comparative studies based on the Taylor and Hudson index—and there is a surprisingly large number of them—have much value for scholars grappling with these important issues at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Taken together, these micro- and macro-level perspectives raise serious questions about the adequacy of existing theories regarding the relationship

22. See Harry Eckstein, “Case Study and Theory in Political Science,” in Eckstein, *Regarding Politics: Essays on Political Theory, Stability, and Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 117–176.

23. See Charles L. Taylor and Michael C. Hudson, *World Handbook of Political and Social Indicators* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1972); and Taylor and David A. Jodice, *World Handbook of Political and Social Indicators* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983).

between democratic persistence and ethnic fractionalization. First, they suggest that the conventional wisdom regarding a link between ethnic fragmentation and democratic failure is in need of revision, and that in fact a high degree of ethnic pluralism may actually *help* prospects for democracy if the ethnic structure is such that no group can act as a national hegemon and control power alone. Second, the evidence suggests that we need to move away from the generic concept of “ethnic groups” and look more at the different types of ethnic divisions, particularly ethnic group size, demography and the crucial question of whether ethnic conflict takes place at a local, regional, or national level. Third, we need better data sources and a more sophisticated way of measuring ethnic differences than we have at the moment if we are to understand the true relationship between democracy, ethnic fragmentation, and internal conflict around the world. Finally, this article suggests a ray of hope for ethnically divided societies: It may well be that some ethnic divisions, if properly accommodated within a suitably designed political framework, can be a *positive* factor for democracy, encouraging shifting coalitions of interest, cross-ethnic bargains, and a regular turnover of power holders within a democratic framework. The “deviant case” at the center of this article, Papua New Guinea, is a good example of how this last factor can work in practice.

Democracy and Ethnic Conflict in Papua New Guinea

The state of Papua New Guinea comprises roughly half of the world’s second largest island, New Guinea, and about 600 smaller islands, sharing its western border with the Indonesian province of West Papua (formerly Irian Jaya). It was a colonial possession of Australia from the early years of the twentieth century until 1975, when it became independent. As part of the decolonization process in preparation for independence, mass-suffrage elections have been held since 1964, first to a house of assembly and then, following independence, to a national parliament, both structured along Westminster lines, with a unicameral legislature elected by plurality voting in single-member districts. Despite such majoritarian institutions, the practice of representative democracy in PNG bears little relationship to the classic Westminster two-party model. National politics is characterized by a diffuse and fragmented party system, high candidacy rates, high turnover of politicians from one election to the next, and frequent party switching by members of parliament. At the most recent elections in 1997, independents won 36 of the 109 parliamentary seats. Political parties are weak and tend to coalesce around personalities rather than issues or ideologies, although they do play a limited role in mobilizing voters and

campaigning at election time and in the formation of governments following elections.

This unusually fragmented and amorphous party system is in part a result of PNG's unusual social structure. PNG, with a population of approximately 4 million people, represents an extreme case of ethnic fragmentation in which a large number of ethnic groups are included within the state "with no single group dominant."²⁴ Ethnic groups in PNG are "both small and multiple."²⁵ With no common history of statehood, "its people are fragmented into hundreds of often mutually antipathetic ethnic groupings."²⁶ At the last count, there were approximately 840 distinct languages spoken in PNG, around a quarter of the world's stock, reflecting enormous cultural divisions: Thus "in a very real sense the country is a nation of minorities."²⁷ Tony Deklin writes that "PNG is a land of many cultures and, if we take the number of languages in the country as a rough criterion, there are some 1,000 cultures."²⁸ This extreme ethnolinguistic fragmentation means that PNG almost certainly has a higher number of politicized ethnic groups than almost any comparable country. In fact, PNG is probably the world's most heterogeneous state in terms of the sheer number of independent ethnolinguistic groups, exhibiting one of the most fragmented social structures known today. At the root of this social structure are unilateral descent groups usually described as "clans"—ascriptive extended family networks that are the primary, and sometimes the only, unit of political and social loyalty in many areas.²⁹

The conventional wisdom is that such a level of ethnic diversity poses significant challenges to successful nation building and governance. Early observers of PNG politics, for example, argued that PNG's ethnic fragmentation

24. R.J. May, "Managing the Ethnic/Religious/Cultural Challenge to National Security," paper presented at the Tenth Asia-Pacific Roundtable, Kuala Lumpur, 1996, p. 10.

25. Anthony J. Regan, "Limiting State Action: Comparative Perspectives on Constitutionalism, Participation, and Civil Society in Papua New Guinea," paper presented at the Waigani Seminar, Port Moresby, 1995, p. 9.

26. David Hegarty, "The Political Parties," in A. Amarshi, K. Good, and R. Mortimer, eds., *Development and Dependency: The Political Economy of Papua New Guinea* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 188.

