Communist-Nationalist Relationships: A Theory of Communist Regime Strength in the Developing World

Edison Zhou

Saint Kentigern College

Author Note

Introduction

1975 was a watershed in the history of communism. It was a year that witnessed the fall of Phnom Penh and Saigon to communist forces of Cambodia and Vietnam respectively, the overthrow of the King of Laos by the Pathet Lao, the end of liberation wars in Angola and Mozambique, and the adoption of revolutionary socialism in Madagascar – all these countries joining the pantheon of communist states. In all, 15 communist regimes formed between the late 1960s and early 1980s. Their emergence was one of the chief surprises accompanying a period of startling change in the developing world.

That such regimes existed at all represents a puzzle in and of itself. The postcolonial world was unlikely terrain for communism, being underdeveloped and largely inhabited by rural populations, rather than by an urban proletariat which was supposed to lead the revolution (Drew, 2017). Communists exploited however much class animosity was on offer. Still more inexplicable was their ability to rise in a country without *significant* class conflict.

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There were other contradictions to communist theory. The developing world was experiencing a high nationalism, as evinced by the many ongoing anti-colonial struggles. In Zhou (2019, pp. 313–315)'s conception, nationalism possessed a predominant "social strength" and "potency" that ensured that it functioned as the "master frame" of the politics of these nations, while communism was supposed to be the internationalist archnemesis to 'bourgeois nationalism'. Instead, communist movements in Africa and Southeast Asia and beyond frequently sought to ally with or master the nationalist wave. Marx (1848, p. 25), who believed that "the working men have no country", was blindsided in the grave.

Communism is now a primarily historical question, but an inter-disciplinary approach combining qualitative evidence from History with the structured analysis of Political Science – with new research offering germane suggestions about the mechanisms behind authoritarian durability – makes it possible to isolate causal factors in the rise and fall of different regimes that are otherwise complex to the point of impenetrability and incomparability. There is evidence to suggest the existence of a positive correlation between the strength of the local relationship between communism and nationalism and the strength of a communist regime in a given country. This paper develops the theory that communist-nationalist dynamics exhibited a significant dependency on the initial conditions of a country, particularly three key factors: (1) whether communists participated in an independence war, improving their palatability in the eyes of more moderate nationalists, (2) whether that independence war coincided with class conflict in the country, allowing communists to take a leading role in national self-emancipation, and (3) whether there were no formidable ethnic divides in the country, as they usually made productive cooperation impossible.

The effects of these factors will be examined across four cases: Vietnam (1975–), Mozambique (1975–90), Angola (1975–90), and Ethiopia (1974–91). They help explain why Vietnam and Laos, where communists were at the forefront of the national cause, remain

communist to this day, whereas a regime like Ethiopia's Derg – facing antagonistic ethnic nationalisms – was besieged by civil war almost from the beginning.

This paper draws on a wealth of literature from Huntington (1968), Smith (2005), Levitsky and Way (2013), Zeng (2020), Kadivar (2018), and others which has been instrumental in delineating the mechanisms by which certain factors can determine a regime's durability. What general theories cannot explain as well are *specific* political developments in communist states which with closer scrutiny clearly seem to be motivated by a logic of their own. Communist regimes should not be lost in the long catalogue of authoritarian regimes, especially not those of the developing world, which constitute a fascinating anomaly – a European ideology being adopted idiosyncratically in postcolonial conditions for which it should have been the least suited, but which remains overshadowed by the Eastern European experience in popular memory and scholarship. That almost all the Marxist-Leninist states disappeared, at least nominally, in quick succession from 1989-92 further suggests that unique historical circumstances pervaded their demise, as they did their emergence, which are not adequately pictured in broader studies of authoritarian regimes. I aim to reconcile existing research with the unique historical context of developing world communism by considering the communist-nationalist relationship as an ideological middleman between initial variation and regime strength.

Communism and Nationalism in the late 20th Century

The study of communism is enmeshed in paradoxes. The foremost such paradox is that, contrary to Marx (1848)'s prediction that communist revolutions would erupt in the most advanced capitalist economies, the only revolutions bearing his name occurred in some of the least developed economies in the world. Communists of the Third World were to be dogged

by this theoretical contradiction for their entire existence. How could they resolve apply the Marxist prescription of working-class self-emancipation to a tiny proletariat that was far off from maturing into a 'class-for-itself'? It was this dilemma that provided the impetus for the evolution of communism's unique nationalistic character in the developing world.

Nationalism, which in Barrington (2006, p. 10)'s working definition is "the pursuit – through argument or other activity – of a set of rights and privileges for the self-defined members of the nation, including, at a minimum, territorial autonomy and independence", was omnipresent and especially potent in the developing world of the late 20th century as peoples sought to cast off colonial rule and realise their utopian dreams. There, nationalism was the closest thing to a universal ideology, more of a patriotic energy than a narrow theoretical system. None could deny its basic principles. As Luyang Zhou (2019, p. 315–316) explains, the intellectually vague idea of nationalism could serve as an 'operative ideology', whereby – transcending the need to provide normative blueprints – it constituted a "master frame" inside whose scaffolding the ideological discourse of any nation had to take shape.

Communism was no exception to this rule. Typically, as memory of Soviet oppression of Eastern European national aspirations remains fresh, communism is typecast as the diametric antithesis to nationalism. Recent scholarship has updated this view with more nuance, as a real socialist internationalism died probably around the start of WW so a "simplistic antithesis" rarely manifested (Schwarzmantel, 2016, pp. 635–639) that even the communists in Eastern Europe attempted to take 'national roads to socialism', although they failed under the jackboot of Soviet hegemony (Kolar, 2017, pp. 205–207) and that the Soviet Union systematically incubated the nationhood of peoples within its borders as the world's first 'affirmative action empire' (Martin, 2001). However, the experience of the USSR was not parallel to that in many Third World countries: in its early years, ethnic identity was less intellectually pronounced and had to be nurtured, then sidelined during Stalin's Russian-

chauvinist era, and finally proved to be one of the main forces behind the dissolution of the USSR. In any case, the dichotomy between communism and nationalism is decidedly false when it comes to the Third World. In Southeast Asia, communism served as "midwife to ethnically homogenising nation-states" and helped define the purpose of nationalist movements (Belogurova, 2017, p. 236). In Africa, communist states explicitly asserted their intention to maintain their sovereignty and follow independent foreign policies (eg by denying requests for military bases), prioritising the nation over a nominal communist fraternity and thereby eschewing Soviet satellite-hood. This vigilance was the defining feature of what David and Marina Ottaway term 'Afrocommunism'.

The dialectic between communism and nationalism played out with vigour everywhere in its diverse local forms, but there were two ideological links that remained fundamental to all communist-nationalist relationships. The first lay in communism's reputation as an ideology of efficient modernisation and development. Third World nationalists wished to telescope the 'bourgeois-democratic' phase of development into one audacious industrialising sprint, thereby avoiding the odious capitalist stage associated with their colonisers (Drew, 2017, p. 293; Ottaway & Ottaway, 1981, p. 157). In Sub-Saharan Africa, as in Southeast Asia, "nationalists saw their vocation as modernisation" (Lonsdale, 2016, p. 334). They were tantalised by the potential of applying Marxism-Leninism as a "state-led developmental paradigm" – in this, Stalin's five-year plans were to be a blueprint (Drew, 2017, p. 295). Scientific socialism in the 1970s was supposed to succeed where the socialist populism of the 1960s had failed. The second link was in the quintessentially nationalist desire for the construction of a cohesive nation-state. The highly neo-patrimonial, statist tendencies of Leninism could provide exactly that, with communist vanguard parties stepping in as centralising institutions. Communists could undertake state-building projects

relentlessly and ruthlessly, as encapsulated in Machel's laconic formula: "For the nation to live, the tribe must die" (n.d., as cited in Mamdani, 1996, p. 135).

Communists and nationalists were not natural allies – in theory, they should never have been allies at all. But politics makes for strange bedfellows. They concluded Faustian pacts in many countries because of what communism could provide in terms of economic development and state-building and what the unifying power of nationalism could provide to communists needing to expand the scope of their appeal. Necessity was the progenitor of communist-nationalist relationships in the developing world.

