

# Identity in Fragile States: Social cohesion and state building

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**ABSTRACT** *Seth Kaplan describes how understanding the relationship between identities, institutions, social cohesion, and state legitimacy is vital to spurring economic and political development in fragile states. The international community needs to stop imposing inflexible formulas for development and to start helping weak countries build on their own people's capacities for good governance.*

**KEYWORDS** *institutions; development; ethnic groups; social capital; state building*

## Introduction

Identity plays a key role in determining a state's robustness. Countries whose citizens share common ideas about who they are and how they should work together are far more likely to enjoy the state legitimacy and good governance necessary to spur and sustain economic and political development. In contrast, states that lack a common identity and a cohesive society will never progress. Understanding how identities shape the destiny of states is crucial to helping the weakest countries overcome their problems and take better advantage of their own people's capacities to govern.

## Identities and institutions

Identity reflects and affects the ties that bind people to groups. Cohesive groups are 'integrated not by one but by a combination of several kinds of objective relationships (economic, political, linguistic, cultural, religious, geographical, historical) and their subjective reflection in collective consciousness' (Hroch, 1996: 79). These 'people who share the same collective identity think of themselves as having a common interest and common fate' (Kriesberg, 2003).

The dominant force driving identity is different in different places. In some regions of the world, religion is the defining aspect; in others, ethnicity; in still others, language. In much of the Middle East, for instance, 'a region of old and deep-rooted identities', 'not nationality, not citizenship, not descent, but religion, or more precisely membership of a religious community, is the ultimate determinant of identity' (Lewis, 1998: 9, 15). In India, a sense of region and nation exist in parallel, forming a dual identity. In much

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of Africa, allegiances and loyalties continue to revolve around lineage and the clan. And in Latin America, identities have for centuries been fragmentary and fluid because of a mixing and remixing of Spanish, Indigenous, and African peoples and traditions.

Identities have an important role to play in the construction of productive institutions, both formal and informal. Cohesive identity groups with long common histories naturally develop their own sophisticated political, economic, and societal system of self-governance. This system includes various mechanisms to regulate political relationships, police members' behaviour, lower the cost of various transactions between members, and encourage the security of property. Even without the assistance of a formal state, such groups can create complex institutional systems to manage their own affairs and promote wealth creation. 'Dispersed ethnic groups' such as diaspora Jews, Chinese, Lebanese, Indians, and Armenians 'have exercised a disproportionate influence on the growth patterns of nations, cities, and regions' because they have been able to leverage a 'strong sense of ethnic identity', a 'sense of mutual dependence that helps the group adjust to changes ... without losing its essential unity', and a strong sense of 'mutual trust that allows the tribe to function collectively' (Kotkin, 1992: 17, 4–5). Unsurprisingly, states that can take advantage of these group synergies on a national level have great advantages over those that cannot.

But just as a strong sense of identity can unite a population and strengthen a state, so a weak national identity or a multiplicity of competing identities can divide citizens and undermine the state. Even a country with robust state institutions and a long history of good governance, such as the United States, cannot completely eliminate the negative effects of diversity. Recent research by Robert Putnam, one of the world's most influential political scientists, suggests that diversity and trust are inversely related. 'In the presence of diversity, we hunker down', notes Putnam. 'We act like turtles ... . And it's not just that we don't trust people who are not like us. In diverse communities, we don't trust people who look like us' (quoted in Lloyd, 2006). Research by other social

scientists confirms that 'racial divisions and ethnic divisions reduce incentives for people to be generous to others through social welfare', undermining 'support for government spending on "public goods" of all types, whether health care, roads or welfare programs' (Porter, 2007). For instance, in sub-Saharan Africa, per capita spending on HIV prevention and treatment correlates closely with a country's degree of ethnic division, the least divided societies spending five times more than the most divided societies (Foreign Policy, 2008: 32).

In fragile states, where the state's formal institutions are weak and society is fractured, making overall conditions unstable, the effects of diverse identities are far worse. Although each individual's identity is 'constructed on the basis of various traits and experiences' and often encompasses membership in multiple identity groups, whose 'relative importance and compatibility differs in various times and circumstances' (Kriesberg, 2003), fluid, unstable environments encourage polities to split along the most profound cleavages: ethnicity, religion, tribe, clan, and so forth. In Yugoslavia and Iraq, although diverse populations had lived peaceably side-by-side for decades, the instability and uncertainty that accompanied a newly volatile environment led religious and ethnic identities to re-emerge as the dominant factors determining an individual's identity; both countries swiftly fragmented along allegiances a millennium in the making and descended into ferocious civil conflict. 'Nations don't behave this way', said Timur Göksel, the former spokesman for the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, about the sectarian tensions that divide, and define, the country. 'It's groups of people who share the same land' (quoted in Slackman, 2007).

