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Peoples Against States: Ethnopolitical Conflict and the Changing World System: 1994 Presidential Address

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Abstract

The post—Cold War surge in so-called tribal conflict is shown here to be the continuation of a trend that began in the 1960s. The main issue of the fifty

most serious current ethnopolitical conflicts is contention for state power among communal groups in the immediate aftermath of state formation, revolution, and efforts to democratize autocratic regimes. The end of the Cold War contributed to the long-term trend mainly by increasing the number of states with such power transitions. Communal conflicts across fault lines between civilizations and religious traditions are more intense than others but have not increased in relative frequency or severity since the end of the Cold War. Nor is there a strong global force leading toward the further fragmentation of the state system: since 1989 no serious new secessionist conflicts have begun outside the Soviet and Yugoslav successor states, and in 1993–94 the regional trend is toward accommodation. The most protracted and deadly ethnopolitical conflicts are likely to occur in poor, weak, heterogenous states like those of Africa. They will continue to pose severe humanitarian problems but are foreseeable and, in principle, are capable of being contained and transformed through constructive regional and international action. Six general international strategies to restrain emerging ethnopolitical conflicts are identified.

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