Theory

Certain patterns can be observed in the interactions between communists and nationalists. For one, political movements if not themselves patriotic were incentivised to make their ideology amenable to the nationalist agenda, because all these countries shared a potent nationalism with broad-based support. Communists only refused to do so when there were no extenuating circumstances (eg an independence war) and when there was intense class conflict, which made them powerful enough to take power without nationalist support. To assume control on a class basis alone seemed ideal to communists as they could avoid having to compromise their often-sectional agenda to appease the country at large, but it was a counterproductive strategy in the long-term – a state can hardly survive if the nation mobilises against it. Nonetheless, incentives are not deterministic, and incumbent elites of authoritarian state always have room to make critical errors in what Treisman (2020) calls 'democracy by mistake'. This accounts for inoptimal policies like Mozambique's period of hardline communism after 1977 or North Vietnam's anti-nationalist pivot in the mid-1950s, when communists temporarily neglected to accommodate interests outside the working class. But the overriding logic, that having a larger base of support is more conducive to political

survival, usually helped communists remember the value in more accommodating, nationalistic visions. Thus, assuming the desire for collaboration stayed effectively consistent on the communist end when the factors allowed for it, most of my focus will be on the willingness and ability of *nationalist* groups to cooperate with a communist regime.

In my contention, there were three factors with a decisive impact on the desire for cooperation between either nationalists or communists: whether there was (1) an independence war that the communists were involved in, (2) significant class conflict to accompany said independence war, and/or (3) a significant ethnic divide. I also argue that the strength of a communist-nationalist relationship directly impacted the strength of a communist regime overall.

Independence War

Self-determination was a very popular cause by the 1970s. There was no way to undertake such a Herculean effort as waging a war for national independence, other than by having overwhelming support among the populace. Communists that fought in independence wars emerged with greater levels of collaboration with nationalists and therefore stronger regimes.

One reason why lies in the more tolerant perception of communists by other political factions when they were compatriots in a shared struggle. Violent conflict "strengthen[s] partisan identities and harden[s] partisan boundaries", and independence wars created the simplest partisan binary of all: 'us vs them' (Levitsky & Way, 2013, pp. 9–10). According to LeBas (2011, pp. 44–47), such polarisation causes combatants to perceive the struggle for their "linked fate" in increasingly "moral" terms. The unity of an independence coalition was enhanced by juxtaposition with its enemies, the colonial powers, encouraging a broad-tent

alliance that imposed few ideological conditions save for the nationalist one – in the formulation of one Kenyan nationalist, "Everyone is taught to know the enemy – the colonial power – and the one goal – independence" (Mboya, 1963, p. 61). Communists were welcomed into what could be a profitable partnership with nationalists; the fact that they participated in the fight also certified their nationalist credentials in the long run. Absent a common cause, the mutual relationship was more likely to take the form of rivalry for political supremacy, defined by suspicion and competition.

Secondly, an independence war provided opportunities for communists to establish robust grassroots organisations that would be useful for their future regime in its capacity to interface with the constituents of the nation down below. If they were to continue to recruit and redeploy guerrillas, independence movements needed to develop a versatile organisational infrastructure rooted in decentralised, informal networks, which provided an organisational buffer against severe colonial repression (Kadivar, 2018, pp. 5–6). The destruction of independent power centres identified by Levitsky & Way (2013, pp. 12 –13) allowed later communist regimes to command more nationalist support by virtue of the fact that their competitors had been weakened, while the loyalists these networks dispersed among the people ensured that communists could continue to nurture a tangible link to society postwar, through which they could claim to represent the nation, mobilise support for that claim, keep a pulse on public opinion, and diffuse their ideology and propaganda – all of which could only improve their position vis-à-vis nationalism (Zeng, 2020, pp. 7–12).

Class Conflict

Secondly, the presence of class conflict – an open antagonism between socioeconomic classes – would result in an increased pre-regime level of authority for communists, making

them particularly enticing allies in the eyes of nationalists. Communists, better than most other groups, could mobilise the lower classes when a society was ripe for social revolution. This gave them a trump card in special situations demanding the participation of the masses – especially such an exacting circumstance as a war for independence. It made the communist-nationalist partnership stronger because there was a more convincing reason why an alliance should exist. However, there is a notable exception: in a society *with* class conflict but *without* an emancipatory struggle – that is, without a unifying cause – communists could take power with greater power and independence but also be overconfident in the loyalty of the masses to Marxist ideology and lacking an established relationship with nationalist movements. Class conflict is thus functionally relevant to my theory only when it coincided with an independence war, for that was when it had a noticeable impact on the communist-nationalist relationship.

The post-WW2 wave of colonial reoccupation exacerbated class conflict, as new developmental policies provoked questions about the unequal distribution of benefits and official efforts to control markets and wages, which agitated farmers and workers. As a consequence, "protest merged into a growing, mass opposition" nearly as much against local elites as against the colonialists (Berman & Lonsdale, 2016, p. 315). Mass-based guerrillas were to be, almost exclusively, the chief prosecutors of independence wars. To recruit guerrilla fighters, nationalists often borrowed the populist class language of the communists, though unsurprisingly the real communists retained the lion's share of lower-class support. Class conflict made the communists' parochial appeal to the disenchanted masses less of a political hindrance and more of a massive attraction. In the race to acquire "organisational weapons" that only the common people could provide, communists had a head-start over other nationalist groups thanks to their popular base (see Selznick, 2014). Therefore, when there was both an independence war and a class conflict, communists had the most to gain.

Their enhanced power made them extremely desirable as allies and more influential as partners, enough so to lead or outright master the nationalist upsurge.

Ethnic Divide

Thirdly, at a time when young nations were couching their identities in the language of self-determination, a significant ethnic divide often led to ethnicities developing nationalisms of their own, catering to their own group at the cost of the ability to form a nation with others. Ethnonationalist movements are typically less ideologically inclusive but no less intense compared to other nationalist movements. For a communist regime to successfully elevate civic values above other competing, exclusive nationalisms in a multiethnic country was a Sisyphean task that risked total aloofness from the fractious reality; neither could the regime befriend one ethnic group without alienating at least one other. Thus, ethnic conflict hampered or outright precluded the possibility of nationalists wanting to cooperate with communists.

Overview of Cases and Methodology

One may be surprised by the number of communist regimes that took power in the developing world during the 1970s–80s. There were 15 of them, listed in Table 1 on the next page. Some of those were 'marginals' unsuitable for analysis, like Benin, Burkina Faso, Madagascar, and Congo-Brazzaville, which arose out of military coups and were characterised by mere approximations of scientific socialism or ideological heterodoxy (Keller, 1992, pp. 289–291).

Table 1

The Rise of Communist Regimes in the Developing World, 1967–84

Region	State (official name)	Tenure
Greater Middle East	People's Democratic Republic of Yemen	1967–90
	Democratic Republic of Afghanistan	1978–92
Sub-Saharan Africa	People's Republic of the Congo	1968–92
	Somali Democratic Republic	1969–91
	People's Republic of Benin	1974–90
	People's Republic of Mozambique	1975–90
	People's Republic of Angola	1975–90
	Democratic Republic of Madagascar	1975–92
	Burkina Faso	1983–87
	Provisional Military Administrative Council, People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia	1974–91
Southeast Asia	Democratic Kampuchea	1975–79
	Socialist Republic of Vietnam	1975–
	Lao People's Democratic Republic	1975–
	People's Republic of Kampuchea	1979–89
Latin America	People's Revolutionary Government (Grenada)	1979–83

To date, there has not been a systematic comparison of communist regimes of this nature, even though it could reveal much about the effect of initial variation on communist-nationalist dynamics. To this end, I chose three cases from Sub-Saharan Africa (Mozambique, Angola, Ethiopia) and one from Southeast Asia (Vietnam) to conduct a plausibility test of my theory. Focusing on the 1970s–80s allows potential confounding factors to be controlled, like Soviet and American foreign policy which rested in continuity during this period, while constraining the sample to two regions – the two with the most communist activity in this decade – ensures that the starting socioeconomic conditions for these regimes were similar.

