

South African Exceptionalism. Does it exist, will it survive?*

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When I asked John De Gruchy what I should present today he suggested to talk on the impressions I have got during a one year stay in South Africa. Maybe that was a reaction on comments which I occasionally made on some peculiarities in this country. I did ask, for instance, why South Africans call a coalition government an alliance or why traffic lights are called robots. I also asked, why street names in the New South Africa are still being called after living persons thereby following a practice of former Apartheid governments rather than a republican principle. Now, I am not going to focus on that sort of peculiarities today. These are culturally entrenched practices which avoid scrutiny. Normally people don't even think about them. Local customs like these are to be found in all countries as it is shown for example by the design of "robot lights".

Doing a cross country study of cross-walk signals, we see that many of them look quite odd, though their basic pictorial design is similar. In the sample drawn here (Picture 1), the Belgium robot light differs because it shows a couple instead of one person. Only the Canadian stop signal is really unique. It shows a red hand instead of a person.

But would we call it exceptional? Probably not. Exceptionalism in this field would mean to have, say, a blue walking signal showing a springbok. And even then I would speak of exceptionalism only if the blue



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springbok was part of a historical context from which it derives a certain meaning. In this sense the notion of exceptionalism points to a configurative understanding of unique individual cases be it persons, countries, customs or places.

Exceptionalism is the study of the idiographic and the incomparable. The idiographic approach stems from regional geography which tries to establish and to explain the differences between places (Shaefer 1953). As places are entities rather than mere additions of single geographical items exceptionalism represents a holistic, historiographic approach. It strongly resembles the discipline of geopolitics, which holds the view that an understanding of geography and history is indispensable when it comes to explain the political, social and economic development of nations (Taylor/Flint 2000). Thus the concept contrasts with nomothetic explanations, which attempt to find similarities between phenomena and to formulate 'law-like' patterns over a broad range of cases.

To say something was exceptional means that it does not follow the course of established knowledge extracted from similar cases. A major consequence of such a statement would be that lesson-drawing proves difficult: Neither can exceptional countries draw lessons from other countries nor can other countries draw lessons from them. Besides such methodological implications exceptionalism - if it refers to a nation - carries a strong political meaning. This can be shown by discourses on exceptionalism in the U.S. and Israel. I will come back to this after a few remarks on the discursive dimension of exceptionalism. The political realities of South Africa as compared to other countries will then be dealt with in the second part of the paper.

Discursive Aspects of South African Exceptionalism

In some situations – be it in public discourse, in politics or in private conversations –South Africans sometimes give an impression of living in a rather unique country. To be sure, this is a self-image. We deal with a discourse of which Mahmood Mamdani said in 1998: "When I came to UCT nearly two years ago, I was aware that the notion of South African exceptionalism had stained the South African intelligentsia with a prejudice that was more than just skin-deep. What I was not prepared for was the ferocity with which it would be defended." (Monday Paper Vol 17 No 13 May 18 - 25, 1998).

Mamdani exposed himself to fierce critique by setting 20th century South Africa into the wider context of European Colonial Rule in Africa. He insisted that South African history during the era of Apartheid should be

viewed as part of the history of European colonialism in Africa. “This perspective, which seems to be commonsense in the rest of Africa, went against the grain in South Africa where a myth of exceptionalism had taken root in both scholarship and the popular imagination”, as Frank Njubi a Kenyan Africanist teaching at San Diego wrote in a recent article (Njubi 2002). The exceptionalism described here focuses on South Africa as compared to the rest of Africa. According to a predominant South African perspective, the settler society in South Africa was dramatically different from other white settler colonies in Zimbabwe, Angola, Mozambique, Kenya and Algeria. In contrast Mamdani (1996) argues that South Africa's racially segregated past was full in line with the long history of colonialism in Africa. It therefore denies South Africa and apartheid any "exceptionalism", embracing the argument that apartheid was the “generic form of colonialism”. To put it clear: Many in South Africa believe that their country was among the first to shake off colonial rule. In fact, however, South Africa was probably the very last to be freed from colonialism.