A multiplicity of competing identity groups, when combined with weak formal state structures, does not always result in bloodshed, but it does always cripple efforts to promote development. This toxic combination – the absence of social cohesion and the lack of a set of shared, productive institutions – prevents states from fashioning a robust nationwide governing system, yielding instead a host of chronic problems,

ranging from state illegitimacy to high transaction costs, to corruption.

### Identities and illegitimacy

The role of identity is crucial to the creation of state legitimacy, because a legitimate political order is usually built around a cohesive group and uses institutions that are a reflection of that group's historical evolution. As Michael Hudson explains in his classic study of the 'legitimacy shortage' in Arab politics,

a legitimate political order ... has to be [based on] some consensus about national identity, some agreement about the boundaries of the political community, and some collective understanding of national priorities. If the population within given political boundaries is so deeply divided within itself on ethnic or class [or, for that matter, religious or clan – SK] lines, or if the demands of a larger supranational community are compelling to some [significant] portion of it, then it is extremely difficult to develop a legitimate order. (Hudson, 1977: 389–390)

'Without authoritative political structures endowed with "rightness" and efficacy, political life is certain to be violent and unpredictable' (Hudson, 1977: 4).

Political fragmentation and weak governing bodies feed upon each other, further undermining state legitimacy. As William Easterly, a well-respected development economist, explains,

Ethnic diversity has a more adverse effect on economic policy and growth when institutions are poor. To put it another way, poor institutions have an even more adverse effect on growth and policy when ethnic diversity is high. Conversely, in countries with sufficiently good institutions, ethnic diversity does not lower growth or worsen economic policies. (Easterly, 2000: 12)

Their very divisions, for example, prevent the formation of the apolitical bureaucratic structures – including the civil service, police, and judiciary – necessary to make modern states work. The tribalism inherent in the political cultures of fractured societies engulf their already weak governing bodies, tribalizing them in the process, and preventing any apolitical bureaucratic

structure emerging that could gain some allegiance from their populations. Similarly, the weakness of the state makes each identity group fall back upon its traditional loyalties because these are the only form of protection and support available.

### Low levels of trust, high transaction costs

This political fragmentation directly impinges on the ability of these countries to foster the positive institutional environment necessary to encourage productive economic, political, and social behaviour because it undermines the usefulness of traditional informal institutional systems and squanders built-up social capital while disabling attempts to construct robust formal governing bodies. The net result is societies with low levels of interpersonal trust and extraordinarily high transaction costs.

In most cohesive societies, 'virtuous' circles develop that feature 'social equilibria with high levels of cooperation, trust, reciprocity, civic engagement, and collective well-being' (Putnam, 1993: 177). These virtuous patterns are bolstered by a variety of formal and informal procedures to penalize non-productive activities that might undermine the general welfare. In fragile states, however, such patterns are unknown.

Instead, states made up of many identity groups with no common history of cooperation and no robust governing institutions to stimulate and regulate such cooperation tend to gravitate towards 'a suffocating miasma of vicious circles' whereby, as Putnam notes, 'defection, distrust, shirking, exploitation, isolation, disorder, and stagnation intensify one another' (Putnam, 1993: 177).

Trust is a prerequisite for any economic and political development because it facilitates cooperation. Democratic systems cannot function without trust; where there is little trust, there is, for instance, little incentive to obey the results of elections. Prosperous economies likewise depend upon a certain level of trust. 'Virtually every commercial transaction has within itself an element of trust, certainly any transaction conducted over a period of time. It can be plausibly argued that

much of the economic backwardness in the world can be explained by the lack of mutual confidence' (Arrow, 1972: 357). Putnam concludes that 'for political stability, for government effectiveness, and even for economic progress social capital may be even more important than physical or human capital' (Putnam, 1993: 182–183).