Each case was selected based on its unique combination of the three factors outlined in the theoretical argument above so that the role of each variable can be teased out. The presence or absence of the key theoretical conditions in the main cases is marked in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Presence or Absence of the Three Factors in Vietnam, Mozambique, Angola, and Ethiopia

	Independence War?			**Ethnic Divide?**	
	Yes				
Class Conflict?			*No*	*Yes*	*No*
	Yes	*No*			
Vietnam	X				X
Mozambique		X			X
Angola		X		X	
Ethiopia			X	X	

With permutations of the factors becoming less favourable down the column, the communist-nationalist relationships should be progressively weaker, and by extension so should the regimes. Indeed, Vietnam, with an independence war, class conflict, and no ethnic divide, was the strongest of the six (one of the four surviving communist regimes today), whilst Ethiopia – without independence war, with ethnic divides – was the weakest, undergoing both regime failure and the termination of its ruling party.

Regime strength is measured in an ordinal scale from 'very weak' to 'very strong'. Owing to a paucity of information, whether a result of a lack of scholarly interest or (more significantly) difficulties associated with data collection during war, a formulaic data-based assessment of the regimes is not possible. Qualitative characterisations in the historical literature are available, however, and I use these to assess various mass measures for popularity, ie the degree of public support, linkage to society, lack of anti-government mobilisation, and others where applicable. Other common measures like ruling-elite cohesion and regime administrative capacity – though illuminating in some cases – are frequently inappropriate because of confounding factors such as differences in the form of government and exogenous intrusions from the Cold War like foreign-backed insurgencies. Nonetheless, a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods are employed where suitable, namely when using party membership to reveal regime popularity and ethnic demographic data to characterise ethnic division. Indeed, a ranking of the four cases using party membership as an indicator of popularity aligns with my theoretical evaluation of their communist-nationalist relationships: on average across the regimes' lifespans, 2.99% of Vietnamese were members of the Communist Party of Vietnam, the highest, 0.91% of Mozambicans were in the FRELIMO Party, 0.46% of Angolans in the MPLA Labour Party, and 0.12% of Ethiopians in the

Workers' Party of Ethiopia, the lowest (Angiolillo, 2023; Brüne, 1990; Schwag, 1985; Brooke, 1987).[1]

The next sections will map out the theory onto the contrasting experiences of the four cases, tracing the effects of each determining factor on the relationship between communists and nationalists from beginning to end.

Vietnam

After a bitter fight against French colonial forces in the First Indochina War (1946–54) and the even fiercer Vietnam War (1955–75), Vietnam officially reunified as a Socialist Republic on 2 July 1976, over 30 years since independence had been declared. Vietnam is perhaps the archetypal example of a communist movement leading the anti-imperialist struggle. It is in my study the maximal success case for a communist-nationalist relationship. With the intersection of a class conflict and an independence war, Vietnam's communists were easily "a dominant outlet for nationalism almost from the beginning" (Westad, 2018, pp. 313–316). The country was ethnically homogenous with a vast majority of the population being Viet so there was no worry of ethnic fracture. With no impediments and only benefits from the three factors, the Communist Party's rule was well-secured, being one of the few such regimes to survive into the present day. In Table 3, the permutation of factors in Vietnam is given.

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[1] Membership statistics for Vietnam, Mozambique, and Angola were calculated using Angiolillo (2023)'s dataset. 2.99% for Vietnam is a figure excluding data post-1989 to allow comparability with the other three cases. Figures for Ethiopia use an estimate of 50,000 party members stated in Brüne (1990) and Brooke (1987), although Schwag (1985) estimates 30,000-50,000. Ethiopia's population was taken from United Nations (2024).

Table 3

The Factors in Vietnam

Factor	Yes/No
Independence War?	Yes
Class Conflict alongside Independence War?	Yes
Ethnic Divide?	No
Number of favourable factore:	**3/3**
Relationship and regime strength:	**Very Strong**

Resisting 'Double Oppression'

The communists' prominent role in the prolonged struggle for Vietnamese independence contributed decisively to their popularity. In August 1945, the communist Viet Minh spearheaded the August Revolution against the Nguyễn puppet state of Japan. From 1946–54, it led the Anti-French Resistance War as a national liberation struggle. So too was cast the Vietnam War, commonly called the *Kháng chiến chống Mỹ* – 'Resistance War against America'. South Vietnam, or officially the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), was odiously associated with foreign military force and anyway posed an obstacle to reunification, so this nationalistic framing persisted despite the technical fact that it was a civil war. The communist Workers' Party of Vietnam's strong bond with nationalism was not the result of political manoeuvre but of the organic ideological convictions of its leadership, a group of Vietnamese nationalist revolutionaries for whom "nationalism and Marxism were one" (Westad, 2018, p. 313). Among the Vietnamese, there was intense patriotic feeling and animosity towards the "double yoke of the French and the Japanese" (Ho, 1945). Thus its leadership exhibited an authentic nationalist spirit which came naturally for members of a people who had suffered longstanding colonial oppression. This was embodied the founder of the Viet Minh and Chairman of the Workers' Party, Ho Chi Minh (1956/2003)'s, recollections

stating that he was a nationalist before anything else: "At first patriotism, not yet communism, led me to have confidence in Lenin…". The genuine patriotic dedication of Ho and his Party helped ingratiate them with moderates.

However, there was a risk in the relatively peaceful period of 1955–56, after the anti-French war ended and the country was partitioned, that the communists would forsake the broad-based, populist policies which had appealed to nationalists. They shifted closer to Marxism in promoting personnel with class credentials over those with nationalist ones and discrediting patriotic heroes (Moise, 1988, p. 19). More than 15,000 "reactionary and evil warlords" were executed in the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), and large-scale land reform was attempted, alienating moderates (Vo, 1990, pp. 2–3). It is telling that this change occurred only in the interlude between Vietnam's two independence wars. The incidence of the second reinforced the impetus for the Workers' Party to shore up its nationalist credentials and by extension communist-nationalist cooperation. With the return to violent conflict in escalatory stages between 1956–59, the Party struck its divisive ideological orthodoxy for the national banner. Political prisoners were released; Ho personally apologised and promised a 'correction of errors' (Moise, 1983, pp. 237–268). Speeches from Le Duan, the party leader after 1960, evince a renewed emphasis on anti-imperialism, like his denunciation of the RVN as "imperialist, feudalist, dictatorial, fascist" and targeting of "American imperialists" as the main enemy to sharpen polarised 'us-them' distinctions (Lê, 1956; Lê, 1965). The Viet Cong's 1962 programme also drew continuity with memories of the colonial era, labelling South Vietnam a "colonial regime of the American imperialists" (National Liberation Front, 1962). The first independence war against France had established a cooperative communist-nationalist relationship; the second against the USA corrected its course.

'Land to the Tillers'

My theory holds that class conflict enabled communist movements to assume leadership of a nationalist independence coalition. This was the case in Vietnam. A 1953 census of North Vietnam illustrates a state of crippling inequality: poor peasants, who constituted 43.5% of Vietnamese households, owned only 15.7% of the land, whereas the 1.8% that were elite households, including landlords, Frenchmen, and the Catholic church, owned 18.9%; furthermore, although it is less relevant, the 19.8% who were labourers owned a paltry 1.9% (Moise, 1983, pp. 151, 156). 'Middle' and poor peasants and labourers, making up 96.9% of Vietnamese households, were easily radicalised by communist propaganda and conferred a powerful mandate for national leadership onto the communists.

Communists earned the people's support through their land redistribution policies. From 1953–56, land in North Vietnam was zealously confiscated from landlords or wealthier peasants for reallocation. Priority was given to the families of communist guerrillas and party members. These were the same 'rectifications' that the Workers' Party soon halted and apologised for, but that was a necessary compromise given the exigencies of the Vietnam War. In the meantime, the communists had lived up to their promises. Later, in 'liberated' zones in the south, ie captured territory from the RVN, communist insurgents would redistribute property to local farmers under the flagship slogan 'land to the tillers' (see National Liberation Front, 1962); redistribution proved to be a vital "means of obtaining a core of activists in each village" (Race, 1972, pp. 126–128). Perhaps the effect this had on Party popularity would have been less significant if the positivity of its actions had not been amplified by juxtaposition with the failings of the RVN. In the south, landlords were able to stall agrarian reform for so long that once it was finally introduced, it "failed to have a decisive impact" because it was "too little, too late" (Elliot, 2003, p. 372). Moreover, other dominant factions in South Vietnam, like the Catholics, the Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo Buddhist

sects, and the Đại Việt did not soothe inter-class antagonism either, remaining elitist to the core and lacking peasant representation. The RVN ultimately failed to mitigate lower-class grievances in time. The outcome was nevertheless not extraordinary: little could counter the signature appeal of communist ideology once a society had already been rent apart along socioeconomic fault lines.