27. Minority Rights Group, *World Directory of Minorities* (London: Minority Rights Group International, 1997), p. 682.

28. Tony Deklin, "Culture and Democracy in Papua New Guinea: 'Marit Tru or Giaman Marit?'" in R. Crocombe, U. Neemia, A. Ravuvu, and W. vom Busch, eds., *Culture and Democracy in the South Pacific* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 1992), p. 35.

29. See I. Hogbin, "Anthropological Definitions," in Peter Ryan, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Papua and New Guinea* (Clayton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press in association with the University of Papua New Guinea, 1973), p. 23.

represented a “formidable and intractable” impediment to nation building;³⁰ and that its “10,000 micro-societies” and many hundreds of language groups, the largest of which numbers only 150,000 people, were an almost insurmountable barrier to stable democracy.³¹ Despite these predictions, on many indicators of democratic consolidation PNG ranks as one of the best-performing democracies in the developing world. Although having experienced a number of secessionist movements, most notably on the eastern island of Bougainville, it has so far been able to maintain both its territorial unity and an impressive record of competitive democracy.³² PNG has faced difficulties similar to those of many newly independent African states (e.g., ethnic divisions, tribal conflict, economic underdevelopment, and low literacy and educational levels), yet its democratic procedures have not just survived but, on many indicators, appear to have flourished. Freely contested and highly competitive elections have taken place regularly since 1964. Participation has been inclusive. Civil and political liberties have generally remained unrestricted, as have the media and labor unions. Voter turnout has been consistently high. Larry Diamond has claimed that PNG’s “remarkably vibrant and resilient democratic system” makes it, with India, the most successful democracy of any of the Asian developing countries,³³ while David Lipset argues that “the democratic system in PNG has been highly successful in terms of . . . any comparative scale.”³⁴ Crucially, there has been a genuine contest for political power at each post-independence election, and PNG thus stands in stark contrast to a number of other developing countries (such as Botswana and Namibia) that also have reasonably competitive elections but have yet to experience a change of government.

Some comparative studies have also confirmed PNG’s unusual status in this regard. Myron Weiner’s examination of elections in the developing world, for example, found that PNG was one of a select group of six developing countries with populations of more than 1 million that had remained more or less con-

30. Ralph Premdas, “Ethnicity and Nation Building: The Papua New Guinea Case,” in Michael Howard, ed., *Ethnicity and Nation Building in the Pacific* (Tokyo: United Nations University, 1989), p. 246.

31. James Griffin, “Papua New Guinea,” in R. Brissenden and J. Griffin, eds., *Modern Asia: Problems and Politics* (Milton, Queensland: Jacaranda Press, 1974), pp. 142–143.

32. See Ralph Premdas, “Secessionist Movements in Papua New Guinea,” *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 50 (1977).

33. Larry Diamond, “Introduction: Persistence, Erosion, Breakdown, and Renewal,” in Diamond, Linz, and Lipset, eds., *Democracy in Developing Countries: Asia*, p. 1.

34. David Lipset, “Papua New Guinea: The Melanesian Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, 1975–1986,” in Diamond, Linz, and Lipset, *Democracy in Developing Countries: Asia*, p. 409.

tinuously democratic since independence (the others were India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago).³⁵ In another study, Diamond found that PNG was one of ten developing countries with populations of more than 1 million that he considered had maintained democracy, or at least a constitutional “near-democracy,” continuously from 1965 (the others were India, Sri Lanka, Costa Rica, Colombia, Venezuela, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Botswana, and Mauritius).³⁶ More recently, Diamond, Juan Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset found that PNG was one of a select group of five developing countries that could be classified as “stable democracies” (the others were Venezuela, Costa Rica, India, and Botswana).³⁷ And, in a similar formulation, PNG is one of only four plural societies in the developing world that Lijphart considers are also “established” democracies (defined as countries with a population of more than 250,000 that are democratic now and have been continuously democratic for the past twenty years)—India, Mauritius, and Trinidad and Tobago being the others.³⁸ An alternative criterion of democratic consolidation, Samuel Huntington’s “two-turnover test” (i.e., at least two peaceful changes of power via the electoral process), would result in the exclusion of a number of the above countries, such as Botswana and Malaysia, but would be easily met by PNG.³⁹ In contrast to these “dominant-party systems,” in which one political party has consistently monopolized government, peaceful changes of government in PNG have been common. In the post-independence period alone, by 2000 there had been nine changes of government: once at independence, three times at general elections, and five times on the floor of parliament.

PNG also has some of the least favorable social and economic conditions for democratic success, including high levels of unemployment and violent crime and low levels of literacy, education, and per capita gross domestic product (GDP).⁴⁰ As Table 1 shows, on almost all indicators of economic and social development, PNG ranks near the bottom compared with Diamond’s other “continuous democracies or near-democracies” in the developing world. Among

35. Myron Weiner, “Empirical Democratic Theory,” in Weiner and Ergun Ozbudun, eds., *Competitive Elections in Developing Countries* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1987), pp. 18–19.