### Opportunism, corruption, and neo-patrimonialism

Political fragmentation warps incentives, encouraging short-term opportunism at the expense of long-term investments that could advance development. Society becomes obsessed by the conflict between identity groups, not with generating wealth or increasing national prestige. Meanwhile, formal governing bodies and regulations, disconnected from their surrounding environments, and not having become an integral part of the informal institutional frameworks that guide people's behaviour, command only superficial allegiance and compliance. Real life goes on outside them. State laws go unheeded because no one acknowledges them as legitimate. Corrupt governments, biased courts, and weak property rights are a natural product of such conditions.

In fragile states, individuals are more likely to feel allegiance to a tribe, religious leader, or clan with which they and their forefathers have been closely connected than to a state with which they have few ties. 'It is difficult to overestimate the enduring importance of patronage networks in societies that are still largely organized within ethnic communities and along kinship lines' (Mayall, 2005: 47). Groups compete to use the formal institutions for their own selfish objectives. If one group gains control of the state apparatus, it inserts its members in important positions and drains the country's wealth. Instead of formulating policy that might encourage growth, the ruling clique acts to control wealth-producing assets, restrict markets, disenfranchise portions of the electorate, and even dupe foreigners into providing more aid. Groups out of power see the state as illegitimate and seek to bypass it. Where cooperation does extend across clan lines, it is usually only a temporary alliance of opportunity,

as cliques of various backgrounds compete to take advantage of the general lawlessness in society to siphon off money from everything from state construction projects to gold mines to warfare. In such cases, identity divisions may be manipulated for short-term personal or political gain, widening the gulf between groups.

In Côte d'Ivoire, for instance, the state was mired in a civil war for most of the 2000s, a war provoked by the disenfranchisement of northerners. Ethnic tensions prompted southerners to amend the national constitution, marginalizing millions of people and denying them the right to identity cards, without which one cannot legally vote nor work. 'We needed a war because we needed our identity cards', explained one rebel fighter. 'We took weapons, not for oil, diamonds or power, but to say that there are people in Côte d'Ivoire that are living as second class citizens in their own country', said another (IRIN, 2005). Many Latin American countries, such as Bolivia, Ecuador, and Guatemala, have discriminated against their indigenous populations for centuries in everything from the provision of public services to the eligibility to vote to the recognition of languages.

Such environments naturally affect the actions of officials:

Politicians are beset by insecurity and fear of the unknown. If their behavior appears at times quixotic or even paranoid, the irrationality lies less within themselves than in their situation ... [these] politicians must operate in a political environment in which the legitimacy of rulers, regimes, and the institutions of the states themselves is sporadic and, at best, scarce. (Hudson, 1977: 2)

These supposedly bad leaders may enact bad policies or act in a despotic fashion because such behaviour is their only viable survival strategy.

These leaders are more likely to resort to patronage, nepotism, corruption, and other patterns of political behavior that are occasionally subsumed under the category of *neopatrimonialism*. (Englebert, 2000: 5–6)

'In short,' Hudson concludes,

the insecurity of the ruling elite, based not necessarily on selfishness but on what impartial observers

might call a realistic appraisal of the situation, causes it to act autocratically ... . [Outsiders] may be wrong in ascribing the behavior to innate human evil; placed in the same situation, they invariably [would] do the same thing. (Hudson, 1977: 395)

### Rethinking the role of identity in state building

Most western policymakers and development practitioners today pay lip service to the idea that states will not prosper unless they are built by local people using local resources, but the great majority of development projects continue to be implemented with inadequate attention to the local social, cultural, and institutional context. By not seeking to better integrate indigenous identities and institutions into the formal state, the West has precluded the evolution of any organic process of reform led by local communities and driven by local resources. And by trying to impose a western-style blueprint for state building, it has perpetuated the most artificial aspects of post-colonial states, preventing them from developing real ties to their own citizens. Such an approach exacerbates existing ethnic, religious, and tribal divisions; encourages an unhealthy dependency on foreign aid; undermines whatever governing capacities local peoples have developed on their own; and torpedoes the chances of fragile states ever becoming self-sufficient.

States work effectively when they are a logical reflection of their underlying socio-political, historical, geographical, human resource, and economic environments, and when they are deeply integrated with the societies they purport to represent, able to harness the informal institutions and loyalties of their citizens. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the most successful countries in Africa and the Middle East – Botswana, Somaliland, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait – are all built upon traditional identities and institutions accepted by the great majority of their citizens. (Cohesive societies, it may be noted, are also able to escape the ‘resource curse’ that seems to afflict all other developing countries.) In contrast, countries whose governments are the least dependent on their indigenous social

structures – such as Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Somalia, and Syria – are much more likely to have corrupt officials, illegitimate states, and ineffective systems of governance.

