HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2004

Cultural liberty in today's diverse world

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Feature 3.1 State unity or ethnocultural identity? Not an inevitable choice

Historically, states have tried to establish and enhance their political legitimacy through nation-building strategies. They sought to secure their territories and borders, expand the administrative reach of their institutions and acquire the loyalty and obedience of their citizens through policies of assimilation or integration. Attaining these objectives was not easy, especially in a context of cultural diversity where citizens, in addition to their identification with their country, might also feel a strong sense of identity with their community—ethnic, religious, linguistic and so on.

Most states feared that the recognition of such difference would lead to social fragmentation and prevent the creation of a harmonious society. In short, such identity politics was considered a threat to state unity. In addition, accommodating these differences is politically challenging, so many states have resorted to either suppressing these diverse identities or ignoring them in the political domain.

Policies of assimilation—often involving outright suppression of the identities of ethnic, religious or linguistic groups—try to erode the cultural differences between groups. Policies of integration seek to assert a single national identity by attempting to eliminate ethno-national and cultural differences from the public and political arena, while allowing them in the private domain.[1] Both sets of policies assume a singular national identity.

Nation building strategies privileging singular identities

Assimilationist and integrationist strategies try to establish singular national identities through various interventions:[2]

- Centralization of political power, eliminating forms of local sovereignty or autonomy historically enjoyed by minority groups, so that all important decisions are made in forums where the dominant group constitutes a majority.
- Construction of a unified legal and judicial system, operating in the dominant group's language and using its legal traditions, and the abolition of any pre-existing legal systems used by minority groups.
- Adoption of official-language laws, which define the dominant group's language as the only official national language to be used in the bureaucracy, courts, public services, the army, higher education and other official institutions.
- Construction of a nationalized system of compulsory education promoting standardized curricula and teaching the dominant group's language, literature and history and defining them as the "national" language, literature and history.
- Diffusion of the dominant group's language and culture through national cultural institutions, including state-run media and public museums.
- Adoption of state symbols celebrating the dominant group's history, heroes and culture, reflected in such things as the choice of national holidays or the naming of streets, buildings and geographic characteristics.
- Seizure of lands, forests and fisheries from minority groups and indigenous people and declaring them "national" resources.
- Adoption of settlement policies encouraging members of the dominant national group to settle in areas where minority groups historically resided.
- Adoption of immigration policies that give preference to immigrants who share the same language, religion or ethnicity as the dominant group.

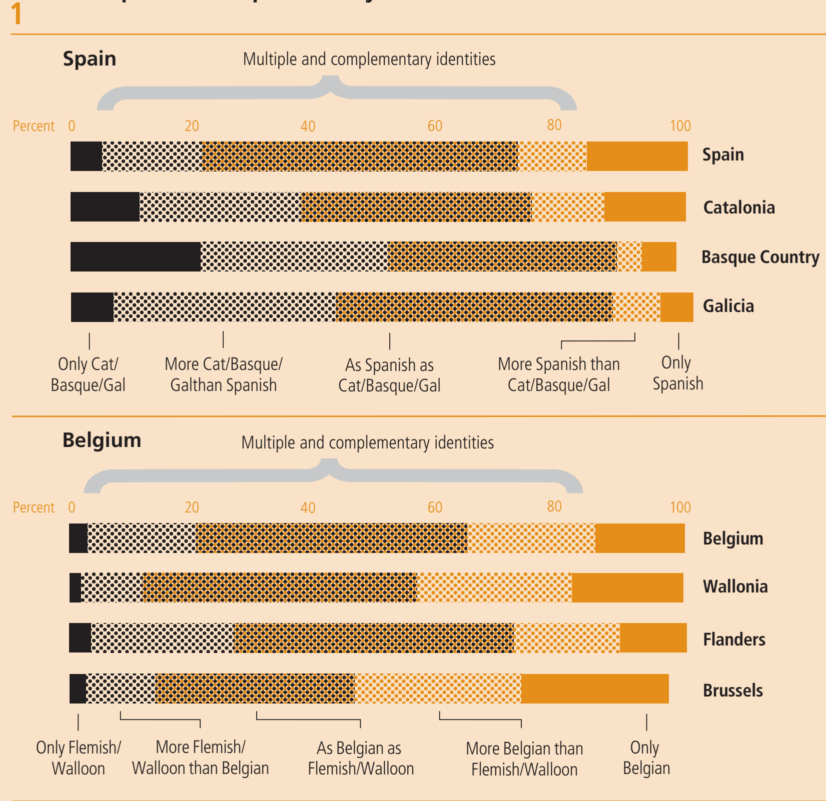
These strategies of assimilation and integration sometimes worked to ensure political stability, but at risk of terrific human cost and denial of human choice. At worst, coercive assimilation involved genocidal assaults and expulsions of some groups. In less extreme cases these strategies involved many forms of cultural exclusion, as documented in chapter 2, that made it difficult for people to maintain their ways of life, language and religion or to hand down their values to their children. People feel strongly about such matters, and so resentment often festered. In today's world of increasing democratization and global networks policies that deny cultural freedoms are less and less acceptable. People are increasingly assertive about protesting assimilation without choice.