36. Larry Diamond, “Economic Development and Democracy Reconsidered,” in Gary Marks and Diamond, eds., *Reexamining Democracy: Essays in Honor of Seymour Martin Lipset* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1992), p. 127.

37. Larry Diamond, Juan Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset, “Introduction: What Makes for Democracy?” in Diamond, Linz, and Lipset, *Politics in Developing Countries*, p. 35.

38. Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-six Countries* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999).

39. Huntington, *Third Wave*, pp. 266–267.

40. See United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report, 1997* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Table 1. Indicators of Economic and Social Development in Developing World Continuous Democracies or Near-Democracies.

	Population	Area (sq. km)	Literacy Rate (%)	GDP (\$U.S. per capita)	HDI
Botswana	1,443,000	582,000	68.0	2,658	0.741
Colombia	34,520,000	1,142,000	90.6	1,873	0.840
Costa Rica	3,071,000	51,100	94.5	2,729	0.884
India	952,590,000	3,167,000	43.6	311	0.436
Jamaica	2,411,000	11,430	84.1	1,593	0.702
Mauritius	1,070,000	2,040	81.7	1,593	0.825
Papua New Guinea	4,107,000	462,840	70.5	1,058	0.504
Sri Lanka	17,865,000	65,610	89.6	656	0.698
Trinidad and Tobago	1,237,000	5,130	97.6	4,217	0.872
Venezuela	20,712,000	912,050	90.6	2,897	0.859

SOURCE: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *Voter Turnout from 1945 to 1997: A Global Report on Political Participation* (Stockholm: IDEA, 1997). Figures are based on those present at most recent elections as of May 1997.

this group, its literacy rate is lower than all others bar Botswana and India. Its GDP per capita is lower than all except the South Asian countries. Similarly, PNG's ranking on the United Nations' Index of Human Development (or HDI, a composite measure of socioeconomic indicators that includes information on health, education, and unemployment levels) is higher only than India's. In comparative terms, there is a strong relationship between a low score on these indicators and democratic instability.⁴¹ And yet PNG has one of the most successful and unbroken democratic records of this entire group.

ETHNIC GROUPS AND ETHNIC CONFLICT IN PNG

Defining what constitutes an ethnic group in a fractionalized state such as PNG is not an easy task. According to Lijphart, an ethnic group can be defined as a group of people who see themselves as a distinct cultural community, often sharing a "common language, religion, kinship, and/or physical characteristics (such as skin color); and who tend to harbor negative and hostile feelings towards members of other groups."⁴² This is a broad definition of ethnicity, however, including as it does reference to factors such as race and religion.

41. For a summary of knowledge to date, see Seymour Martin Lipset, "Economic Development," in Lipset, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1995), pp. 350-356.

42. Arend Lijphart, "Multiethnic Democracy," in *ibid.*, p. 853.

Milton Esman has contrasted this to a narrower definition of ethnic identity that denotes a community that claims common origins, possesses distinctive and valued cultural markers such as customs, dress and, especially, language, and that expects to share a common destiny.⁴³ This definition may be more applicable to PNG, where groups are divided less on overt ascriptive criteria such as race or religion than on kinship, language, and region. Stephen Levine writes that “if ethnic communities are understood to be groups possessing a distinctive language, custom and memories—traits that give its members a sense of unity and cause them to distinguish themselves (and be distinguished by) others—then PNG may have more than one thousand such ethnic groups within its borders.”⁴⁴

Considering the lack of overt racial distinction between them, the depth of cleavages between these groups is often striking and can be partly explained by two related factors: geography and language. PNG has some of the world’s most dramatic terrain, with a vast range of mountains and valleys running through the middle of the mainland and an extensive arc of populated volcanic islands off the coast—all of which create severe difficulties in terms of isolation, access, and transport. Accordingly, “most groups developed their own physical and cultural identity in isolation . . . communities living on different sides of the same highland valley sometimes speak languages as distinct from one another as Spanish is from Italian.”⁴⁵ Although few groups were entirely isolated, and many had ally groups with which they conducted trade and marriage, relations between many were characterized as much by hostility as by cooperation. Traditional contact in the highlands, for example, often took the form of intermittent tribal warfare between clan groups.⁴⁶ Moreover, within the main language groups themselves, there are also often deep internal divisions.⁴⁷

Part of the difficulty of defining what constitutes an ethnic group in PNG is the sheer variation of its ethnic structure, which limits the ability to make gen-

43. Milton Esman, *Ethnic Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 15.

44. Stephen Levine, “Culture and Conflict in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, and the Federated States of Micronesia,” in Michael E. Brown and Sumit Ganguly, eds., *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in the Asia and the Pacific* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), p. 479.

45. Gavin Souter, *New Guinea: The Last Unknown* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1963), p. 49.

46. See Marie Reay, “Lawlessness in the Papua New Guinea Highlands,” in R.J. May and Hank Nelson, eds., *Melanesia: Beyond Diversity* (Canberra: Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, 1982), pp. 630–636.