I do not comment on the substance of such statements. The fact that they have been made, indicates a problem in itself. What one can see here is a division of perspective between foreign and domestic views on South Africa's history. The division of perspective not only applies to South Africa and her neighbours or peer nations on the African continent. There is also a split discourse on South Africa going on in the U.S. and Europe. I was confronted with quite a number of comments of European colleagues on South Africa during the last one and a half years. Those who advised me not to stay here for a year or longer pointed to “crime, geographical and intellectual remoteness, and a kind of parochialism”. “Enlightenment is just about to reach them, unfortunately 200 years late”, was one of the comments I got from a colleague. Actually he had been approached by the Apartheid Government to do some advisory work on constitutional reform and homelands policies during the mid 1980s. His view was thoroughly coined by a visit to Apartheid South Africa during which he met national government and homeland officials. Those who encouraged me to go to South Africa mainly referred to the country's climate and natural beauty. A Dutch colleague and cricket player called me a “lucky bastard” because of the cricket matches he would have enjoyed if he was in my place.

To be sure, we are now talking on a number of stereotypes which have not yet found a common denominator. I doubt whether a society in transformation like the South African one can be understood in categories of the unique and exceptional. This is because the notion of exceptionalism

has always meant, that a country is characterized by an inescapable historic fate. The fact that things have been in constant flux since more than a decade, however, forbids us to pin South Africa down to the image of an exceptional country. As usual in transformation periods we have only a limited, often diffuse understanding of current developments. In contrast, countries with deep and enduring discourses on exceptionalism like the U.S. and Israel have reached a punctuated equilibrium in history that allows us to treat them as exceptional country-cases.

US exceptionalism is based on the notion of being "god's own land" Born out of revolution, the U.S. has always considered itself an exceptional country. The term "American Exceptionalism" was coined by de Tocqueville and was extensively noted in much of the "foreign-traveler" literature of the 19th century in which foreign visitors to the US compared and contrasted what they saw to their native countries. Seymour Martin Lipset (1996) argues that American Exceptionalism results from the prevalence of "congregational sects" as opposed to "hierarchical churches" characteristic of European nations. That explains why socialism has never taken hold in the United States, why Americans are resistant to absolute quotas as a way to integrate blacks and other minorities, and why American religion and foreign policy have a moralistic, crusading stream.

Exceptionalism can be a politically useful myth. Gil Merom (19xx), for instance, in the *Political Science Quarterly* called the rhetoric of Israeli exceptionalism a useful construct based on religion. I don't feel competent to comment on that. Given the deep political, cultural and economic gap as well as the hostile relations between Israel and her neighbours, Israel is certainly experiencing a sort of regional exceptionalism. This resembles the South African Situation. All the more if we take the Apartheid past into account, when South Africa was not only a case of regional exceptionalism but was also surrounded by hostile neighbouring countries. In addition both, Israel and Apartheid South Africa, cultivated a self-image of being a "good colony". I shall deal with aspects of regional exceptionalism in more detail in the following paragraph. In particular, I want to demonstrate that South Africa is confronted with a dilemma when trying to take advantage of its outstanding position in Southern Africa and on the African continent.

South Africa in the World

So let us now leave the discursive aspects and turn to some real life phenomena. What is really and maybe enduringly special of South Africa? Take look at the earth at night. This picture (Picture 2) was taken

by an American Spy satellite. The contours of North America and Europe are easily recognizable. One can even see the stream of car lights on the major continental highways. In Asia the cities along the Transsiberian Railway shine like pearls on a necklace. Africa remains dark. Only in the deepest South one big and one smaller bright spots indicate a shine of modernity far away from other illuminated centres. These places are Gauteng and the municipality of Cape Town.



Even a child could see that there is something special or even curious about such a remote place. Geographical remoteness, however, has changed its meaning in the wake of satellite communication, global warming and an emerging class of global citizens. Globalisation, however, did not only enhance the mobility of ideas, goods, money and people in a previously unknown manner. It also brought new burdens and dilemmas to places like South Africa. On the one hand South Africa's post-1994 foreign policy aims to "export" its model of conflict resolution. Whether through quiet diplomacy or outright arm-twisting, Pretoria tried this in Mozambique, the former Zaire, Nigeria, Angola, Lesotho, Congo, Zimbabwe. On the other hand, South African companies are conquering the markets of their neighbouring countries, and the New South Africa is now among the World's big arms exporters. Weapons have become SA's second largest manufactured export even though they accounted for only 1% of all manufacturing jobs (Marais 1999: 11). In that respect South Africa shares the fate of semi-peripheral countries which are exploited by the core and tend to exploit their own peripheries (McGowan/Ahwireng-Obeng 1998). This describes a state of affairs created by British colonialism and prolonged by South African capitalism. It is true: Since 1994 the