Assimilation policies were easier to pursue with illiterate peasant populations, as with Turkey's language reform in 1928 propagating a single language and script. But with the rapid spread of a culture of universal human rights these conditions are fast disappearing. Efforts to impose such a strategy would be greatly challenged today. In any case the historical evidence suggests that there need be no contradiction between a commitment to one national identity and recognition of diverse ethnic, religious and linguistic identities.[3]

Bolstering multiple and complementary identities

If a country's constitution insists on the notion of a single people, as in Israel and Slovakia, it

Figure 1 **Multiple and complementary national identities**



becomes difficult to find the political space to articulate the demands of other ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities and indigenous people. Constitutions that recognize multiple and complementary identities, as in South Africa,[4] enable political, cultural and socio-economic recognition of distinct groups.

A cursory look around the globe shows that national identity need not imply a single homogeneous cultural identity. Efforts to impose one can lead to social tensions and conflicts. A state can be multi-ethnic, multilingual and multireligious.[5] It can be explicitly binational (Belgium) or multi-ethnic (India). Citizens can have a solid commitment both to their state identity and to their own cultural (or distinct national) identity.[6]

Belgium and Spain show how appropriate policies can foster multiple and complementary identities (figure 1). Appropriate policies—undertaken by Belgium since the 1830s and in Spain since its 1978 Constitution—can diminish polarization between groups within society, with the majority of citizens now asserting multiple and complementary identities.

Obviously, if people felt loyalty and affection only for their own group, the larger state could fall apart—consider the former Yugoslavia. Countries such as Iceland, the Republic of Korea and Portugal are close to the ideal of a culturally homogeneous nation-state. But over time even states known for their homogeneity can be challenged by waves of immigration, as has happened in the Netherlands and Sweden.

Fostering trust, support and identification among all groups to build a democratic "state nation"

The solution could be to create institutions and polices that allow for both self-rule that creates a sense of belonging and a pride in one's ethnic group and for shared rule that creates attachment to a set of common institutions and symbols. An alternative to the nation state, then, is the "state nation", where various "nations"—be they ethnic, religious, linguistic or indigenous identities—can coexist peacefully and cooperatively in a single state polity.[7]

Case studies and analyses demonstrate that enduring democracies can be established in polities that are multicultural. Explicit efforts are required to end the cultural exclusion of diverse groups (as highlighted in the Spanish and Belgian cases) and to build multiple and complementary identities. Such responsive policies provide incentives to build a feeling of unity in diversity—a "we" feeling. Citizens can find the institutional and political space to identify with both their country and their other cultural identities, to build their trust in common institutions and to participate in and support democratic politics. All of these are key factors in consolidating and deepening democracies and building enduring "state-nations".