47. See M. de Lepervanche, “Social Structure,” in Ryan, *Encyclopedia of Papua and New Guinea*, p. 1066.

eralizations. For example, in lowlands areas the population of ethnolinguistic units normally ranges from a few hundred to several thousand, whereas in the highlands these groups may number as many as 60,000 members.⁴⁸ In the highlands regions, the largest autonomous groups have tended to be defined in the scholarly literature as tribes, phratries, or clans; in coastal areas the literature more often refers to villages, territories, neighborhoods, or similar terms.⁴⁹ There has been little detailed assessment of the total number of ethnic (i.e., clan) groups in PNG, but estimates from informed observers are in the region of 5,000–7,000 separate groups.⁵⁰ Estimates of the number of separate “political units” range from 2,000 to 18,000.⁵¹ If a larger unit of base measurement is used, such as “tribes” (i.e., aligned or related clan groupings), then we are still dealing with an extremely fragmented society: A rough average of 2,000 members per tribe against PNG’s total population of approximately 4 million people gives a figure of around 2,000 separate tribes. Even using conservative figures, then, PNG exhibits a level of fragmentation that makes divided societies elsewhere look relatively homogeneous by comparison.

Despite PNG’s extraordinary social structure, ethnic identity there, as elsewhere, tends to be manifested as a mixture of “primordial” and “constructed” factors,⁵² exhibiting a combination of both traditional historical associations and opportunistic adaptations to contemporary events.⁵³ Many analyses of ethnicity in PNG, for example, emphasize the extent to which ethnic identities were both a salient feature of traditional society and a reaction to colonialism, modernization, and independence.⁵⁴ Unsurprisingly, descriptions of traditional ethnic identities in PNG tend to privilege primordial characteristics of ascription, competition, and dynamism. R.S. Parker and Edward Wolfers characterized the traditional situation in PNG as one in which “political entities . . . were both relatively unstable and small. Not many effective political units contained more than a few hundred people, although on occasions thou-

48. *Ibid.*, p. 1065.

49. L.L. Langness, “Political Organization,” in Ryan, *Encyclopedia of Papua and New Guinea*, p. 924.

50. Personal communication with William Standish, Australian National University, September 28, 1996.

51. Personal communication with John Burton, Australian National University, December 24, 1996.

52. The term “primordialism” is usually associated with Clifford Geertz, “The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States,” in Geertz, ed., *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa* (New York: Free Press, 1963). For a discussion of this typology in the scholarly literature, see Esman, *Ethnic Politics*, pp. 9–16.

53. Esman, *Ethnic Politics*, p. 14.

54. See Premdas, “Ethnicity and Nation Building,” p. 246.

sands might co-operate for a specific battle, or in trade and ceremonial exchange. Membership of even the smallest primary groups was unstable—as people married in and out, disputes arose between rival leaders, and intergroup warfare forced some members of each group to choose between the claims to their loyalties of, say, their residential or their kin group.⁵⁵ Primordial factors remain strong at all levels of PNG politics today. Political loyalties are focused primarily at the level of family, clan, and regional allegiances, rather than along party or ideological lines. William Standish notes that “most PNG people maintain a mind-set of primary attachment and loyalty to their clan and tribal group, sometimes known as *wantok*, the Tokpisin [i.e., Pidgin] word for people who speak the same language.”⁵⁶

Ethnic identity as a political factor in PNG tends to be played out at different levels, and may manifest itself as a salient factor, in varying strengths, at the levels of extended family, clan, tribe, and region, and even along the colonial divisions of the state between Papua and New Guinea.⁵⁷ Despite this degree of variation, it is possible to make some limited generalized observations about ethnicity and politics in PNG. The most prominent conflicts to date have been at the macro level, in terms of ethnonationalist movements and secessionist struggles.⁵⁸ By far the most persistent and deadly of these has been the long-running civil war in Bougainville, which has claimed several thousand lives to date, although a nascent peace agreement reached in 1997 appears to have held so far. Most conflicts in PNG, however, are manifested not at the macro ethnonationalist level, but at the micro level as violence between PNG’s many small, competitive ethnic groups. Ethnic conflict between these groups is traditionally played out locally, often via intertribal fighting, rather than as part of an ethnonationalist quest or a competition for regional or national hegemony, although it is no less deadly for that. More than 100 people are killed every year in tribal fights in PNG.⁵⁹ Reports have estimated that around 20 percent of

55. R.S. Parker and Edward P. Wolfers, “The Context of Political Change,” in A.L. Epstein, R.S. Parker, and M. Reay, eds., *The Politics of Dependence: Papua New Guinea, 1968* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1971), p. 16.

56. William Standish, “Papua New Guinea: The Search for Security in a Weak State,” in A. Thompson, ed., *Papua New Guinea: Issues for Australian Security Planners* (Canberra: Australian Defence Studies Centre, Australian Defence Force Academy, 1994), p. 60.