government has embarked on a radical political and ideological change. It wants to attach its future to that of Africa as a whole, dreaming of a *pax africana* and the continent's renaissance. But its economic policy, derived from the developed world, still makes it see the rest of Africa as its own hinterland (Marais 1999). South Africa being a regional hegemon has to play a dilemmatic or maybe even a tragic part as the only semi-peripheral economy in an otherwise peripheral region. In an All African context this makes South Africa truly exceptional.

In March 1999, Hein Marais (1999: 11) wrote in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, one of the few All European political periodicals published in French, German, English, Italian and other European languages: "Fired by what Ugandan academic Mahmood Mamdani disapprovingly calls South Africa's claim to "exceptionalism", the ruling African National Congress (ANC) has in the past four years fallen victim to an inflated sense of its authority and influence in foreign relations. As a result, it now finds itself in a tangle of inconsistencies and contradictions and according to Greg Mills, director of the South African Institute for International Affairs, is unable to find a balance between "claims of morality and the constraints of realpolitik". With the exception of Mozambique all attempts to export its model of reconciliation have failed by now, and will probably fail because of the usual tensions between realpolitik and a mission statement which could easily be understood as an ideological blanket to cover plans of economic conquest.

Domestic Politics: The Constitutional Framework and Society

Let us turn to some features of domestic politics. South Africa shares a common fate with numerous countries which are characterized by fractured societies and fractured histories. Japan and Germany for instance, both experienced fractured histories with recurring fundamental regime changes. The same is true for post-socialist Eastern Europe. Switzerland and Northern Ireland are characterized by fractured societies. In fact, South Africa combines both a fractured society and a fractured history. In this respect it resembles the Balkans, the former Yugoslavia in particular.

Fractured Societies run the risk of violent conflicts which potentially arise from mutually reinforced socio-economic and ethnic cleavages, i.e. conflicts between groups who share socio-cultural, ethnic or religious traits with a certain socio-economic status. The answer to that problem found by the United States was pluralism. The American society born out of revolution and based on a melting-pot idea of citizens who became unified by an allegiance to a common set of ideals: individualism, anti-statism, populism, and egalitarianism. National identity in this case is

based on political ideology or a more rationalized “constitutional patriotism” (Habermas). Building national identity on ideology or I should even say “political theology” can result in ostracism because citizens who refuse to share this ideology can easily become stigmatized.

Winston Churchill once gave vivid evidence to the difference between a national identity rooted in history and one defined by ideology. In objecting to a proposal to outlaw the anti-war Communist Party in 1940, Churchill said that as far as he knew, the Communist Party was composed of Englishmen and he did not fear an Englishman. In Europe, nationality is related to community, and thus one cannot become un-English or un-Swedish. Being an American, however, is an ideological commitment. It is not a matter of birth. Those who reject American values are un-American.

There is a third pattern of political integration which I would call Negotiated Democracy. The concept of a „negotiated democracy“ applies to political systems, in which substantial decisions are made not by majority voting but by political bargaining. Such bargaining processes are to be found between political parties or between governments and interest associations or between constitutional parts of governments like for instance provincial and national governments. The term negotiated democracy had been applied in the early 1970s at first to describe the Swiss system of executive power sharing in government. Without it Switzerland would be ruled by a structural majority of the German Speaking population whereas the French and Italian speaking regions would have never had a chance to take part in government.

As national integration rooted in history is not a viable option for South Africa, the country has to navigate between attempts of ideological integration and negotiated democracy. Constitutional patriotism might be a scenario available in the future. The constitution however – though one of the best constructed ones ever – poses its own problems. It appears as if the South African constitution “limps ahead of the social conditions”, just as Otto Kirchheimer characterized the Weimar Constitution” in inter-war Germany , which was one of the most democratic constitutions in those days, but failed to integrate a Democracy without democrats.

