



Northern Ireland Conflict

For Prelims: Northern Ireland Conflict, Republicans and the Unionists, First World War, Good Friday Agreement.

For Mains: Northern Ireland Conflict, International Relations and Implications for India.

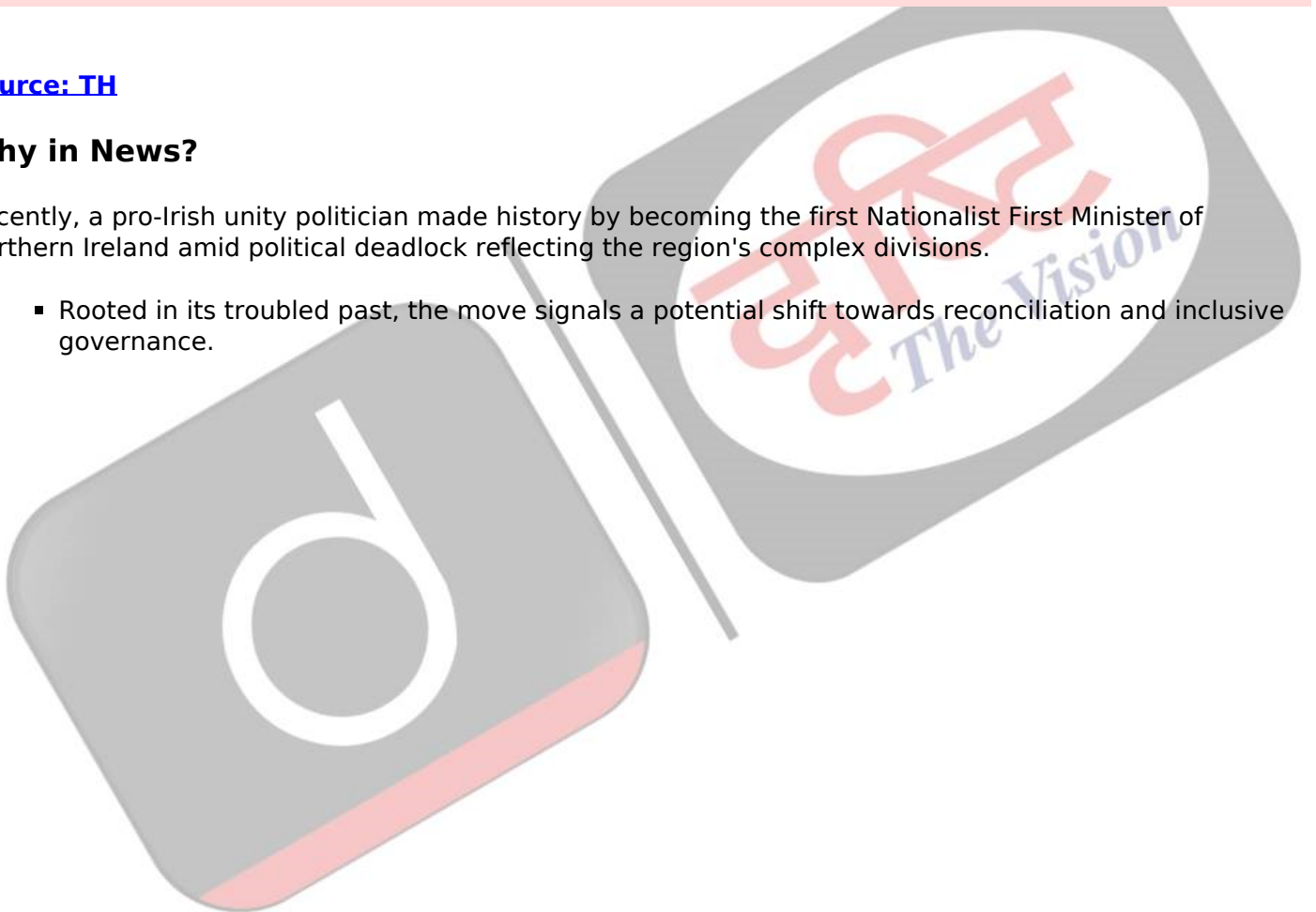
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Why in News?

Recently, a pro-Irish unity politician made history by becoming the first Nationalist First Minister of Northern Ireland amid political deadlock reflecting the region's complex divisions.

- Rooted in its troubled past, the move signals a potential shift towards reconciliation and inclusive governance.

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How did Northern Ireland Come into Being?

▪ The Troubles:

- Northern Ireland was the site of a **30-year civil war (1968-1998)** known as 'The Troubles' between the **Republicans and the Unionists**, which killed over 3,500 people.
- It also had a religious aspect to it with the Republicans being mostly Catholic and the Unionists being largely Protestants.
- Northern Ireland was formerly part of the **Ulster province**, which lies to the north of modern-day Ireland.

▪ Conflict Between Protestants and the Irish Catholics:

- Conflict between the Protestants and the Irish Catholics goes all the way back to 1609, when **King James I started an official policy of migration** wherein people from England and Scotland were encouraged to move to Ulster to work in his various plantations there.
- The religious war that was being waged in much of Europe at the time, between the Protestants and the Catholics, made its presence felt in Ulster as well.
- However, a much stronger resistance was brewing. Ireland at the time was under **the rule of England**.