57. Parker and Wolfers, “Context of Political Change,” pp. 16–17.

58. See R.J. May, “Micronationalism: What, When, and Why?” in May, ed., *Micronationalist Movements in Papua New Guinea*, Political and Social Change Monograph 1 (Canberra: Department of Political and Social Change, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, 1982).

59. Sean Dorney, *Papua New Guinea: People, Politics, and History since 1975* (Sydney: Random House, 1990), p. 310.

the population is affected by such violence, with a marked concentration in highlands regions.⁶⁰ Recently, guns have supplanted more traditional weapons in tribal wars, thus raising their stakes and increasing their deadlines.⁶¹ The imposition of representative government via competitive national elections has tended to sharpen ethnic cleavages, as the salience of ethnicity in PNG “tends to come to the fore . . . during national election campaigns.”⁶² It is thus perhaps not surprising that ethnic violence increases at election time.⁶³ Andrew Strathern has argued that post-independence elections in PNG have encouraged a retribalization of ethnic groups, in which the commodification of the voting process has led increasingly to rigidified ethnic group boundaries and interethnic armed conflict.⁶⁴ Elections, rather than larger concerns such as policy implementation, government formation, or national ideology, are thus one of the primary ways in which traditional enmities are mobilized in contemporary PNG, even though in most cases contestation is very much for election to office itself.⁶⁵

Given that elections are one of the primary arenas for ethnic conflict in PNG, it may seem perverse to assert that PNG’s highly fragmented ethnic structure should actually promote democratic persistence. Such an argument flies in the face of many of the academic analyses concerning the relationship between democratic sustainability and ethnic fragmentation discussed earlier. These studies, however, have often failed to distinguish between states in which monoethnic hegemony is possible, and those where ethnic fractionalization simply overwhelms any possibility of a single ethnic group dominating all others. PNG, I assert, is in the latter category. The key to the beneficial effects of ethnic fragmentation in PNG is its dispersive effects on ethnic conflict, which is thus typically expressed at the periphery (in the form of local-level disputes and tribal fighting) rather than at the center (in the form of a contest for government by one or two dominant groups). This attribute was identified well

60. W. Clifford, L. Morauta, and B. Stuart, *Law and Order in Papua New Guinea*, Vols. 1 and 2 (Port Moresby: Institute of National Affairs and Institute of Applied Social and Economic Research, 1984), pp. 94–95.

61. Dorney, *Papua New Guinea*, pp. 310–311.

62. Michael Howard, “Ethnicity and the State in the Pacific,” in Howard, *Ethnicity and Nation Building*, p. 45.

63. Andrew Strathern, “Violence and Political Change in Papua New Guinea,” *Pacific Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (1993), p. 51.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

65. See Sinclair Dinnen, “Violence, Security, and the 1992 Election,” in Yaw Saffu, ed., *The 1992 PNG Election: Change and Continuity in Electoral Politics* (Canberra: Department of Political and Social Change, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 1996), pp. 77–104; and Bill Standish, “Elections in Simbu: Towards Gunpoint Democracy?” in Saffu, *The 1992 PNG Election*, pp. 277–322.

before PNG became independent, such as in 1970 when the Kenyan scholar Ali Mazrui argued that “the worst troubles we have had in Africa have been in countries with very big tribes competing with each other. . . . To this extent, one of Papua New Guinea’s greatest assets may well be its acute ethnic fragmentation. Small ethnic groups may fight each other, but because there are so many their conflicts may remain localized. They need not shake the nation to its very foundation, as did the tensions between big ethnic giants in Nigeria, the Congo, Kenya, and Uganda.”⁶⁶

The reality of PNG’s extraordinary ethnic structure is that no group is ever likely to have sufficient support to attempt to control power at the national level, and the one ethnoregional numeric majority that could conceivably make such a claim—the highlanders, who make up close to half of PNG’s population—are probably the most fragmented and divided of all regional groups in PNG. Similarly, attempts to mobilize ethnoregional forces in lowlands Papua, where there is a relatively high degree of regional consciousness, have contributed to changes of government, but never to a level sufficient for Papuans to act as a hegemonic ethnic power. This represents a major advantage so far as democratic prospects are concerned, because no group “is either subject to strong pressure to take exclusive control of the state or capable of doing so if it wishes to.”⁶⁷ Although “ethnic entrepreneurs” from the larger and more conspicuous ethnoregional groups make periodic attempts at mobilizing support through appeals to ethnic consciousness (e.g., Josephine Abaijah’s Papua Besena separatist movement in the 1970s or Iambakey Okuk’s similar attempts to harness a pan-highlander consciousness in the early 1980s), no group to date has been able, or has seriously attempted, to stake a claim for national domination. And although there has been a noticeable ethnoregional quality to some governing coalitions in recent parliaments, this also appears to rotate, with governments headed by a coastal New Guinean under Michael Somare and islanders under Prime Ministers Julius Chan and Rabbie Namaliu giving way to the supremacy of highlanders under Paias Wingti and Papuans under Prime Ministers Bill Skate and Mekere Morauta, most recently.

