



# Cultural liberty in today's diverse world

How will the new constitution of Iraq satisfy demands for fair representation for Shiites and Kurds? Which—and how many—of the languages spoken in Afghanistan should the new constitution recognize as the official language of the state? How will the Nigerian federal court deal with a Sharia law ruling to punish adultery by death? Will the French legislature approve the proposal to ban headscarves and other religious symbols in public schools? Do Hispanics in the United States resist assimilation into the mainstream American culture? Will there be a peace accord to end fighting in Côte d'Ivoire? Will the President of Bolivia resign after mounting protests by indigenous people? Will the peace talks to end the Tamil-Sinhala conflict in Sri Lanka ever conclude? These are just some headlines from the past few months. Managing cultural diversity is one of the central challenges of our time.

Long thought to be divisive threats to social harmony, choices like these—about recognizing and accommodating diverse ethnicities, religions, languages and values—are an inescapable feature of the landscape of politics in the 21st century. Political leaders and political theorists of all persuasions have argued against explicit recognition of cultural identities—ethnic, religious, linguistic, racial. The result, more often than not, has been that cultural identities have been suppressed, sometimes brutally, as state policy—through religious persecutions and ethnic cleansings, but also through everyday exclusion and economic, social and political discrimination.

New today is the rise of identity politics. In vastly different contexts and in different ways—from indigenous people in Latin America to religious minorities in South Asia to ethnic minorities in the Balkans and Africa to immigrants in Western Europe—people are mobilizing anew around old grievances along ethnic,

religious, racial and cultural lines, demanding that their identities be acknowledged, appreciated and accommodated by wider society. Suffering discrimination and marginalization from social, economic and political opportunities, they are also demanding social justice. Also new today is the rise of coercive movements that threaten cultural liberty. And, in this era of globalization, a new class of political claims and demands has emerged from individuals, communities and countries feeling that their local cultures are being swept away. They want to keep their diversity in a globalized world.

Why these movements today? They are not isolated. They are part of a historic process of social change, of struggles for cultural freedom, of new frontiers in the advance of human freedoms and democracy. They are propelled and shaped by the spread of democracy, which is giving movements more political space for protest, and the advance of globalization, which is creating new networks of alliances and presenting new challenges.

Cultural liberty is a vital part of human development because being able to choose one's identity—who one is—without losing the respect of others or being excluded from other choices is important in leading a full life. People want the freedom to practice their religion openly, to speak their language, to celebrate their ethnic or religious heritage without fear of ridicule or punishment or diminished opportunity. People want the freedom to participate in society without having to slip off their chosen cultural moorings. It is a simple idea, but profoundly unsettling.

States face an urgent challenge in responding to these demands. If handled well, greater recognition of identities will bring greater cultural diversity in society, enriching people's lives. But there is also a great risk.

These struggles over cultural identity, if left unmanaged or managed poorly, can quickly

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become one of the greatest sources of instability within states and between them—and in so doing trigger conflict that takes development backwards. Identity politics that polarize people and groups are creating fault lines between “us” and “them”. Growing distrust and hatred threaten peace, development and human freedoms. Just in the last year ethnic violence destroyed hundreds of homes and mosques in Kosovo and Serbia. Terrorist train bombings in Spain killed nearly 200. Sectarian violence killed thousands of Muslims and drove thousands more from their homes in Gujarat and elsewhere in India, a champion of cultural accommodation. A spate of hate crimes against immigrants shattered Norwegians’ belief in their unshakable commitment to tolerance.

Struggles over identity can also lead to regressive and xenophobic policies that retard human development. They can encourage a retreat to conservatism and a rejection of change, closing off the infusion of ideas and of people who bring cosmopolitan values and the knowledge and skills that advance development.

Managing diversity and respecting cultural identities are not just challenges for a few “multi-ethnic states”. Almost no country is entirely homogeneous. The world’s nearly 200 countries contain some 5,000 ethnic groups. Two-thirds have at least one substantial minority—an ethnic or religious group that makes up at least 10% of the population.