Ideological nation building requires a pluralist society as compared to what political scientists call a corporatist society. Liberal Corporatism is based on strongly organized socio-economic associations participating in government. Looking at how the recent SA mineral rights bill had been negotiated between government and representatives of the minerals industry in a series of official talks, or how the recent reform of labour laws

in the context of NEDLAC had been managed, or how public-private partnerships like the new deep water port project in the Eastern Cape work, the South African political economy has to be classified as a coordinated market economy. A high share of para-statal – Spoornet, Portnet, SASOL, Telkom, ACSA etc. – adds to that picture which resembles continental European corporatist systems and the so called Rhenish model of capitalism (Albert 1993) much more than the Anglo-Saxon and U.S. types of political economy. Ironically this has very much to do with the Apartheid past and international Embargo policies. Apartheid economic policies were geared to close the economic gap between the English speaking and the Africans speaking parts of the population, and they had to cope with isolation. Both factors contributed to a critical juncture in South African History which set off a path of state capitalism resembling the economic histories of Japan, Austria, Sweden or Germany more than those of the UK or the U.S.

Looking at the major determinants of government policy, one finds that there are three aspects which are of particular importance:

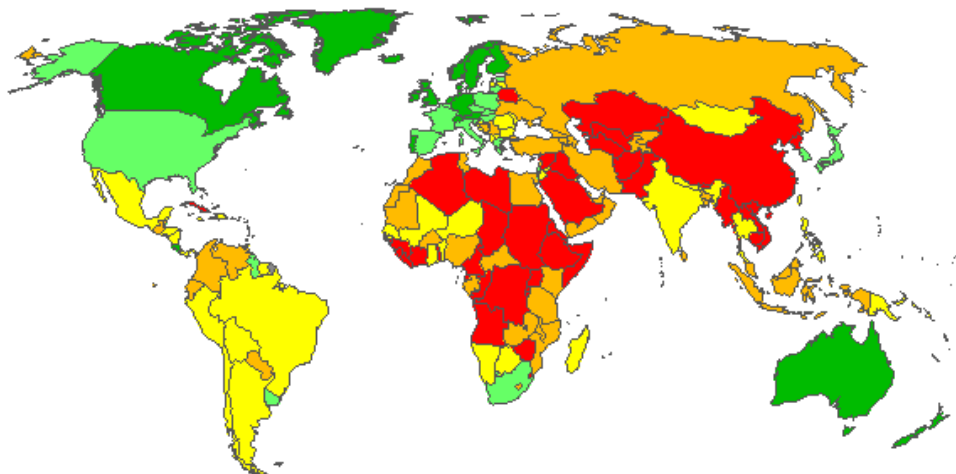
1. The autonomy of a national government vis a vis constitutional actors like subnational, provincial governments, central banks, constitutional courts, parliaments, supra national bodies, or other so called political veto-players.
2. The associational strength and political incorporation of socio-economic producer groups like business associations and labour unions.
3. The policy-orientation and electoral strength of a majority party or coalition government.

In sum, policy-making is determined by constitutional factors namely the veto-structure of government, the power-resources and political involvement of socio-economic producer groups, and aspects of political incumbency mainly the electoral strength and stability of party governments.

Now if we look at these attributes across the liberal-democratic industrialized countries of the north, we get an interesting three-dimensional configuration (Figure 1). Before I comment on that, I have to talk about whether South Africa could be compared to these highly industrialized OECD-countries. In terms of political structures I think one can compare South Africa to European Countries. As I said, the constitution and political power structure of the New South Africa are quite similar to the rest of the democratic world. In this respect South Africa is now much closer to the OECD-world than to all other African countries (Picture 3, dark

green indicates highest, red lowest scores with yellow and brown in between).

