

# The Nation-State, Diversity and Democracy

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Driven by a mercantilist economic philosophy and an ambitious political leadership, the nation-state of the 17<sup>th</sup> century fast developed an aggressive attitude. On the one hand, the crystallization of nationalism as a sociopolitical ideology served to strengthen the internal unity of society and give the new state a clear objective and a feeling of superiority. And on the other, mercantilism gave the state the economic incentive and rationale to adopt an expansionist policy to control foreign sources of raw materials and expand export markets internationally. Such policies were often justified as defensive measures to contain the enemy, undermine his power base, and realize the potential of the nation. Consequently, political and economic competition between the major European states ensued and paved the way for colonialism.

Because most such states had superior war machines, they were able to dominate most lands and peoples in the world and greatly influence their fates and life conditions. "The West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence," says historian Hugh Thomas (Hugh Thomas, *World History*, 121). That is how colonialism was able to control most of the world and establish colonies and settlements in many parts of it at the expense of the native peoples of the land. And to tighten control over their colonies and facilitate economic exploitation, colonial powers, especially Great Britain, adopted a policy of "divide and rule." While such a policy served the interests of the colonialist state well, it helped plant the seeds of numerous, often bloody ethnic conflicts and civil wars that were to follow.

The political settlements that concluded the two world wars of 1918 and 1945 respectively, added another dimension to the causes of conflict. Political maps, which were drawn at the end of each war, were tailored to reward the victors, appease the powerful, and punish the losers. Little or no considerations were given to history, tribal ties, geography, culture, or even

economics. The state, which emerged from that process, tended to control territories on which more than one ethnic, religious, national or cultural minority lived. Today, all states, rich and poor, capitalist and non-capitalist, democratic and non-democratic, are governed by either one ethnic or cultural group, or by a political elite that neither represents all citizens nor treats them equally. In fact, no government represents all of its citizens or seeks the welfare of all its individual constituents with the same degree of diligence and commitment.

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, the western democratic states in general and the United States in particular incorporated human rights as a component of their foreign policies. The international economic and financial institutions, especially the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, were instructed to tie financial aid to Third World nations and former communist states to their human rights records, as well as to the proper management of their economies. In addition, pressure was applied on most states to adopt democracy and carry out free elections. As a consequence, most Third World nations endured unprecedented changes with far reaching consequences. On the economic side, the economic restructuring programs, while causing the socioeconomic gap separating the rich from the poor to widen further, provided no economic relief to the poor; they also helped integrate the advanced sector of each state's economy into the global economy and, consequently, weakened the state's ability to manage its economic resources to achieve desired national goals. And on the political side, the pressure to adopt democracy and improve human rights records led often to rigged elections that falsified the will of people and gave autocrats enough legitimacy to oppress their people and rule unchallenged.

Since democracy is based on the principle of "one man one vote," it serves to facilitate majority domination of minorities in multiethnic societies. "To abandon all constraints on direct democracy is to submit minorities to the tyranny of the majority." (Steven Weinberg, "Utopias," *The Atlantic Monthly*, January 2000, 110) In societies where tolerance is either weak or hardly exists, an ethnic majority rule usually leads to discrimination, oppression, and sometimes to "ethnic cleansing" as well. Bogdan Denitch, speaking about the tragedy of former Yugoslavia, said: "Nationalism is utterly undemocratic although populist, and it is not open to the

compromises and negotiations that are the heart of modern democratic politics. In an era of awakened nationalism in multiethnic societies democracy is the first casualty.” (Bogdan Denitch, “Tragedy in Former Yugoslavia,” *Dissent*, winter 1993, 34) In addition, special interest groups have used democracy as a framework to pursue interests that differ from and oftentimes collide with the public interest. “Democracy, meaning majority government, is proving to be corrupt when pressure groups exert a greater influence than the electorate.” (John Burton and Frank Dukes, Eds. *Conflict: Readings in Management and Resolution*, 1990, 10)

Western democracy in general faces many problems at home, while the democratic system faces serious challenges abroad. One of the major problems democracy faces today is loss of popular confidence in its ability to deliver on its promises. Such promises include equality of opportunity, social justice, true freedom of speech, and most importantly, a “fair game,” that enables people to compete on equal bases. Investment capital controlled by a super rich and largely greedy elite, and an ability to mold and remold public opinion monopolized by an exclusive media elite are gradually reducing the possibility that a fair game can be played in either politics or economics or even culture. Moreover, reducing the definition of democracy to holding regular elections has enabled autocrats and dictators to falsify elections and remain in power for decades without losing the support of the West.