It is important to remember that South Vietnam laid a claim over Vietnam's 'contested nationalism' as well. It too was seeking to modernise and reunite the country. It cultivated a "dynamic nationalist culture" of its own by presenting itself as the "sole legitimate inheritor and custodian of Vietnamese culture and history" (Tran, 2013, pp. 1–2). It grounded itself in the past to contrast with its opponents' radicalism, highlighting imperial architecture and archaeology, royal music and dance, and high art. Yet by taking charge of the class struggle, the Vietnamese communists all but assured their pre-eminence in the contest for nationalism as well. It was decided in two ways. First, their version of nationalism was more popular, because, unlike the RVN's counterproductive ideology which "identified Vietnam's national culture with elite culture", the Party embraced a folk nationalism comprising country dances, rural crafts, and oral literature (Tran, 2013, p. 145). Second, the communists leveraged support to build a mass-based insurgency in the south, utilising volunteer fighters, propaganda units, and resilient village cell structures. In Vietnam, communism became the preeminent representative of nationalism simply because millions of peasants and workers gave it the power to do so.

Weak Minority Resistance

To the extent that ethnic divides existed in Vietnam, they proved to be insignificant. In South Vietnam, some ethnic minority peoples were politically active. This included the

Montagnards or 'highlanders', the Buddhist Khmer Krom, and the Hindu and Muslim Champa people. A number split off, disavowing both Vietnamese nationalist factions since state modernisation was averse to the practice of their customs. They formed the United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races (FULRO) to campaign for independence safe from Vietnamese domination. If these minorities had been more populous and united – that is, if there had been a large ethnic divide in Vietnam – the cost of the communists allying with Vietnamese nationalism would have been to suffer their opposition. But ethnic Viet/Kinh people made up 79.5% of the population in 1954 and 78.1% in 1976 – FULRO had little to no prospect for success in Vietnam (Vogt et al., 2015).

Communist-Nationalist Synthesis

With all three factors being favourable to the Workers' Party, communist-nationalist cooperation in Vietnam was very strong. 'Revisionist' historians of the Vietnam War take the central role of the masses to mean that communist ideology per se was the kingmaker of a strong regime, rather than nationalist ideology. But there is no need to draw this dichotomy when there was a dialectical synthesis between the objectives of the two. The peasants resented the elites; those same elites were protected by the Americans. Independence war was why the communists were nationalists. Class conflict was why they were the most powerful, guaranteeing that other nationalists would jump on the bandwagon. Some members of the Party were primarily nationalist, some primarily communist, but the relationship in Vietnam was so firm that the synthesis of the two viewpoints appeared, at least from the outside, complete. After the civil war, there ceased to be a visible nationalist movement in Vietnam outside the communist umbrella organisation. As Moise (1988, p. 9) argues, "Those who recognise that a nationalist-Communist synthesis exists, generally agree that in countries like Vietnam, this synthesis has been crucial to Communist success."

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Strong foundations for the communist-nationalist relationship in Vietnam helped it to endure after the war years. Confronted with a debilitating economic crisis after 1976, the Party sought to rally an internally divided population by identifying an external threat, which informed Hanoi's "apparent need and desire to label China as a threat" (Path, 2011, pp. 204–205). Consequently, territorial disputes along the northern border escalated into "tit-for-tat struggle" with Chinese people in Vietnam being increasingly assaulted and harassed; the Party invoked Vietnamese collective memory and national myths of heroic resistance to Chinese chauvinism (Path, 2011, pp. 200–203). Nationalism in the crisis preceding and the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War managed to distract citizens and thereby preserve the communist regime in a period of instability. If the Vietnamese communists had not been the exclusive leaders for nationalism at home, various nationalist groups would have had to jockey for the best anti-China stance. Instead, the communist regime reaped the benefits of reinvigorated patriotism completely.

Very Strong Relationship and Regime

The Vietnamese communist regime remains robust, having lasted for 49 years and counting – a remarkable durability in light of the collapse of communism in the rest of the developing world – and only being weaker than one like China's. The public popularity of the Party has always been high, as reflected in statistics which show a local maximum of party membership of one member for every 32 Vietnamese people in 1976 right after reunification, a minor decline to a ~1:34 ratio from then to 1984, and a steady climb ever since (Angiolillo, 2023). Additionally, there has been no dangerous anti-government mobilisation after 1975. The relationship with nationalism has been successfully maintained, for the regime has demonstrated its willingness to reform in the 1986 *Doi Moi* as a compromise with the different economic visions of moderate nationalists. Moreover, nationalism is increasingly

stoked by calls for vigilance against China, much like around 1979. Thus, the state of affairs in Vietnam is likely to persist for some time yet.

Ethiopia

At a cursory glance, Ethiopia's communist regime should have been very secure. Ethiopia before communism was ruled by the archaic, feudal government of Emperor Haile Selassie. Class conflict was extreme, entrenched, and omnipresent. Between the Emperor, his feudal lords, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and the state lay possession of 93% of the country's land. The 23 million peasants owned only 7%, an inequality even more acute than Vietnam's, and regularly lost up to 75% of their produce to the landlords (Gutpa, 1978, p. 158). In the era of the 'toiling masses' breaking their 'feudal chains', the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution – triggered by the ravages of the 1972–75 Wollo Famine – came as no surprise. Swept away by student-led protests, the empire was replaced by a military junta, the Provisional Military Administrative Council (the 'Derg'). It quickly got to work constructing a unitary Marxist-Leninist state, which was proclaimed as the People's Democratic Republic in 1987. The initial theoretical conditions for Ethiopia are outlined in Table 4.

Table 4

The Factors in Ethiopia

Factor	Yes/No
Independence War?	No
Class Conflict alongside Independence War?	No
Ethnic Divide?	Yes
Number of favourable factors:	**0/3**
Relationship and regime strength:	**Very Weak**

The Derg was the weakest of the five cases I examine. First, there was no independence war. Second, crucially, Ethiopia is an exceptionally diverse country with over 80 ethnicities. With no favourable factors affecting the communist-nationalist relationship, the Derg's regime was very weak. It had no desire to work with nationalism because there had not been a national liberation struggle. Resultantly, it a) was overconfident in the people's loyalty to class since a social revolution and not a national liberation struggle had propelled communism to power, and b) felt no obligation to concede the kind of devolved, federal government structure which was so anathema to Leninism but which may have made communist-nationalist cooperation possible. For non-regime groups, the obstacles to cooperation were their loyalty to regional ethnic identities and the dominance of the Amhara people in the imperial system. Although Ethiopia was one of the few countries outside Europe to not be colonised, to many ethnicities in the country ironically it was the Ethiopian Empire that was their colonial oppressor. The communists inherited the fatal position sown under their predecessors reaping the wrath of the minorities, but did nothing substantial to ameliorate this. Ethnonationalists had no desire to work with ruling communists who offered no concessions, whilst it is doubtful that reconciliation would have been possible anyway due to the labyrinthine complexities in coordinating multiethnic coalitions. The People's

Democratic Republic was toppled in 1991 with the rest of the communist world.

Red Terror

Due to the Derg's lack of nationalist conviction – which would not have been an issue if there had been some kind of patriotic inspiration in Ethiopia (like anti-colonialism in Vietnam) – it was not interested in cultivating an alliance of nationalists. Instead, it leaned into its communist agenda with radical impatience, which is ironic because it did not have a convincing ideological monopoly over communism either. Various powerful groups asserted leadership over the lower classes, such as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON).

We only need to trace the disastrous effects of the Derg's refusal to coopt nationalism to understand why a unifying communist-nationalist relationship was important. The Ethiopian Revolution had propounded communalism, 'people's democracy', and nationalisation of economic property. In contrast to nationalism which persists as a unifying thread, there was no reason why Ethiopian civil groups should have tolerated the Derg once it revealed its ambivalence to the revolution's democratic aims. Therefore, a savage confrontation for power ensued. There was 'counterrevolutionary' royalist and conservative opposition, primarily rural, on the right and urban opposition on the left. The latter included erstwhile allies like the EPRP which carried out an assassination campaign against the regime, the 'White Terror', in September 1977. Due to internal ideological discord, the Derg itself did not have a clear leader until after an hour-long shootout on 3 February 1977. Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam ruled thereafter as its chairman (see Andrew & Mitrokhin, 2006b). Mengistu (1977, as cited in Andrew & Mitrokhin, 2006a, pp. 467–468) resolved to crush the EPRP brutally: "We are doing what Lenin did. You cannot build socialism without Red Terror." The Derg did not just suppress the EPRP but also turned on MEISON. In so

doing, it undermined its long-term position, for those former allies possessed established bases across the country, whereas the absence of protracted conflict in the Derg's 'revolution from above' meant it had had no pretext for building its own power centres.