Just as the nature of ethnic cleavage in PNG is fragmented by its extraordinary level of clan-based diversity, so PNG does not suffer from the bipolar linguistic divisions that have molded political development in Canada, Belgium, Estonia, and some African states. A multiplicity of languages at the micro level has by necessity led to a degree of integration at the national level, with Eng-

66. Ali Mazrui, “An African’s New Guinea,” *New Guinea*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (1970), pp. 54–55.

67. Regan, “Limiting State Action,” p. 9.

lish as the language of official communication and Pidgin the neutral lingua franca of the masses. As Mazrui has argued, this process was aided, not hindered, by PNG's amazing linguistic diversity. In addition, the rise of Pidgin as a national language has provided PNG with an integrative means of national communication, while the widespread use of English among the elite facilitates communication with the developed world—both necessary if not sufficient requirements for successful nation building.

POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

The above analysis suggests that PNG's extreme ethnic fragmentation may actually increase prospects for sustainable democracy by dispersing potential points of conflict and guaranteeing that no one group will be able to command power alone. Although a challenge to the scholarly consensus, this conclusion is in line with analyses of other ethnically divided democracies. Donald Horowitz, for example, argues that in countries such as India and Tanzania, this factor is actually the key to democratic stability. Such states contain a high number of dispersed ethnic groups, none of which are large or powerful enough to dominate the center, leading to parochial ethnic loyalties and localized ethnic conflict, where "the demands of one group can sometimes be granted without injuring the interests of others."⁶⁸ A further positive feature for democracy in such systems is that key agencies of the state, such as the police force and the military, tend to be comprised in such an ethnically heterogeneous way that no group interest can predominate internally, while center-based civilian politics is itself so heterogeneous as to act in most cases as a relatively neutral agent on ethnic issues. Both of these factors have been cited as contributing to PNG's democratic longevity.⁶⁹

Another area worthy of examination is the nature of PNG's political institutions. I have shown in other work how the introduction prior to independence of a vote-pooling electoral system—the alternative vote—assisted the early consolidation of accommodative campaigning and early political coalitions in PNG, and how these incentives changed drastically with the introduction of plurality voting in 1975.⁷⁰ On a broader level, however, it is clear that some other aspects of PNG's system of government have also helped, rather than

68. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, pp. 37–38.

69. See R.J. May, *The Changing Role of the Military in Papua New Guinea*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No. 101 (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, 1993), p. 75.

70. See Ben Reilly, "The Alternative Vote and Ethnic Accommodation: New Evidence from Papua New Guinea," *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1997).

hindered, conflict management. One alluded to earlier is the parliamentary system. In line with scholarly expectations, parliamentarism in PNG—by allowing shifting coalitions of interests to group and regroup, and hence to form new governments without the need for a new election or a constitutional impasse—has delivered executive flexibility and rotation of office holding that have helped accommodate competing interests, if not provide continuity and stability of government. Indeed, every elected government to date has changed at least once on the floor of parliament within the five-year parliamentary term. A second institutional feature that appears to have played a role in managing conflicts, and which is also supported by the scholarly literature, has been the “quasi-federal” system of provincial government, which has helped to devolve power and contain separatism in peripheral regions, particularly Bougainville and the other island provinces.⁷¹ A third feature is the use of a district-based, single-member electorate system, which helps to channel and contain violent conflicts at the local level, rather than allowing them to find expression on a potentially more damaging national stage. Although the use of plurality rather than alternative voting has clearly been a negative factor, overall the dispersing effect of breaking PNG’s political landscape into 109 small, single-member electoral districts has served to both contain and focus intergroup conflict at a manageable and localized level.⁷²

This final point stands in stark contrast to orthodox prescriptions of electoral system choice for divided societies, which tend to favor proportional representation (PR). Lijphart, for example, argues that “the electoral system that is optimal for segmented societies is list PR in large districts,” largely because such systems enable all politically significant ethnic groups, including minorities, access to legislative representation, encouraging ethnic groups to “define themselves” around ethnically based parties. The use of large, multimember electoral districts is particularly favored, because it maximizes proportionality and hence the prospects of multiple parties in parliaments, which can then form the basis of a cross-ethnic government coalition.⁷³ PR election rules are thus important of themselves—because they are likely to facilitate propor-

71. See R.J. May and A.J. Regan, eds., *Political Decentralization in a New State: The Experience of Provincial Government in Papua New Guinea* (Bathurst, New South Wales: Crawford House, 1997).

72. For a detailed discussion of this point, see Ben Reilly, “The Effects of the Electoral System in Papua New Guinea,” in Saffu, *The 1992 PNG Election*.