At the same time the pace of international migration has quickened, with startling effects on some countries and cities. Nearly half the population of Toronto was born outside of Canada. And many more foreign-born people maintain close ties with their countries of origin than did immigrants of the last century. One way or another every country is a multicultural society today, containing ethnic, religious or linguistic groups that have common bonds to their own heritage, culture, values and way of life.

Cultural diversity is here to stay—and to grow. States need to find ways of forging national unity amid this diversity. The world, ever more interdependent economically, cannot function unless people respect diversity and build unity through common bonds of humanity. In this age of globalization the demands for cultural

recognition can no longer be ignored by any state or by the international community. And confrontations over culture and identity are likely to grow—the ease of communications and travel have shrunk the world and changed the landscape of cultural diversity, and the spread of democracy, human rights and new global networks have given people greater means to mobilize around a cause, insist on a response and get it.

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**Five myths debunked. Policies recognizing cultural identities and encouraging diversity to flourish do not result in fragmentation, conflict, weak development or authoritarian rule. Such policies are both viable, and necessary, for it is often the suppression of culturally identified groups that leads to tensions.**

This Report makes a case for respecting diversity and building more inclusive societies by adopting policies that explicitly recognize cultural differences—multicultural policies. But why have many cultural identities been suppressed or ignored for so long? One reason is that many people believe that allowing diversity to flourish may be desirable in the abstract but in practice can weaken the state, lead to conflict and retard development. The best approach to diversity, in this view, is assimilation around a single national standard, which can lead to the suppression of cultural identities. However, this Report argues that these are not premises—they are myths. Indeed, it argues that a multicultural policy approach is not just desirable but also viable and necessary. Without such an approach the imagined problems of diversity can become self-fulfilling prophecies.

*Myth 1. People’s ethnic identities compete with their attachment to the state, so there is a trade-off between recognizing diversity and unifying the state.*

Not so. Individuals can and do have multiple identities that are complementary—ethnicity, language, religion and race as well as citizenship. Nor is identity a zero sum game. There is no inevitable need to choose between state unity and recognition of cultural differences.

A sense of identity and belonging to a group with shared values and other bonds of culture is important for individuals. But each individual can identify with many different groups. Individuals have identity of citizenship (for example, being French), gender (being a woman), race (being of West African origin), language (being fluent in Thai, Chinese and English), politics (having left-wing views) and religion (being Buddhist).

Identity also has an element of choice: within these memberships individuals can choose what priority to give to one membership over another in different contexts. Mexican Americans may cheer for the Mexican soccer team but serve in the US Army. Many white South Africans chose to fight apartheid as South Africans. Sociologists tell us that people have boundaries of identity that separate “us” from “them”, but these boundaries shift and blur to incorporate broader groups of people.

“Nation building” has been a dominant objective of the 20th century, and most states have aimed to build culturally homogeneous states with singular identities. Sometimes they succeeded but at the cost of repression and persecution. If the history of the 20th century showed anything, it is that the attempt either to exterminate cultural groups or to wish them away elicits a stubborn resilience. By contrast, recognizing cultural identities has resolved never-ending tensions. For both practical and moral reasons, then, it is far better to accommodate cultural groups than to try to eliminate them or to pretend that they do not exist.

Countries do not have to choose between national unity and cultural diversity. Surveys show that the two can and often do coexist. In Belgium citizens overwhelmingly replied when asked that they felt both Belgian and Flemish or Walloon and in Spain, that they felt Spanish as well as Catalan or Basque.

These countries and others have worked hard to accommodate diverse cultures. They have also worked hard to build unity by fostering respect for identities and trust in state institutions. The states have held together. Immigrants need not deny their commitment to their families in their countries of origin when they develop loyalties to their new countries. Fears that

if immigrants do not “assimilate”, they will fragment the country are unfounded. Assimilation without choice is no longer a viable—or a necessary—model of integration.