When Marxist regimes had no desire to make alliances with them, they displayed a striking readiness to "alienate, gratuitously, whole swathes of the societies of the societies they [seek] to govern" (Glaser, 2013, p. 185). The Derg hubristically overplayed its hand in economic policy. It was ideologically rigid, setting up a command economy when it lacked the managerial capacity to do so; in rural land reform, it undertook policies that were hostile to smallholder peasant agriculture and thus bitterly resented; in the urban sector, it struggled with solving unemployment, poverty, and food scarcity (Rahmato, 1987, pp. 167 – 175). Rural populations were especially resentful of the way the Derg corralled them onto Maoist-style cooperatives hundreds of miles away all while disparaging animist beliefs and traditional leaders (Glaser, 2013, pp. 184–85).

Although the lack of nationalist support was not the only reason why the Derg was such a weak regime, the above does show that ideologies of socioeconomic organisation were inconducive or outright detrimental to unity of the populace and thereby the resilience of a regime. Nationalism in the developing world was the diametric opposite: a vague ideology almost always potent enough to perform a unifying role, to be sidelined at any regime's peril.

'Prison of Nations'

Worse, deep-seated ethnic divides in Ethiopia resulted in a very poor, hostile communist-nationalist relationship. The Derg's half-hearted attempts to befriend the manifold ethnonationalist oppositions were doomed to fail because the situation in Ethiopia was more demanding than its centralising policies were suited for. It needed a creative stance on issues

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of national self-determination if ethnic nationalists were to be willing to work with it, but nothing such was forthcoming from a regime indifferent to (or ignorant of) the power of nationalism, for reasons discussed earlier, and thus unconvinced of the importance of cooperation. Consequently, resistance groups formed around nationalist goals, and those resistance groups included original socialist champions of the Ethiopian Revolution who chose ethnic-national identity over any affinity with communism – a clear indication of their priorities (Moody, 2023, pp. 16–19).

The Derg maintained continuity with injustice, preserving the traditional dominance of the Amhara and subjecting other ethnicities to "active, intentional, and targeted discrimination by the state" (Vogt et al, 2015). It was loath to part with the semi-supportive Amhara to try and reconciliate with an eclectic opposition. Ethnic identity was demeaned by the Derg in many ways, for example in the suppression of indigenous languages in favour of Amharic, the under-representation of ethnic out-groups in official bodies, the forced 'villagisation' of 13 million rural peasants into unfamiliar areas by 1989 which was insensitive towards regional identities, and the fact that over 80% of generals were Amharan (Glaser, 2013, p. 185; Human Rights Watch, 2012; Tareke, 2009, p. 123). The Derg attempted a token affirmative action approach in 1977, creating the Institute for Nations and Nationalities, but the assumptions behind such an approach were based on the *korenizatsiia* ('indigenisation') policies of Lenin's USSR, which had nurtured the consciousness of embryonic nationalities (see Liber, 1991). Something similar in Ethiopia was unworkable, because the situation in the former imperial Russian territories was totally divorced from the severity of ethnic division in Ethiopia. Unlike Vietnam where the Viet were overwhelming numerous, the Amhara constituted just 28.3% of the population, and, notably, did not even have a plurality, as the Oroma made up 29.1% (Vogt et al, 2015).

Even if the Derg had better articulated a solution to the 'problem of nationalities', it is doubtful that they could have strung Ethiopia's melting pot of nationalists together. Anti-government mobilisation took on three forms: 1) communist, pan-Ethiopian ethnic federalists, 2) ethnonationalist separatists seeking independence, and 3) Somalis in the Ogaden trying to secede and join Somalia (see Berhe & Gebresilassie, 2020). Of the first type, there was the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the mostly Amharan Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement, and the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation, which merged into the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1988 under TPLF leadership. Of the second, there was the Oromo Liberation Front, Afar Liberation Front, and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which eclipsed its non-communist rivals. As for the third, the Western Somali Liberation Front and irredentist Somalia waged the 1977–78 Ogaden War. Not even Fidel Castro's 'shuttle diplomacy' could persuade communists to halt the fratricidal in-fighting. David and Marina Ottaway (1981, p. 10) encapsulate precisely what the separatist wars waged by communist Somalis and Eritreans reveal: "that nationalism was a far more deeply held conviction than their commonly espoused Marxist-Leninist ideology".

Very Weak Relationship and Regime

Ethiopian communism's experience supports my counterintuitive point that communists' class credential were only contributors to long-term success insofar as they contributed to the ability to form an alliance with nationalism. If class consciousness superseded ethnic consciousness in Ethiopia, one would expect people to flock to the banner of scientific socialism. Yet, after being prepared for its role as the civilian-based vanguard party for nearly a decade, the Workers' Party of Ethiopia only ever mustered 0.12% of the

population, many of those being members of the regime military.[2] Ethiopia proves by contradiction that a strong class conflict, without any other supportive factors, was an inadequate formula for communist regime strength.

The communists' failings were their own, but they need not have been besieged from all sides. It came down to the factors affecting communist-nationalist dynamics in Ethiopia. If Ethiopia had to fight for independence, Mengistu's coterie, the EPRP, and MEISON would likely be much more nationalistic, potentially putting aside theoretical disputes, and instituting the multinational structure demanded by the EPRDF, thus averting challenge from ethnic federalists. Nevertheless, no Ethiopian communists could have satisfactorily assuaged the ethnonationalisms of the Oroma, Afar, and Eritreans spawned by ethnic division. It is probable that the communists there were even weaker than they appeared. They did not possess enough force endogenously to defeat Eritrea, a much smaller of nation, and would have lost to Somalia if not for Soviet and Cuban rescue.[3]

The winding-down of Eastern Bloc technical, economic, and security assistance in the developing world in the late 1980s presaged the imminent downfall of the People's Democratic of Ethiopia. Mengistu (1990, as cited in Herbst, 1990, p. 95) recognised that the end was nigh in 1990: "Today's world is no longer what it was when we charted out the direction of progress 15 years ago…No development plan can be permanent. One year later, Mengistu fled the country, Addis Ababa fell to the EPRDF, and communism in Ethiopia was no more.

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[2] See 'Overview of Cases and Methodology' for how this figure was calculated.
[3] 12,000-18,000 Cuban troops fought in the Ogaden War (Gleijeses, 2013, p. 45).

Mozambique

Between the two poles of Vietnam and Ethiopia lies a case like Mozambique, where anti-colonial groups coalesced in 1962 into the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) to eject the Portuguese who were stubbornly rejecting decolonisation. In the midst of this, there was not a class conflict that communists could exploit to their advantage. Unlike Vietnam, where the masses had been arrayed against the elites, that divide was less significant in Mozambique because the colonial authorities broadly did not discriminate in their mistreatment. Despite allowing the rise of a small, elite *assimilado* ('assimilated') class, the colonial authorities erred by subsequently "subjecting it to personal humiliation and depressed status" (Newitt, 1995, p. 477). Thus, Mozambique's was not a situation where an indigenous petty bourgeoisie betrayed its countrymen to back the colonisers. Rather, the southern *assimilados* joined forces with northern peasants during the 1964–74 Mozambican War of Independence (Sumich, 2010, pp. 18–19). Still, the lack of a class conflict posed a challenge for the later communist FRELIMO Party if it was to stay dominant, as it could not rely on the lower classes to buttress its position as a nationalist party. The situation in Mozambique is represented in Table 5.