73. Arend Lijphart, “Electoral Systems, Party Systems, and Conflict Management in Segmented Societies,” in R.A. Schreier, ed., *Critical Choices for South Africa: An Agenda for the 1990s* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 9–13.

tional parliamentary representation of all groups—and also an important component of wider consociational prescriptions that emphasize the need for grand coalitions, group autonomy, and minority veto powers.

The evidence from PNG, however, suggests that such prescriptions can be rendered meaningless in extremely heterogeneous societies that evidence high levels of multiplicity and fragmentation of ethnic groups. In fractionalized societies such as PNG's, the granting of proportional representation to all minority ethnic groups is simply not feasible. The legislature itself would have to be eight times larger just to represent all languages spoken—a "Parliament of a Thousand Tribes," to quote the title of one work on pre-independence PNG.⁷⁴ Likewise, proportional representation of political parties in the legislature according to their share of the popular vote is meaningless because there is no real party system. Since parties tend to be organized around dominant personalities rather than ideologies, there is an extremely weak commitment to party solidarity, and members frequently change their party allegiance after they have been elected in the hope of being able to secure a ministry or to take advantage of some other aspect of government patronage. At the 1997 elections, the major "party" was in fact the independent candidates, who gained 61 percent of the vote, while the most successful self-declared party, the People's Progress Party, could gain only 6 percent of the vote (although it did win sixteen seats in parliament).

In cases like this, there is little party identification on the part of the electorate, yet most list PR systems force voters to choose between parties rather than between candidates. The supposed benefit of PR in producing multiethnic coalition governments—identified by many scholars as a crucial factor for sustainable democracy in plural societies⁷⁵—is also redundant. In PNG, governments have always been loose coalitions spanning numerous parties and ethnic groups. In addition, because regionalism continues to be one of the few enduring cleavages in PNG politics,⁷⁶ ministries and other government positions are allocated at least partly on the basis of region and the need to strike the right balance of Papuans, north coast New Guineans, highlanders, and islanders. The National Executive Council (the PNG cabinet) invariably

74. See O. White, *Parliament of a Thousand Tribes* (Melbourne: Wren, 1972).

75. See, for example, W. Arthur Lewis, *Politics in West Africa* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1965), p. 79; Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, pp. 365–395; and Arend Lijphart, "The Power-Sharing Approach," in J.V. Montville, ed., *Conflict and Peacemaking in Multiethnic Societies* (New York: Lexington Books, 1991), p. 505.

76. See Reilly, "The Effects of the Electoral System in Papua New Guinea," pp. 62–76.

fills to its maximum possible size of twenty-eight members (plus a host of associated or sometimes invented positions) in part to balance regional and ethnic representation. There is no need to engineer coalition government in PNG—the fragmentation of the society and the weak party system mean that coalitions are almost inevitable.

Faulty Theories or Faulty Data?

Many studies of democracy and ethnic conflict have posited a simple hypothesis linking increasing levels of ethnic heterogeneity with decreasing prospects for democracy. PNG, the world's most ethnolinguistically fractionalized state, acts as a crucial case study for this hypothesis—a crucial case that the hypothesis clearly fails. There are several possible explanations for PNG's deviance in this regard. One is that the methodology employed by Dahl, Lijphart, Powell, and others is at fault by incorrectly positing a linear relationship between ethnic fragmentation and negative factors such as ethnic conflict, state instability, and democratic weakness, when the actual relationship may be more complex. This suggests that a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between ethnic fragmentation and democratic stability may be required. One striking difference between PNG and many other multiethnic states, for example, is that ethnic cleavages in PNG usually find political expression at the local level—for example, in a contest to have a member of one's own clan elected—rather than as a contest for political hegemony at the national level.

Another explanation may simply be a lack of adequate data to support hypotheses concerning the relationship between ethnic fragmentation and democracy. It is surprising how ignorant we remain about the ethnic structure of many parts of the world, particularly those in relatively obscure locations outside the academic mainstream (of which Papua New Guinea is certainly one). This suggests that we may need to take a closer look at the adequacy of the basic data that scholarly studies of this issue have used. Take for example, the Taylor and Hudson index of ethnic fractionalization, which was utilized in the studies cited earlier by Powell (1982), Hadenius (1992), Lane and Ersson (1995), and Paul Collier (1998), among many others. Their index, based on Douglas Rae and Michael Taylor's earlier development of an "index of ethnic fractionalization," effectively measures the probability of two randomly drawn citizens being from different ethnic or linguistic groups, represented as a measure of ethnic heterogeneity ranging from 0 (completely homogeneous) to 1 (com-