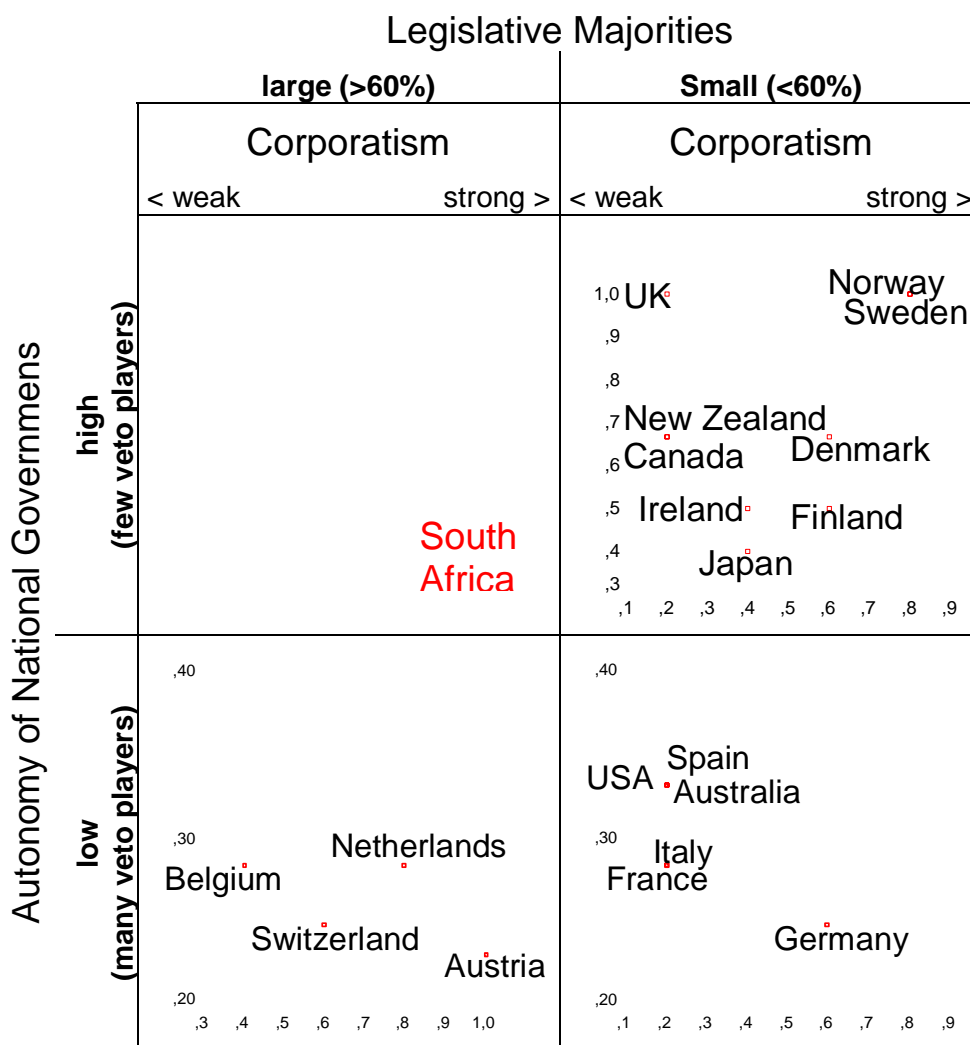
Democratic Participation, Civil Society, and the Rule of Law (2000/2001)



According to the World Bank indicators of Good Governance South Africa ranges on the same level as the United States as far as Democratic Participation and Civil Rights are concerned. Thus the New South Africa belongs to the family of nations with the highest democratic standards. Simultaneously it has a semi-peripheral emerging market economy which sets South Africa apart from the developed global metropolises. However, one can possibly compare South Africa with the liberal democratic western countries along the three dimensions outlined above. Within the OECD world we get three clusters of countries in a 4*4 table. All Countries with historically deep rooted ethnic or religious cleavages are characterized by many constitutional veto points, whereas we find unitary political systems in the historically homogeneous countries like in Scandinavian or the UK. In the US case the veto structure reflects the political will to protect minorities against a possible tyranny of the majority. In Switzerland, Federalism and Direct Democracy served the same purpose. Unfortunately constitutional vetoes as well as the incorporation of interest groups into policy-making restrict a national government's room to manoeuvre and slows down political decision-making. It can even cause political stalemate. For cases like this, classical veto player theory predicts small scope for policy change, including a minuscule capacity for political reforms. That is why such countries often have oversized governments. Coalition governments based on broad electoral support are apt to overcome the obstacles of constitutional vetoes as well as of societal conflict. Consequently we do not find any OECD-country with unitary decision-making structures having such broad coalition governments. In our 4*4 table this is an empty cell. Now, looking at

South Africa’s constitutional system, its corporatist traits and the exceptional electoral majority of its national government, we find that South Africa fits perfect into this empty upper left cell of our 4*4 table(Table 1).