While democracy in the United States seems to have reached its limits, it is being promoted worldwide as the only force of real change. Nations that are being enticed or coerced to import western democracy tend to have neither the culture of tolerance nor a solid middle class to support a viable democratic system; they also lack an understanding of the essence of democracy and its requirements and consequences. Because of its current shortcomings, western democracy has become like an old airplane that can no longer perform satisfactorily, which makes its maintenance exceeds its utility. Yet it is being exported using the carrot and stick to nations that do not know how to use it and cannot afford its maintenance cost. Due to President Bush’s failure to advance democracy in the Third World, President Barack Obama decided to abandon that policy and replace it with the old one that seeks to protect and advance the American national interest. However, neither Obama nor anyone else is able today

to define the American national interest in clear terms that guarantee elite consensus; the segmentation of the American society along sociocultural lines has made elite consensus impossible to reach.

Democracy is most effective and fairly progressive when stability and prosperity prevail, when the opposition consists mainly of political groups contending for political power, where the influence of special interest groups is minimal, and where society is largely homogenous. In other situations, particularly in multiethnic and multicultural societies, 'one man one vote' democracy is often counterproductive. If every ethnic, national and cultural group is given the right to develop its own identity in accordance with the right to self-determination principle, every group would likely seek a state of its own, causing the disintegration of most nation-states in the world. On the other hand, if the nation-state is allowed to maintain all of its internationally sanctioned prerogatives, no ethnic minority or oppressed nation will attain its legitimate goals of political freedom and cultural recognition. Therefore, as we work to promote democracy and respect for human rights, the prerogatives of the nation-state need to be redefined to deny the state the right to violate the human rights of its citizens and to make its institutions more responsive to minority rights. Nationalism has the ability to evoke collective memories and awaken old hatreds, as well as the capacity to revive, unify, and activate older nations and cultural communities, causing states to crumble and civil wars to spread.

The nation state claims absolute sovereignty over all territories and peoples under its control. Yet it has little or no constitutional provisions to respond positively to the legitimate needs of its national, religious and cultural groups. In light of the spread of ethno-national conflict, it has become abundantly clear that both the structure and the prerogatives of the nation-state are in need of an overhaul. "The disorders in the entire international system are many and profound; the structures of resolving them are obviously inadequate, and the failure to deal with them is disastrous." (Robert Pickus, "New Approaches," *Approaches to Peace*, W. Scott Thompson et al, Eds., 1992, 237) Since Western democracy cannot deal with such disorders, there is a need for an alternative system, or at least for a modified version of the democratic one.

The shared homeland model articulated hereafter is meant to restructure the nation-state system and enable it to respond positively to the needs of ethnic and national minorities.

## The Shared Homeland Model

The basic provisions of this model call for political separation of ethnic groups along nationality lines, while maintaining economic and social unity within existing state lines. The model has four major components, the implementation of which would create separate political entities but a unified economic and residential community, as well as a collective security system to tie all entities together and reduce the possibility of future conflict.

According to the propositions of this concept, national and ethnic groups that live as minorities within a state would be allowed to create their own political entities or mini states. Regions claimed by national minorities and recognized by the international community as their historical homelands, would be allowed to declare independence and create mini nation-states as separate political entities within the territories on which they live and to which they have a valid claim. Yet all territories under the control of the central authority before the start of this process would be declared a shared homeland for all minorities and majorities alike. As a consequence, all individuals, economic enterprises, and social and cultural organizations would continue to belong to the same community. National politics apart, all individuals and groups belonging to all nationalities living in and outside the newly created mini states would become equal partners sharing a larger homeland and enjoying the opportunities it has to offer.

The newly acquired national identity would give members of each ethnic or national group exclusive rights to participate in the politics of their own state, but no rights to participate in the politics of other states. In other words, political choice for each national group would be limited to the borders of its own mini state, while economic choice and residential preference would be extended to include all territories within the outer borders of all states. Members of each national group would acquire citizenship rights in their state only but residency rights in all other states; residency rights are defined as being equal to citizenship rights with one

exception, participation in the national politics of other states. Each citizen, however, would be granted the right to choose the national identity he or she would like to adopt. Participation in local politics is a right that all majorities and minorities would enjoy wherever they reside without limits. As a consequence, the rights of minorities living in the newly created mini states would not be compromised or diminished.