Table 5

The Factors in Mozambique

Factor	Yes/No
Independence War?	Yes
Class Conflict alongside Independence War?	No
Ethnic Divide?	No
Number of favourable factors:	**2/3**
Relationship and regime strength:	**Strong**

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Fortunately, at least the Mozambican communists did not have to contend with ethnic divides. There was no burning need for ethnic groups in Mozambique to seek self-determination, to a large extent because the sources of oppression had not been local – most grievances were rightly lanced at the Portuguese. The 'bourgeois' elements of FRELIMO which were ejected in 1969 tried to build up a movement of their own through ethnic nationalism, but this proved unsuccessful. The effect their attempt did have, interestingly, was that FRELIMO became militantly non-racial, obsessed with maintaining unity and preventing the divergence of the nation along sectarian lines by any means (Sumich, 2010, p. 18).

With a majority of the three factors being favourable, Mozambique's communist-nationalist relationship was cohesive and resilient and made for a robust regime. With the death of its President Samora Machel in 1986 and the decline of Soviet communism, FRELIMO has stepped away from communism, but remains Mozambique's firmly nationalist governing regime.

Mozambican War of Independence

Nationalism was always FRELIMO's overriding priority. It was to unify the people on as inclusive a basis as possible, a purpose always stated unambiguously by its leader Machel (1975, p. 8): "No one can claim that they are representatives of a race, ethnic group, region, or religious belief… We all fought and are still fighting for the same nation, for the single ideal of liberation of our land and our people." Indeed, FRELIMO was not even definitively socialist until 1969, when the 'bourgeois' wing was defeated internally, nor was it a self-defined Marxist-Leninist party until 1977. Those with socialist and populist leanings had been exceedingly willing to make a national coalition in 1962 even with those they viewed as 'counterrevolutionary'. Thus, "Marxist-Leninism became a part of the nationalist ideology"

of FRELIMO, not vice versa (Ottaway & Ottaway, 1981, p. 34). This correlated with the order of preference in Vietnam: where colonial oppression was the concern, nationalism came first, communism second. Although intellectuals like Amilcar Cabral (1972, pp. 92–93) lamented the "ideological deficiency" of Africa's national liberation movements, ie the kind of ideological blank canvas that was FRELIMO's banner, ideological generality was crucial to success. FRELIMO was broad enough to not have been opposed by other pro-independence groups, so it was able to claim the mantle of leadership in 1975 undisputed.

The second mechanism of independence wars was also in play: FRELIMO had to refine its revolutionary practice in order to mount a guerrilla war, leading to a better connection with the constituents of the nation down the line (Saul, 1987, p. 112). It grew a positive bond with the peasants by a permitting a kind of direct democracy of self-government and political participation; *grupos dinamizadores* ('dynamising groups') were used to inculcate links between party and people and promote *aldeias comunais* (communal villages), which in turn functioned as key local units for hosting people's assemblies and organising collectivisation (Martin, 2012, p. 82; Ottaway & Ottaway, 1981, pp. 75, 197–198). In conjunction with the diffusion of revolutionary ideas to the people through exemplary, egalitarian policies, these local democratic habits were part of the "political preparation of the peasantry", as the people were roused, imbued with a "socially transformative zeal" from which FRELIMO would benefit postwar (Glaser, 2013, p. 173). Thus by independence the Party was already ready to crown itself the supreme nationalist group.

In Search of Class Warfare

The lack of open class conflict did not prevent the rise of communism in Mozambique, primarily because it was adopted top-down by the auspices of an existing

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ruling party. Regardless, its absence certainly did not make FRELIMO's regime stronger. The Party worried about the limited radicalism of the Mozambican masses and the relatively unimportant role they had played in the national liberation struggle (Ottaway & Ottaway, 1981, p. 27). The Party's leaders were mostly *assimilado*, a miniscule, expatriate intellectual elite (see Derluguian, 2012). So the communists contrived, perhaps absurdly, to manufacture the missing ingredient in the Marxist recipe. Desiring the "intensification of class struggle", they set up the "gigantic managerial nightmare" of state farms, proclaimed the leading role of the working class, and disparaged the peasantry as unreliable (Ottaway & Ottaway, 1981, p. 196). Had there been overt class consciousness in Mozambique, it is unlikely that an elitist organisation like FRELIMO could have successfully posed as the representative of the lower classes.

Notwithstanding the begrudging acceptance of FRELIMO pre-eminence, there still existed a level of alienation between the common people and their tiny revolutionary elite, a distance they themselves widened by insisting on a pure, professional party. What is more, Howe and Ottaway (1987, p. 44) argue that FRELIMO was unprepared to take power when it did because it had not expanded its presence geographically as of 1975, when it remained confined to liberated zones in the northern provinces and only maintained a weak presence in the capital city Maputo. All the above points to the conclusion that Mozambique's communist-nationalist relationship was strong on the nationalist end but weak on the communist end. Nationalist ideology deserves much credit, then, for keeping the FRELIMO regime relatively secure.

Pre-empting Ethnic Conflict

In post-independence Mozambique there was a dangerous potential for the explosion of latent ethnic divisions. The most visible ethnic groups in the new regime were the Makonde and the Tsonga though more by circumstance than any intentional ethnic bias (Vogt et al., 2015). Recent scholars have taken more note of the effects of ethnic marginalisation of groups like the Amakhuwa, but from the historical perspective it appears that FRELIMO shrewdly bypassed the ethnic question by totally disavowing the validity of ethnic nationalist claims (Bussoti & Nhaueleque, 2022, pp. 152–155). It instead asserted its strong partnership with pan-Mozambican nationalism and diametric opposition to any 'tribalist' arguments. Most of the would-be nation came to accept this dogmatic approach, as evident in the fact that FRELIMO massively outgrew ethnonationalist organisations like those of the Makonde or Zambesi after its foundation in 1962. While the cynicism of marginalised groups fertilised ethnic particularism, the idea of broad-based nationalism became synonymous with FRELIMO, cementing the synthesis of communism and modernist nationalism. The potential for large-scale ethnic conflict was disarmed by the strength of the communist-nationalist alliance within FRELIMO. At the same time, it only proved tenable at all because ethnic consciousness was not sufficiently salient in 1970s Mozambique. If it had been, the FRELIMO regime would have had to contend with a predominant clamour for ethnic self-determination from all sides and thus would inevitably be much weaker.

Strong Relationship and Regime

FRELIMO discarded some of its conciliatory precepts in 1977, turning to more rigorous applications of communist economics. It abandoned the participatory, democratic precedent set during the war years to force the country into a faster pace of industrialisation

(Glaser, 2013, p. 174). Many initiatives caused frustration, such as the coerced resettlement of unemployed city-dwellers out of Maputo, the formation of communal villages and state farms, and the dismissal of the needs of the agricultural peasant sector because it was 'petty bourgeois. During this period, enthusiasm for FRELIMO declined drastically; its nationalist reputation as the custodian of all Mozambicans was being sacrificed to spite the majority of the population who were peasants; "the connection between party and population became weak" (Howe & Ottaway, 1987, pp. 47–48).

These grievances (and ethnonationalist disillusionment) precipitated the rise of the Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO), an anti-communist, conservative, and nationalist insurgency. FRELIMO's seemingly monopolised communist-nationalist relationship was under serious challenge. RENAMO capitalised on disaffected parts of the population: peasants who were not satisfied with being ruled by an "alien, urban, Creole" elite and disenfranchised *régulos*, former local leaders at the rural subdivision level (Sumich, 2010, p. 21). It also had large amounts of external backing from South Africa and Rhodesia which wished to roll back Africa's more radical regimes. Due to the civil war, the FRELIMO regime's hold on Mozambican territory fell to about 59% by 1981 (V-Dem, 2024).

FRELIMO (1978, p. 22)'s earlier willingness to work with nationalism on a broad progressive front encompassing the "proletariat, the peasants, particularly those in cooperatives, revolutionary intellectuals, artisans, workers in general" was not forgotten. It provided a grace period in the eyes of the people at the end of which the communists decided to back-track from their divisive policies. Nor had FRELIMO forgotten its roots in the independence war. It was not about to see the alliance between revolutionary nationalism and communism they had cultivated be usurped by RENAMO's neo-traditionalist nationalism. In addition, the regime needed to be secured internally if it was to resist the aggressive destabilisation strategies of exogenous threats, Rhodesia and South Africa. As such, at the

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Fourth Party Congress in April 1983, moderates took over from the hardliners and the Party acknowledged errors – eg the "one-sided concentration of the government on the state sector in agriculture" – committed since 1977 ('Defend the fatherland!', 1983, p. 39). Changes included a non-aggression pact with South Africa and economic association with it, a pragmatic pivot to private farms, and requests for US agricultural aid (Saul, 1987, pp. 110, 146).