The key to fixing fragile states is, therefore, to deeply enmesh government within society. People in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, Central Asia, and elsewhere have enormous political, socioeconomic, and cultural resources built up over centuries that can serve as the foundation for political, economic, and social development. What these people and these countries need are state models and structures that can be adapted to take advantage of those resources. Foreign assistance needs to complement and reinforce local capacities and institutions and be disciplined enough to avoid undermining or warping locally driven arrangements, which is all too common today, especially with the tendency of so many international programmes to focus on financial aid targets, poverty reduction targets, and the importation of generic and typically centralized state models.

States will work better if they are structured around cohesive population groups able to capitalize on their common interests and affinities. In some cases, government (and its authority, financial resources, and systems of accountability) should be decentralized around cohesive identity groups, such as the Kurds in Iraq, the Isaaq in Somaliland, and the Aymara in Bolivia. In large, sprawling countries such as the DRC and Sudan, locally driven models of development are more likely to succeed than state-based models, especially if gains within local arenas are extended over time both horizontally to other localities and vertically to higher-level government bodies. A locally based model would emphasize the construction of a series of competent city-based provincial bureaucracies built around relatively cohesive populations and based upon locally accepted institutions rather than trying to build a robust national government. It would also ensure that local communities were not held hostage to the dysfunctions of a national government. Focusing aid on these ‘pockets of opportunity’, would be more effective in the short

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term – and encourage other areas to improve through competition in the medium term.

Building unity among disparate peoples at both the national and the local levels needs to be a major focus of development. Ghana, one of the more cohesive countries in Africa, has actively promoted national integration by investing in infrastructure, education, and health in the poorer northern areas; by supporting the study, teaching, and use in television and radio of all major indigenous languages; by prohibiting the formation of political parties based on ethnicity, religion, or region; and by maintaining an ethnoregional balance in the political sphere. The kind of consociational government introduced in Burundi offers a variety of opportunities to build coalitions and to reduce tensions by lessening or eliminating real or perceived imbalances in representation in cabinets, civil services, legislatures, and the military (Kenya was urged to take similar steps in the wake of its 2007–2008 election turmoil). Similarly, apportioning the profits from natural resources in a fair and transparent manner, ensuring that social spending is impartially distributed (something the international community rarely considers even if it is the source of the funds), and reducing economic inequities between rival groups would dispel some of the potential for friction in divided polities.

The international community should also promote and fund programmes that create stronger social and cultural bonds across groups, that institutionalize cooperation, and that promote reconciliation where there has been a history of inter-group hostility. Cultivating strong ‘we’ feelings through various educational, sports, and cultural programmes can foster complementary or multiple cultural identities that strengthen national bonds, diminishing inter-group frictions in the process. South Africa, for example, has creatively used sports since the end of the apartheid era to unite its fissiparous peoples. Programmes designed to reconcile long-festered inter-group

wounds, such as South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission and reconciliation programmes in Burundi, have proved valuable in many countries.

In order to better integrate the state with the societies it purports to represent, far more emphasis must be placed on seeking locally appropriate solutions for problems of governance, land and resource management, and knowledge transfer if development is ever going to become locally propelled and thus sustainable. Certainly, no community that has successfully developed has depended as heavily on foreign resources, foreign political models, foreign languages, and foreign laws as fragile states typically do today.

### Conclusion

The illegitimacy and poor governance that debilitate fragile states can be traced to many factors – such as colonialism – that have combined to detach states from their environments, governments from their societies, and elites from their citizens. Whereas a robust state uses local identities, local capacities, and local institutions to promote its development, a fragile state’s formal governing structures undermine all of these indigenous assets. As a consequence, a weak state cannot leverage its people’s histories and customs to construct effective formal institutions with wide legitimacy; nor can it draw on the social capital embedded in cohesive groups to facilitate economic, political, and social intercourse; and nor is it able to employ the traditional governing capacities of its citizens to run the affairs of state. The socio-political, geographical, and economic problems that typically lie at the root of state dysfunction are usually systemic in nature and complicate all efforts to reform governments and economies. The international community needs to look beyond its standard tool kit – aid, competitive elections, economic reform, and peacekeeping troops – if it is going to really help these places.

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