pletely heterogeneous).⁷⁷ Its data source drew on the work of a team of Russian anthropologists working in the 1950s, whose anthropological atlas *Narodov Mira* identified linguistic, tribal, and cultural differences among nations as of 1960.⁷⁸ Unfortunately, much of the *Narodov Mira* data appear either out of date, insufficient, or just plain wrong. To give a few examples: Both North and South Korea, according to the *Narodov Mira* figures, have an ethnolinguistic fractionalization measure of 0, meaning that both societies are entirely homogeneous. Somalia, which has numerous competing clans and contains a significant (25 percent) Issaq minority, has an extremely low fractionalization ranking of 0.08, while Burundi has an even lower ranking of 0.04, despite its deep Tutsi (18 percent)-Hutu (82 percent) cleavage. Lebanon, one of the world's most complex divided societies, has a similarly low fractionalization score of 0.13, the same ranking as much more homogeneous Austria. Relatively homogeneous states such as Nepal (0.70) and Thailand (0.66) have higher indexes of fractionalization than fragmented societies such as Burma (0.47), Singapore (0.42), and Sri Lanka (0.47). Two very different societies, the United States and Switzerland, are adduced as having exactly the same degree of fractionalization, 0.50. And the index does not even include the many new countries that have been created since 1960 (nor, of course, does it measure the extent to which fractionalization has changed since 1960, which in some countries is considerable). The most glaring weakness, ironically enough, is in relation to the post-Soviet states of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, nearly all of which are deeply divided, and none of which figure in the index. In short, the *Narodov Mira* database is a questionable source for measuring ethnolinguistic fractionalization, and any conclusions drawn from it (which means most of the large-*N* studies cited in this article) should be approached with caution.⁷⁹

Conclusion

This article has suggested several challenges to existing theories concerning the relationship between ethnic fragmentation, democracy, and internal con-

77. See Douglas W. Rae and Michael Taylor, *The Analysis of Political Cleavages* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970).

78. See *Atlas Narodov Mira* (Moscow: N.N. Miklukho-Maklaya Institute of Ethnography for the Academy of Sciences, Department of Geodesy and Cartography of the State Geological Committee of the USSR, 1964).

79. Numerous other well-regarded scholars have also made use of the *Narodov Mira* index in their work. Two prominent examples that base some of their analysis on these data are Gary Cox's ac-

flict. In particular, it argues that the conventional wisdom—that the more ethnically fragmented a state, the lower its chances of democracy—is wrong. In fact, a high level of ethnic fragmentation can actually help democratic consolidation if no group has the capacity to control power alone. Moreover, the PNG case suggests that we need to know more not about the overall number of ethnic groups, but rather about their capacity to dominate politics in their country at the national level. It is possible—indeed likely—that with more adequate data we would find not a linear relationship between increasing ethnic fragmentation and democracy or state stability, but rather a bell-shaped curve: Homogeneity at one extreme and ethnic fragmentation at the other both assisting democracy by making strategies for monoethnic dominance of politics, and hence large-scale ethnic conflict, pointless; while a low-to-medium number of ethnic groups creates precisely the opposite set of incentives, holding out to ethnic elites at least the possibility that they may be able to rise to a level of national hegemony, thus facilitating the politicization of ethnic conflict.

This suggests the possibility of a more complex curvilinear relationship between ethnic fragmentation and democratic sustainability, with both very low (i.e., highly homogeneous) and very high (i.e., highly heterogeneous) levels of ethnic fragmentation more conducive to democracy than those in between. Indeed, one large-*N* analysis has come to precisely this conclusion: Regressing data on ethnolinguistic fractionalization against the probability of civil war, Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler found that although there was a relationship between fractionalization and civil war, its effect was nonmonotonic: “Highly ethnically fractionalized societies are no more prone to war than highly homogenous ones. The danger of civil war arises when the society is polarized into two groups.”⁸⁰ Their analysis, however, was also based on Taylor and Hudson’s *Narodov Mira* data, rendering its explanatory value questionable. In addition, despite more recent work by Ted Robert Gurr⁸¹ and the Minority Rights Group,⁸² among others, we still lack reliable contemporary data on this issue. Although the PNG case (and others) points toward a curvilinear rela-

claimed *Making Votes Count: Strategic Coordination in the World’s Electoral Systems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and the work of the influential Harvard economist Dani Rodrik. See, for example, “Where Did All the Growth Go? External Shocks, Social Conflict, and Growth Collapses,” *Journal of Economic Growth*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (1999).

80. Collier and Hoeffler, “On Economic Causes of Civil War,” p. 571.

81. Ted Robert Gurr, *Minorities at Risk: A Global View of Ethnopolitical Conflicts* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1993).

82. Minority Rights Group, *World Directory of Minorities*.

relationship between ethnic fragmentation and democracy, we need a more rigorous and comprehensive measure of ethnolinguistic fractionalization before we can attempt more generalized propositions with confidence. In the meantime, however, the PNG case should serve to caution against adopting what Lane and Ersson typified as “the common sense notion” that ethnolinguistic heterogeneity is negatively related to democracy.⁸³

83. Lane and Ersson, *Comparative Politics*, p. 204.