There is no trade-off between diversity and state unity. Multicultural policies are a way to build diverse and unified states.

*Myth 2. Ethnic groups are prone to violent conflict with each other in clashes of values, so there is a trade-off between respecting diversity and sustaining peace.*

No. There is little empirical evidence that cultural differences and clashes over values are in themselves a cause of violent conflict.

It is true, particularly since the end of the cold war, that violent conflicts have arisen not so much between states but within them between ethnic groups. But on their causes, there is wide agreement in recent research by scholars that cultural differences by themselves are not the relevant factor. Some even argue that cultural diversity reduces the risk of conflict by making group mobilization more difficult.

Studies offer several explanations for these wars: economic inequalities between the groups as well as struggles over political power, land and other economic assets. In Fiji indigenous Fijians initiated a coup against the Indian-dominated government because they feared that land might be confiscated. In Sri Lanka the Sinhalese majority gained political power, but the Tamil minority had access to more economic resources, triggering decades of civil conflict. In Burundi and Rwanda, at different points in time, Tutsis and Hutus were each excluded from economic opportunities and political participation.

Cultural identity does have a role in these conflicts—not as a cause but as a driver for political mobilization. Leaders invoke a single identity, its symbols and its history of grievances, to “rally the troops”. And a lack of cultural recognition can trigger violent mobilization. Underlying inequalities in South Africa were at the root of the Soweto riots in 1976, but they were triggered by attempts to impose Afrikaans on black schools.

While the coexistence of culturally distinct groups is not, in itself, a cause of violent conflict,

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it is dangerous to allow economic and political inequality to deepen between these groups or to suppress cultural differences, because cultural groups are easily mobilized to contest these disparities as injustice.

There is no trade-off between peace and respect for diversity, but identity politics need to be managed so that they do not turn violent.

*Myth 3. Cultural liberty requires defending traditional practices, so there could be a trade-off between recognizing cultural diversity and other human development priorities such as progress in development, democracy and human rights.*

No. Cultural liberty is about expanding individual choices, not about preserving values and practices as an end in itself with blind allegiance to tradition.

Culture is not a frozen set of values and practices. It is constantly recreated as people question, adapt and redefine their values and practices to changing realities and exchanges of ideas.

Some argue that multiculturalism is a policy of conserving cultures, even practices that violate human rights, and that movements for cultural recognition are not governed democratically. But neither cultural freedom nor respect for diversity should be confused with the defence of tradition. Cultural liberty is the capability of people to live and be what they choose, with adequate opportunity to consider other options.

“Culture”, “tradition” and “authenticity” are not the same as “cultural liberty”. They are not acceptable reasons for allowing practices that deny individuals equality of opportunity and violate their human rights—such as denying women equal rights to education.

Interest groups led by self-appointed leaders may not reflect the views of the membership at large. It is not rare for groups to be dominated by people who have an interest in maintaining the status quo under the justification of “tradition” and who act as gatekeepers of traditionalism to freeze their cultures. Those making demands for cultural accommodation should also abide by democratic principles and the objectives of human freedom and human rights. One good model is the Sami people in Finland,

who enjoy autonomy in a parliament that has democratic structures and follows democratic procedures but is part of the Finnish state.

There does not need to be any trade-off between respect for cultural difference and human rights and development. But the process of development involves active participation of people in fighting for human rights and shifts in values.

*Myth 4. Ethnically diverse countries are less able to develop, so there is a trade-off between respecting diversity and promoting development.*

No. There is no evidence of a clear relationship, good or bad, between cultural diversity and development.

Some argue, however, that diversity has been an obstacle to development. But while it is undeniably true that many diverse societies have low levels of income and human development, there is no evidence that this is related to cultural diversity. One study argues that diversity has been a source of poor economic performance in Africa—but this is related to political decision-making that follows ethnic rather than national interests, not to diversity itself. Just as there are multi-ethnic countries that have stagnated, there are others that were spectacularly successful. Malaysia, with 62% of its people Malays and other indigenous groups, 30% Chinese and 8% Indian, was the world’s 10th fastest growing economy during 1970–90, years when it also implemented affirmative action policies. Mauritius ranks 64 in the human development index, the highest in Sub-Saharan Africa. It has a diverse population of African, Indian, Chinese and European origin—with 50% Hindu, 30% Christian and 17% Muslim.