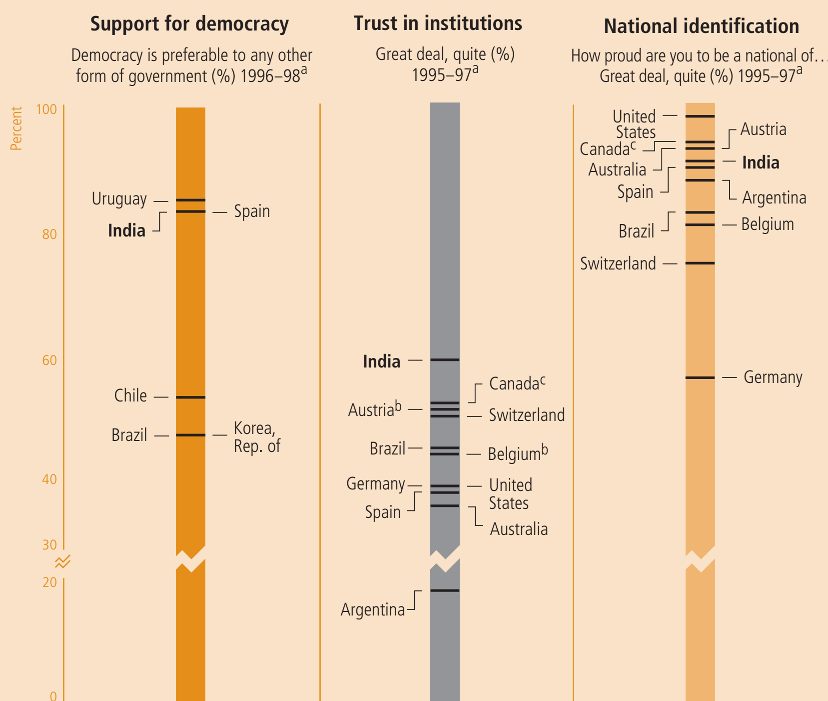
India's constitution incorporates this notion. Although India is culturally diverse, comparative surveys of long-standing democracies including India show that it has been very cohesive, despite its diversity. But modern India is facing a grave challenge to its constitutional commitment to multiple and complementary identities with the rise of groups that seek to impose a singular Hindu identity on the country. These threats undermine the sense of inclusion and violate the rights of minorities in India today.[8] Recent communal violence raises serious concerns for the prospects for social harmony and threatens to undermine the country's earlier achievements.

And these achievements have been considerable. Historically, India's constitutional design recognized and responded to distinct group claims and enabled the polity to hold together despite enormous regional, linguistic and cultural diversity.[9] As evident from India's performance on indicators of identification, trust and support (figure 2), its citizens are deeply committed to the country and to democracy, despite the country's diverse and highly stratified society. This performance is particularly impressive when compared with that of other long-standing—and wealthier—democracies. The challenge is in reinvigorating India's commitment to practices of pluralism, institutional accommodation and conflict resolution through democratic means.

Critical for building a multicultural democracy is a recognition of the shortcomings of historical nation-building exercises and of the benefits of multiple and complementary identities. Also important are efforts to build the loyalties of all groups in society through identification, trust and support.

National cohesion does not require the imposition of a single identity and the denunciation of diversity. Successful strategies to build "state-nations" can and do accommodate diversity constructively by crafting responsive policies of cultural recognition. They are effective solutions for ensuring the longer terms objectives of political stability and social harmony.

Figure 2 **Trust, support and identification: poor and diverse countries can do well with multicultural policies**



Note: Percentages exclude 'don't know/no answer' replies. a. The most recent year available during the period specified. b. Data refer to 1992. c. The most recent year during the period 1990–93.

Source: Bhargava 2004; Kymlicka 2004; Stepan, Linz and Yadav 2004.