These drastic course-corrections were parallel to Vietnam's in 1956 and 1986. Both Vietnamese and Mozambican communists displayed a remarkable capacity for self-criticism, demonstrating that, as long as there was recognition of the significance of nationalism and a desire to work with nationalists, communist regimes could renew themselves. Mozambique survived the withdrawal of Soviet assistance in the 1980s. Party membership continuously increased during FRELIMO's tenure, reaching one member for every 37 people in 1990 (Vietnam had one for every 32 that year), the last year of communist dictatorship in Mozambique (Angiolillo, 2023). The fall of the USSR effected a 'hegemonic shock' in Africa and with it a moment of liberalisation. But in many ways the defining features of communist regimes have not disappeared: state-driven economies, single-party systems, Leninist statism (see Woldense & Kroeger, 2023). At the turn of the decade, FRELIMO (1989, as cited in Perlez, 1989) gave up on its communist regime: where for two decades it had been the "vanguard party of the worker-peasant alliance", now it would return to its roots as the "vanguard party of the Mozambican people". Perhaps implicit in the perseverance of a democratic socialist FRELIMO Party is confirmation that it was nationalism all along that was the source of its durability.

Angola

The People's Republics of Mozambique and Angola were sister regimes, both entering power within months of each other in 1975, both having prevailed over Portugal in their anti-colonial liberation wars, and both honouring nationalism and Marxism-Leninism as their ideological lodestars. Where they varied noticeably was in regime strength: the FRELIMO Party maintained an upper hand against insurgency, while the communist People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) barely stayed above water during the Angolan Civil War (1975–2002), with territorial control upon independence at merely 56.7%, 20 points lower than the Mozambican communists', and falling to 46.7% by 1986 (V-Dem, 2024). Angola had an independence war but no class conflict – same as Mozambique. Where Angola and Mozambique diverged was that communists of the former country had to contend with an ethnic divide. The similarities and differences between Mozambique and Angola can be noticed in Tables 5 and 6 respectively, with Table 6 indicating the factors in Angola.

Table 6

The Factors in Angola

Factor	Yes/No
Independence War?	Yes
Class Conflict alongside Independence War?	No
Ethnic Divide?	Yes
Number of favourable factors:	**1/3**
Relationship and regime strength:	**Weak**

Angola's communist regime was weakened on the one hand by the lack of a class struggle, leaving the MPLA Labour Party in an isolated position at the top without the kind of overwhelming power that would have forced nationalists to seek alliance with it; on the other hand, it was undermined by ethnic conflict, as ethnic groups grounded in local tribes vied for their interests to become preponderant. The MPLA could not extricate itself from the quagmire, and the country splintered three ways racially and ethnically between the *assimilados*, mixed-race *mestiços*, and Mbundu for the MPLA; the Ovimbundu for the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA); and the Bakongo for the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA). Like in Ethiopia, ethnic divides proved to be the bane of communist-nationalist cooperation. In 1991, the MPLA abandoned communism to reach a (unsuccessful) peace settlement.

Angolan War of Independence

As the theory goes, Angola's independence war increased the willingness of the different nationalist factions to cooperate. Informal collaboration or coexistence was possible since early Angolan nationalism existed in broad, anti-colonial form, its chief objective defined basically as the eviction of the Portuguese. This facilitated a tripartite pact between the liberation movements in January 1975, as part of the Alvor Agreement, to form a transitional government to organise elections in Angola. Just as with FRELIMO, the MPLA (1974) recognised the prevalence of nationalism and made its "present priority" to "unite the broad strata of the Angolan people behind the MPLA" rather than discriminate by class. In the earlier words of Spartacus Monimambu (1968) of the Politico-Military Coordinating Committee, "Political education [was] first of all nationalist". The socialist agenda was overtly relegated to secondary significance: in 1971, the MPLA (1974, as cited in Ottaway & Ottaway, 1981, p. 102) asserted that it was "not a Communist movement" and that to label it

so was "false propaganda". The MPLA's numbers swelled due to the "bandwagon effect" created by the imminence of independence, with patriots coalescing behind the largest battle-tested and proven patriotic front (Ottaway, 1990, p. 234). The MPLA had also built up a powerful party organisation by 1975, boasting of a "political underground, guerrilla force, and exile movement", although any possible long-term gains from this were negated by the civil war (Marcum, 1987, p. 69).

Peace with Portugal portended war at home. As independence approached and the unifying domestic thread vanished, the MPLA's cooperation with other nationalist movements deteriorated due to the surfacing of ethnic and/or racial nationalisms. For want of a class conflict, the MPLA moreover lacked the dominance to become national leader by default and force the other nationalists to stay onside.

Limited Class Conflict

Given that it was a revolutionary left-wing movement situated in an environment without prominent class conflict, the MPLA faced a grave theoretical conundrum that played out as an internal conflict between President Agostinho Neto, who represented the *moderados*, and Nito Alves, who rebelled in 1977 with his 'Nitistas'. "I am the revolution incarnate", Alves (1977, as cited in Fauvet, 1977, pp. 97–98) proclaimed. There was more to their rivalry that will be explored later. This was symptomatic of deeper issue with the MPLA's provenance: usually, communists who started as intellectual professionals were able to shift to a mass-based movement, but the MPLA stayed anchored to its elite origins. The trouble for Angola's communists was that the necessary re-orientation was not possible, for there were no self-identified 'toiling masses' in Angola, not as of the 1970s – it typically takes an acrimonious inter-class feud to stimulate class consciousness. It dawned on the

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MPLA quite late that nationalism actually *was* its main draw, for African peasants "logically viewed the independence struggle in racial, not class, terms" and thereby had primarily sought the elimination of white settler oppression (Marcum, 1987, p. 74). Remaining an organisation fixed in metropolitan milieus, featuring a high proportion of *mestiços* who had had Portuguese schooling and still enjoyed privilege, the MPLA found itself – in spite of there being no coherent class antagonism – alienated from rural inhabitants and unable to produce an effective rural insurgency; only 12 out of 600 delegates were peasants (Somerville, 1986, p. 105). The contrast with the symbiosis of national and class struggles in Vietnam's case is stark.

Same as FRELIMO, the MPLA believed it imperative to effect the development of "antagonistic social classes" from above (Ottaway & Ottaway, 1981, p. 100). After some experimentation, the MPLA Labour Party was thoroughly disabused of that notion, discovering – as was fast becoming a pattern – that the nominal applicability of Marxist theory to African economic conditions was illusory. The effects of its economic reforms were generally deleterious: for example, of the 6000 farms placed under state control, only a handful ever became operational, so agricultural yields collapsed (Gunn, 1987, p. 187).

Ethnic Divides

In contrast to the leaders of communist regimes like Ethiopia's, the MPLA's were born and bred in a war for independence and thus keen on reaching a big-tent nationalist alliance. To this end, its ideology was calculated to overcome ethnic nationalism. The first way it tried to do this was by stressing the Marxist philosophy that multiple ethnic groups could have common class interests. There was some success at transcending racial difference as the *mestiços* and *assimilados* arranged cooperation in the cities with black workers and the

'Lumpenproletariat'. But we have discussed why this could not work outside the cities – class divides were not sharp enough to overcome much more tangible local ones. Secondly, the communists tried to foster 'national reconciliation' in 1976 by providing an opportunity for insurgents to claim amnesty and either resettle or work in the civil service (Marcum, 1987, p. 75). Although this policy did attract supporters of the FNLA, it was not decisive, nor did it make inroads with UNITA. Such attempts eventually fell to the wayside as civil war consumed Angola more and more.

Success could hardly be expected when ethnic divides were so profound that they penetrated the MPLA too. The Soviet Politburo (1977, as cited in Rothwell, 2015) noticed that dissent was splitting the party into two halves, "one led by Neto, the other by Nito". Nito Alves's opposition to Neto was motivated in large part by racial tension, as Alves saw the President, his white wife, and his mixed-race allies as unfit representatives for a vast-majority black nation. Alves (n.d., as cited in Rothwell, 2015) believed that there would "only be true equality in Angola when white people were seen sweeping streets alongside blacks". Neto urged Alves not to compromise national unity, but neither could budge: Neto fearing anti-white backlash if he relinquished power, Alves unwilling to tolerate non-blacks piloting an African nationalist party (Fauvet, 1977, p. 98). In May 1977, the rift became a ravine as Alves and his adherents attempted a coup. They failed and were brutally purged. Alves had been popular in the *musseques* (slums) of Luanda, organising *poder popular* ('popular power') committees, and his Fractionism movement had contained the most earnest communists, so the death of Alves and his backers had a terrible effect on regime strength (see Ferraz, 2005). Thus, the communist-nationalist relationship was even weak within the ranks of the MPLA due to ethnic and racial hostility.