Table 1: Government autonomy, legislative majorities, and corporatism



Source: Czada (2003).

South Africa’s political system is actually quiet exceptional at least with respect to the system characteristics discussed here. It is more than a speculation, however, to expect South Africa evading the upper right “empty cell” of our 4*4 table which is characterized by an exceptional legislative majority, relatively few political veto-players and corporatist interest-intermediation between government and well organized producer-groups. Sooner or later, South Africa will probably move into one of the neighbouring cells of our 4*4 table – or, in a worst case scenario, outside of this context of liberal democratic countries. Electoral majorities may

decline, the pact between government and the unions may break, or well organized civil society groups will call for more participation, direct democracy, or the decentralization of government. As the case may be, the political system will probably change. But in which direction could it possibly move? The South African constitution with its strong presidency, proportional representation and a relatively weak second chamber of provinces, and a quite limited provincial financial autonomy will probably never become similar to the West European negotiation democracies with many veto players and oversized coalition governments. To move into the direction of a unitary majoritarian system with minimum-winning coalitions and a well organized society as one can find in the Scandinavian Countries is also quite unlikely. This would hardly work because of the strong egalitarian and redistributive tendencies entrenched in the political structures of these countries.

Table 2: Equality Indicators

COUNTRY	GINI COEFFICIENTS 1980-98	COUNTRY	GINI COEFFICIENTS 1980-98
Namibia	0.70	Italy	0.34
Zimbabwe	0.63	United States	0.34
Malawi	0.62	Greece	0.33
South Africa	0.59	Ireland	0.32
Lesotho	0.57	United Kingdom	0.32
Angola	0.54	Australia	0.30
Botswana	0.54	Canada	0.28
Swaziland	0.51	Hungary	0.28
Zambia	0.50	Germany	0.28
Seychelles	0.47	France	0.27
Tanzania	0.38	Belgium	0.27
SADC	0.58	Switzerland	0.26
Brazil	0.59	Austria	0.26
Mexico	0.52	Japan	0.26
Turkey	0.49	Norway	0.25
Uganda	0.45	Netherlands	0.25
		Sweden	0.23
		Finland	0.22
		Denmark	0.21

Notice: Higher value of gini coefficient represents lower equality of income distribution. Sources: OECD 1999; SADC Regional Human Development Report 2000: Challenges and opportunities for regional integration. The report is published by the United Nations Development Programme, the Southern African Development Community and the Southern African Political Economy Series Trust

I have not mentioned up to now that South Africa is one of the countries with the most unequal distribution of wealth and income. In this perspective the country is not different from other African countries at all (Table 2). Looking at political indicators and socio-economic indicators simultaneously shows a truly exceptional picture. Politically the new South Africa belongs to the family of liberal-democracies, in socio-economic terms the country is part of Africa. Even an exceptionally high GNP does not mean that the socio-economic conditions differ fundamentally from other African countries. For instance GDP/capita is higher in Botswana than in South Africa, and social inequality is even worse than in most other African countries (Table 1).

We can now add a new dimension to Table 1, in which South Africa already takes a unique position. As a result we look at a country with high constitutional capacities of its national government, a largely oversized legislative majority, and a system of corporatist interest-intermediation. In this respect South Africa differs from its African neighbours and resembles the European and North American democracies. All this, however, comes with an extremely high measure of social inequality compared to Europe, North America and most Asian countries. In this respect South Africa finds herself in a family of nations together with most African countries, Brazil, Argentina and other Latin American countries.

To sum up: South Africa is not at all exceptional in any important single constitutional, political or socio-economic dimension. What makes it exceptional is a configuration of factors. From a configurative point of view South Africa is indeed a world of its own, in which characteristics of African, European, and North American countries coexist in a rather unique way. That is why the world watches this country. Friedrich Hebbel, the great Austrian dramatist of the 19th century, described his country as "the small world in which the great world holds rehearsal." That was at a time when Austria was the most multiethnic country in Europe. Maybe Hebbel's words apply to South Africa today more than to any other country. Some would probably worry about that. Let us hope that South Africa will not share the fate of Austria, who at Hebbel's time stretched deep into the Balkans, which still is – as we all know – the most fractured region with entrenched ethnic conflict and civil war since centuries.

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