▪ Resistance Against the Colonial English Rule:

- The growing resistance against colonial English rule, especially after the **Potato Famine of 1845** where over 1 million Irish people died due to disease and starvation, cemented these **sectarian and religious differences**.
- Finally, in 1916, in the middle of the **First World War**, during Easter week, Ireland rose up in arms against colonial rule under the leadership of the **Irish Republican Army (IRA)**.

▪ Forming of Northern Ireland:

- After a bloody war, it was able to gain independence from England with the **Anglo-Irish treaty of 1921**.
- However, Ireland was split into two territories. As there was a protestant majority in Ulster,

out of the **32 counties in Ireland, six remained with the U.K**, forming the region of **Northern Ireland**.

What is the Background of Political Deadlock in Northern Ireland?

- The political deadlock in Northern Ireland stemmed from the disagreement over the implementation of border controls between **Britain and the Island of Ireland** following **Brexit**.
- When the United Kingdom left the **European Union**, Northern Ireland, as part of the UK, became the **only province with a land border with an EU member state**, the Republic of Ireland.
- To address this issue, the UK and the EU devised the **Northern Ireland Protocol** as part of the Brexit deal. This protocol aimed to prevent the reintroduction of a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland by shifting the trade border to Irish ports, effectively creating a sea border between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK.
- However, this arrangement was contentious, particularly for the **Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)**, which objected to what it saw as undermining Northern Ireland's status within the UK and **violating the principles of the Good Friday Agreement**.
 - The DUP's objection to the Northern Ireland Protocol led to their withdrawal from the power-sharing government, as they believed the protocol threatened Northern Ireland's position within the UK and violated the principles of the Good Friday Agreement, which emphasised free movement of goods and people across borders.
- Ultimately, the resolution of the deadlock came through a renegotiation of the border controls and assurances regarding Northern Ireland's status within the UK, leading to the DUP's agreement to return to government.

What is the Good Friday Agreement?

- **About:**
 - The Good Friday Agreement, also known as the **Belfast Agreement**, is a historic peace treaty signed on 10th April, 1998, in Northern Ireland.
 - It aimed to bring an end to the violence and conflict that had plagued the region for decades, particularly during the period known as "The Troubles."
- **Key Provisions:**
 - **Power Sharing:** The agreement established a devolved government in Northern Ireland, with power shared between Unionists (who generally want Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom) and Republicans (who generally seek reunification with Ireland). This power-sharing arrangement was intended to ensure that both communities had a voice in governing Northern Ireland.
 - **Consent Principle:** It recognized the principle of consent, meaning that the status of Northern Ireland would not change without the consent of a majority of its people. This provision allowed for the possibility of reunification with Ireland through a referendum, but only if the majority of people in Northern Ireland voted for it.
 - **Human Rights:** The agreement emphasised the importance of human rights and equality for all citizens of Northern Ireland, regardless of their background or political beliefs.
 - **Decommissioning of Weapons:** While the agreement did not explicitly require the immediate disarmament of paramilitary groups, it set out a process for the decommissioning of weapons held by such groups. This process was meant to take place in parallel with the implementation of other aspects of the agreement.
 - **Cross-Border Cooperation:** The agreement encouraged cooperation and reconciliation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, as well as between the UK and Ireland more broadly. It promoted economic, social, and cultural ties across the border, while also recognizing the sovereignty and territorial integrity of both states.

What are the Key Facts About Northern Ireland?

- **Location and Geography:** Northern Ireland is situated in the northeastern quadrant of the island of Ireland. It shares borders with the Republic of Ireland to the south and west, while the Irish Sea separates it from England and Wales to the east and southeast, and the North Channel separates it from Scotland to the northeast.

- **Political Status:** Northern Ireland is a constituent country of the United Kingdom, alongside England, Scotland, and Wales. It is **not a sovereign state** but has its own devolved government within the framework of the United Kingdom.
- **Capital and Major Cities:** The capital city of Northern Ireland is Belfast, a modern city with a rich industrial history, including shipbuilding. Other major cities include Londonderry (also known as Derry) and Armagh.
- **Cultural Contributions:** Northern Ireland has made significant contributions to world culture, particularly in literature, music, and the arts. Notable figures include poet Seamus Heaney and musician Van Morrison.
- **Economy:** Historically reliant on industries such as shipbuilding and textiles, Northern Ireland's economy has diversified in recent decades, with a focus on technology, tourism, and services.
- **Demographics:** The population of Northern Ireland is **diverse, with a mix of ethnicities, religions**, and cultural backgrounds. The region's population is predominantly Christian, with significant Protestant and Catholic communities.

Conclusion

- The success of the Good Friday Agreement will depend on the ability of all stakeholders to transcend divisions, embrace diversity, and build a shared future grounded in mutual respect and understanding. Only through sustained commitment to peace and reconciliation can Northern Ireland fully realise its potential as a society that celebrates its rich cultural heritage while forging a common path towards prosperity and unity.

PDF Reference URL: <https://www.drishtias.com/printpdf/northern-ireland-conflict>