*Myth 5. Some cultures are more likely to make developmental progress than others, and some cultures have inherent democratic values while others do not, so there is a trade-off between accommodating certain cultures and promoting development and democracy.*

Again, no. There is no evidence from statistical analysis or historical studies of a causal

relationship between culture and economic progress or democracy.

Cultural determinism—the idea that a group’s culture explains economic performance and the advance of democracy—as an obstacle or a facilitator, has enormous intuitive appeal. But these theories are not supported by econometric analysis or history.

Many theories of cultural determinism have been advanced, starting with Max Weber’s explanation of the Protestant ethic as a key factor behind successful growth in capitalist economies. Persuasive in explaining the past, these theories have been repeatedly proven wrong in predicting the future. When Weber’s theory of the Protestant ethic was being touted, Catholic countries (France and Italy) were growing faster than Protestant Britain and Germany, so the theory was expanded to mean Christian or Western. When Japan, the Republic of Korea, Thailand and other East Asian countries achieved record growth rates, the notion that Confucian values retard growth had to be jettisoned.

Understanding cultural traditions can offer insights to human behaviour and social dynamics that influence development outcomes. But these insights do not offer a grand theory of culture and development. In explaining economic growth rates, for example, economic policy, geography and the burden of disease are found to be highly relevant factors. But culture, such as whether a society is Hindu or Muslim, is found to be insignificant.

The same is true with reference to democracy. A new wave of cultural determinism is starting to hold sway in some policy debates, attributing the failures of democratization in the non-Western world to inherent cultural traits of intolerance and “authoritarian values”. At the global level some theorists have argued that the 21st century will see a “clash of civilizations”, that the future of democratic and tolerant Western states is threatened by non-Western states with more authoritarian values. There are reasons to be sceptical. For one thing, the theory exaggerates the differences between “civilization” groups and ignores the similarities among them.

Moreover, the West has no monopoly on democracy or tolerance, and there is no unique line of historical division between a tolerant

and democratic West and a despotic East. Plato and Augustine were no less authoritarian in their thinking than were Confucius and Kautilya. There were champions of democracy not just in Europe but elsewhere as well. Take Akbar, who preached religious tolerance in 16th century India, or Prince Shotoku who in 7th century Japan introduced the constitution (*kempo*) that insisted that “decisions on important matters should not be made by one person alone. They should be discussed by many”. Notions of participatory decision-making on important public issues have been a central part of many traditions in Africa and elsewhere. And more recent findings of the World Values survey show that people in Muslim countries have as much support for democratic values as do people in non-Muslim countries.

A basic problem with these theories is the underlying assumption that culture is largely fixed and unchanging, allowing the world to be neatly divided into “civilizations” or “cultures”. This ignores the fact that while there can be great continuity in values and traditions in societies, cultures also change and are rarely homogeneous. Nearly all societies have undergone shifts in values—for example, shifts in values about the role of women and gender equality over the last century. And radical changes in social practices have occurred everywhere, from Catholics in Chile to Muslims in Bangladesh to Buddhists in Thailand. Such changes and tensions within societies drive politics and historical change, so that the way power relationships affect those dynamics now dominates research in anthropology. Paradoxically, just as anthropologists have discarded the concept of culture as a bounded and fixed social phenomenon, mainstream political interest in finding core values and traits of “a people and their culture” is growing.

Theories of cultural determinism deserve critical assessment since they have dangerous policy implications. They can fuel support for nationalistic policies that denigrate or oppress “inferior” cultures argued to stand in the way of national unity, democracy and development. Such attacks on cultural values would then fuel violent reactions that could feed tensions both within and between nations.

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