



IDEA Round Table 2007 Democracy and Diversity

Background Note

Diversity in human society has always existed. The mingling of people of different cultures, religions, customs and skills has been the catalyst of trade, science and arts since the dawn of history. The geography of cultural encounters coincides with the birthplaces of major human achievements and advances in knowledge: Mesopotamia, the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, the Americas – to mention just a few – were crossroads of cultures and cradles of fertile diversity. Whether they occurred as sudden breakthroughs or through decades-long gradual population movements, these encounters have not, however, always been peaceful – and less still ‘democratic’, in the sense of reflecting the free choice of those involved.

The history of human diversity is also the history of human suffering: of intolerance, wars, conquests, colonialism, slavery, forced migrations and migrations in search of safer and more promising living conditions.

Democracy is also an age-old aspiration of humankind. The quest for the fair and just organization of human relations, for a polity in which all individuals and groups experience themselves as guiders of their own destinies can hardly be dated. Democracy has many definitions. Analysts and observers with an appreciation of the complexities of history are usually reluctant to lock democracy into a closed, culturally-determined definition of the term masquerading as definitive, universal truth. In its work in support of democratic development and consolidation around the world International IDEA adopts a minimal, working definition that sees democracy as a system in which government is controlled by the people, and in which citizens are considered as equals in the exercise of that control.

Can democracy be a tool for building a constructive approach to the management of human diversity? Or is it rather the other way round - that diversity is in fact a key ingredient in the maintenance of vital, living democracy? That the social, political and cultural space that exists for the expression of diversity in turn shapes and defines the nature of democracy itself? At the same, it should be born in mind that even societies that claim to be democratic, and to feature effective and well-established democratic institutions, often manifest an uneasy relationship with the daily warp and woof of human diversity.

Three features of diversity deserve to be highlighted:

- The unavoidable linkage of diversity with issues of *identity* and the individual sense of belonging to a group or a community
- The fundamentally *political nature* of any definition of diversity - in particular the tendency to use (and misuse) it as a positive or negative argument, tool, value or even weapon in political debate and electoral competition
- The proneness of diversity to be captured by *myths and prejudices* that remain deeply entrenched and are all too often resistant to arguments based on empirical evidence.

Overall it seems evident that functioning and effective democratic institutions are a necessary but not sufficient condition for the construction of a positive and mutually supportive relationship between democracy and diversity. In addition, the range of political approaches to the management of human diversity is vast. (Redundantly, one could say that there is great diversity in the management of diversity).

In different political and social contexts, in different countries and periods of time, diversity has been alternately perceived by different sections of the population as a threat to cultural identity, national unity and social order; as a fundamentally disruptive factor in the local labour market; as a source of discontent and turmoil - but also as 'leaven in the dough' giving rise to unparalleled cultural enrichment, economic growth and peace.

In general terms it appears that diversity has fared better in societies where people are free and are encouraged and willing to assume multiple, rather than single, identities. In periods of crisis and uncertainty, amidst widespread feelings of insecurity and doubt, however, a single, all-embracing identity tends to overshadow all others, transformed in the process into a fortress to be defended, a weapon to be used against other, equally unipolar alignments. Moreover, similar processes occur when a particular feature of human identity becomes the defining principle of inclusion - or equally, exclusion and discrimination - within a society.

Successful and unsuccessful examples of the management of diversity can be found in both the North and in the South, in both young and well-established democracies. What has worked in one country or region in terms of harmonizing democracy and diversity will not necessarily resonate positively in other contexts.

Within Europe different schools of thought - in the first instance grounded on colonial experiences - appear to contradict each other. The *French model* of 'integration' that emphasizes equality through the adherence of all citizens to the same 'republican values', for example, as against an *Anglo-Saxon model* that tends to acknowledge the collective claims of different 'communities' within the nation. On the other side of the Atlantic, the 'melting pot' approach to integration is being challenged by the vigorous dynamics and increasing political self-confidence of immigrant Latin American communities established throughout the USA. In the context of the shaping of political approaches to diversity and immigration within

Western societies, some of the key dilemmas appear to revolve around differences stemming from an approach that emphasizes *integration* (immigrants and minorities adopt the value system and the culture of the receiving country) as against *inclusion* (immigrants and minorities maintain their system of cultural references and customs and settle in the receiving country as separate communities).

These two options represent notional extremes. More often than not, actual policies reflect a nuanced combination of the two, and usually with some degree of inconsistency. In reality, in fact, high tensions and crisis situations often appear to stem precisely from a dogmatic application of either of the two approaches as opposed to their blending – the French debate over the public wearing of the *hijab* being a notorious case in point. The practical challenges involved in managing diversity within a democratic framework are multiple, ranging from constitutional and electoral process design to political party regulation and immigration, language, economic and social policies. In many less developed countries, moreover, traditional village-, town-, clan- or caste-based identities may be a much stronger daily reality than a weak and remote state, and it is a real challenge for state building and good governance policies to find practical means to harness and accompany this diversity.

Societies of the global South have long experienced many facets of diversity. India is often referred to as a 'nation of nations', for example, post-apartheid South Africa as the 'rainbow nation', and Mexico proudly proclaims its multicultural origins a defining feature of the nation (*'las tres culturas'*). In other parts of Latin America the political awakening of indigenous peoples and their demand for a more inclusive democracy is challenging traditional institutional frameworks. How can the North benefit from the experiences of the South in managing diverse societies democratically – and vice versa? What can we learn from each other? Are there lessons to be learned from such diverse experiences? In particular, can we distil a set of key best practices that may be useful and relevant in a variety of different contexts?

These are some of the critical issues which the International IDEA 2007 Democracy Round Table will seek both to address and to provide practical, policy-orientated guidelines for.

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