Alves's concerns were legitimate, as the MPLA's nationalism was increasingly sabotaged by a monopoly of *mestiços*, *assimilados*, and Mbundu (who live nearest to Luanda)

(Vogt et al., 2015). The MPLA flatly rejected the legitimacy of ethnic-based identity, "tribalism", and spurned affirmative action to combat underrepresentation in government (Marcum, 1987, p. 75). As a consequence, the Ovimbundu and Ovambo (38% of the population) continued to suffer heavy discrimination from the Mbundu and *mestiços* (26%), while the Bakongo (13%) had no political power whatsoever (Vogt et al., 2015). The communists provoked additional friction by harassing religions and traditions, not sparing the nationwide Catholic Church. Meanwhile, UNITA alleged that the communists, backed up by 35,000 Cubans, were enabling continued alien white occupation (Marcum, 1987, p. 75). Ultimately, these vitriolic ethnic divides caused the trifurcation of the nation in civil war. Communists never interacted with one nationalism, but had to contend with, at various times, anti-colonial, urban and *mestiço*, black and nativist, Ovimbundu-centric, and Bakongo-centric nationalisms. Cooperation with one such form of nationalism undermined cooperation with another. Ipso facto, the MPLA's relationship with nationalism was condemned to weakness by initial demographic conditions.

Weak Relationship and Regime

It is worth qualifying such a pessimistic picture, because, weak as it was, the People's Republic of Angola was not totally hopeless. The independence war had hardened the desire of the Angolan communists to uphold nationalism, albeit an increasingly misguided version of it. Another one of the aspects countervailing the ethnic impulse affecting the MPLA's nationalism was foreign policy, where the party's dedication to national interests over political ones was most evident. Neto (1978, as cited in Ottaway & Ottaway, 1981, p. 9) swore to "defend the independence of the party" against foreign actors, including allies like the Soviet Union and Cuba. The same sentiment was echoed in the MPLA (1974)'s platform: there would be non-alignment in the Cold War and a refusal to allow any foreign military

bases on Angolan soil – "foreign aid must not be used as a weapon to seek to make us alter our policy". UNITA was the opposite: regularly shifting ideologically in search of funding abroad, evolving a "protean character", and becoming an instrument of South African and American geopolitics (Ottaway, 1990, pp. 241–242). In this way, the MPLA's domestic position remained the superior one. The FNLA effectively withered into a small guerrilla core in 1975; UNITA would have too if not for a lifeline in external aid. If we compare this situation to Ethiopia's, the MPLA was the favourite to win the civil war – and it did – whereas the Derg was coming last in a nationalist race it was scarcely cognizant of.

Still, Angola's regime was demonstrably weaker than its twin in Mozambique. In the communist years, the proportion of the Mozambican population in FRELIMO was always roughly double that of Angolans in the MPLA (see Angiolillo, 2023). And though it withstood the withdrawal of foreign troops in the 1980s, demonstrating that it could survive by itself, Cuban manpower and Soviet technological assistance had undeniably helped keep the Angolan experiment afloat.

Conclusion

Communists made homes in post-colonial or semi-feudal countries where there was no industrial proletariat to sustain them. This alone made for the interesting scenarios we have explored, since communism needed to deviate from its theory to survive in heterodox conditions. Ironically, even though the lack of suitable conditions did not prevent the rise of communism, initial conditions did factor into communist-nationalist relationships and ultimately decided the viability of a communist regime. Vietnam boasted of patriotic communists with little to inhibit them from representing the whole nation. Mozambique's FRELIMO was slightly impeded by its own weakness due to the lack of a base in the masses.

Meanwhile, ethnic divides in Angola and Ethiopia separated nationalism into ethnic strands, leaving the communists hamstrung in their ability to ally with more than one nationalist group.

Though the theory developed here may not be generalisable to contemporary politics, it can certainly contribute to historical understanding of communism. The idea that communism ever found shelter under nationalism's tent should be more widely understood – as the experiences of these countries prove, a bona fide, internationalist communism had died out long before the 1970s communist wave. The Workers' Party of Vietnam was founded by a man whom many contend only adopted communism as the vessel for national liberation; Vietnam never hesitated to fight against fellow communists in China and Cambodia; Mozambique and Angola's communists were recent converts who did not commit wholeheartedly until 1977; Ethiopia's most enthusiastic communists were the students who had taken to the streets in 1974, but they were viciously purged by the communist soldiers who actually took power. Developing world communists were rarely unified, and rarely actively opposed nationalism. Thus, the perception of an adversarial relationship between communism and nationalism is misleading, not merely because the doctrine of identity based on class was incompatible with that of identity based on the nation, but because communism never had the wherewithal – moral or coercive – to challenge nationalism on equal terms.

Furthermore, this paper helps clarify the matter of communist regime strength, the realities of which are usually opaque and masked by factors like foreign support propping up a regime, "preference falsification" of individuals who find it personally advantageous to pay lip-service to the government, and the relatively uniform durability of communist regimes, since they near-simultaneously collapsed in the 1989–91 'Autumn of Nations' (see Kuran, 1991). Some take this to mean that the collapsed communist regimes must have shared a

similar level of strength, or rather weakness. Glaser (2013), as an example, argues that the Afro-Marxist regimes born in protracted struggle (Mozambique and Angola) did not stick to their ideology any more tenaciously than "military-Marxist" regimes (Congo-Brazzaville, Somalia, Benin, Ethiopia, Madagascar, and Burkina Faso) when the death knell for communism sounded in 1989 – that is to say, essentially, they all underwent regime change just as easily. However, though most communist regimes underwent the same pro forma change, they were not necessarily equally weak. Our understanding of the cases demonstrates as much: Ethiopia was far more susceptible to the gravitational pull of the fall of communism in Europe than were Mozambique and Angola, as is evident in the fact that FRELIMO and the MPLA continue to rule, even if they stripped away all the Marxist nomenclature to retain a Leninist state (see Woldense & Kroeger, 2023).

An inquiry of this nature could also yield promising insights into other ideological dynamics. There have been many cases where the politics of a nation have revolved around a vague, universal, dominant ideology acting as a 'master frame' and forcing specific, sectional ideologies to articulate themselves in relation to it. A unique set of factors determining the willingness and ability of adherents to the two ideologies to cooperate could be curated, allowing for cross-national comparisons spanning different regions, time periods, and regime types.

To further test the plausibility of the theory, any number of the other cases could be explored. There is also a need to consider one combination of the factors that was not covered in this study: a communist regime without an independence war and without ethnic divides. Such a case would have only one favourable factor out of three possible, making it theoretically 'weak', so it could be compared to Angola which had an independence war but also had ethnic divides – likewise, one favourable factor out of three. Directly pairing the two

to highlight any differences could help differentiate the impact of independence wars and ethnic divides respectively, to see which have more of an impact on communist-nationalist relationships. Moreover, some cases may necessitate the expansion or modification of the existing set of three factors, as one of the problems with the theory is that it does not represent extremely complex situations with high fidelity. Communism was not a monolith; it cannot be assumed that its adherents made for unitary actors, especially as it is apparent that nationalism was never represented by one entity either. In Ethiopia, as in other countries, non-regime communists (the multi-ethnic EPRDF coalition) also cultivated relationships with nationalism. Post-1979 Cambodia is an example of the difficulties in typology. The communists governing the People's Republic of Kampuchea (founded 1979) were nationalists who had fought in the independence war but then branched off from the Khmer Rouge after invasion by Vietnam, while the Khmer Rouge had the support of the national figurehead Prince Sihanouk in a putative liberation war against the Vietnam-installed People's Republic. Clearly, there is a good reason why communism in the developing world remains an elusive topic; more investigations that appreciate its political and geographic breadth are necessary yet.

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