In order to maintain the integrity of the shared homeland and minimize the possibility of conflict between the newly created mini nation-states, a collective security system would be constructed and implemented. As a result, each national group would gain a distinct political and cultural identity of its own, get an opportunity to live in peace with its neighbors, have a larger homeland to enjoy and share with other national groups, and belong to a collective security system that guarantees its safety, territorial integrity and survival. In addition, the provisions creating the shared homeland would be made to supersede all laws to be enacted by the individual mini states. Thus, the creation of a shared homeland would enable several political entities to coexist harmoniously within one homeland, while allowing people to preserve or reclaim their own separate national and cultural identities and sovereignties. In other words, peoples sharing a homeland would be permitted to belong to separate nation-states, while enjoying equal nonpolitical rights and privileges in all other states. As such, the implementation of the shared homeland model would redefine the notion of national sovereignty, making it less ambitious and inclusive, and more accommodating and democratic, and thus more humane and respectful of people's wishes and cultures and historical rights.

Partitioning a state's land into separate mini states and, at the same time, uniting all such states and peoples into one homeland is probably the only feasible solution to problems arising from conflicting national rights and homeland aspirations and clashing claims that peoples living in one state may have. And in so doing, the shared homeland would, in due time, make national hostilities and ethnic grievances disappear. The open borders that the shared homeland calls for would make trade and travel and human mobility, as well as interaction between the land, its history, its cultures, and its peoples a living reality that benefits all.

The creation of separate nation-states within a shared homeland, while maintaining a collective security system to tie all such states together, amounts in reality to granting each national or ethnic minority the right to govern itself and manage its own economy. As a consequence, the shared homeland arrangements are able to address the needs of minorities for cultural and political identity and self-rule, while maintaining the integrity of a multi-ethnic state; they also help such a state avoid accusations of human rights violations, as well as outside interference to encourage ethnic conflicts that often lead to civil wars and sometimes to ethnic cleansing as well. And by meeting the demands of minorities living in separate enclaves in countries such as Afghanistan, China, Georgia, India, Iraq, Nigeria, Philippines, Russia and Sudan, the shared homeland would foster world peace and respect for human rights, and transform the political and sociocultural environments in which minorities live, giving all peoples an optimistic outlook. Having gained what they needed most, members of each minority are likely to become more tolerant and willing to accept the other and cooperate with them to strengthen the shared homeland. Thus, values that separate ethnic groups and cause them to hate and often fight each other, would be replaced by mutual interests that tie people together and encourage them to work with one another.

The shared homeland model could also be used to facilitate the resolution of other conflicts, particularly claims concerning disputed territories between two neighboring states or peoples. Palestine and Cypress are good examples where the shared homeland model could be implemented to resolve the decades-long conflicts. Palestine, for example, would be declared a shared homeland for both Israelis and Palestinians, while giving each group the right to create its own state along the 1967 partition lines. While all Israelis and Palestinians would have the right to live and work and own property anywhere in Palestine, the political expression of both Israelis and Palestinians would be limited to the borders of their states only. All Palestinians and Israelis who might choose to live in the other state would be subject to the laws of that state.

The shared homeland model provides a practical solution to the nation-state's ethnic and nationality problem, helping it to deal effectively and humanely with its citizens and address the grievances of its ethnic minorities. At the same time, it provides a new sociopolitical framework

that makes most societies more homogenous while fostering economic integration and cultural diversity. And that in turn would help people regain their dignity, enrich their lives, and facilitate the introduction of democracy while improving its chances of success. In fact, political plurality and respect for human rights should be advanced as major components of the shared homeland arrangements. (For a detailed presentation of this concept and how it may be applied to resolve ethno-national conflict in various countries, see Mohamed Rabie, *Conflict Resolution and Ethnicity*, 1994, 173-194), and for a detailed plan to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict using the same model, see Dr. Rabie's paper, *A Vision for the Transformation of the Middle East*, posted on his website: [www.yazour.com](http://www.yazour.com).

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