Democratization: Resolution of National Identity Issues

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Abstract

National identity issues exist when two or more identities within a nation compete over self-determination, territories, narratives, myths, rights and goals. This paper discusses whether democratization provides the means to resolve national identity problems in such a way that these problems are transformed into constructive dialogues between groups and the state instead of leading to violence or exclusion of groups. Democratization can transform national identity problems by providing political equality between groups and handing the state legitimacy to construct a national identity. It concludes that democratization on its own is not enough; it needs to be accompanied by certain conditions such as the construction of a civic national identity and internal political will. These conditions can also be seen as prerequisites for the establishment of a stable and strong democracy.

Keywords: democratization, national identity problem, civic national identity, ethnic national identity, conflict resolution, Taiwan, Thailand, enforced democratization.

Introduction

Many countries struggle with national identity problems (Jones & Smith, 2001). This phenomenon should be understood as a situation in which sections of national populations do not identify with the nation-states in which they live, and seek instead to create their own identity based on culture or ethnicity (He, 2002). Such a process is often accompanied by calls for secession and national disintegration. According to Bar-Tal (2002) the concept of national identity comprises two elements; self-categorization as a member of the nation and identifying with this nation; and identification with an "imagined community," including a sense of belonging, unity, loyalty and solidarity. Shared goals, ideas, narratives, collective memories, societal beliefs, holidays, commemorations, rituals and myths give meaning to the notion of national identity (Bar-Tal, 2002). Processes that accompany the construction of national identity involve building momentum for working toward the achievement of national goals and mobilizing the willingness to make sacrifices for a nation's sake (Bar-Tal, 2002). In a country struggling with national identity problems, there are two or more national identities competing over self-determination, territories, narratives, myths, rights and goals (Bar-Tal, 2002). For the most part, distinct identities belong to different national or ethnic groups living in a nation (Jones & Smith, 2001). Almost all modern states contain several national or ethnic groups, and this reality creates internal ethnic tensions (Jones & Smith, 2001). This means that almost all modern states are struggling in various degrees with national identity issues.

Since the end of the Cold War, the West has expressed optimism in regard to democratization as a way of managing national identity problems (Hippler, 2008). National identity problems will always exist, since different ethnic groups will continue to live together. The question that remains is how to cope with these problems in a way that fosters peaceful co-existence and not violence or exclusion of certain groups. Kelman (1997) calls this the choice between pluralism and ethnic cleansing. This paper approaches the issue of peaceful co-existence among different groups from the perspective of conflict resolution; the recognition that conflict between groups is not preventable, but that violent conflict is (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall, 2005). Conflict resolution tries to transform conflict from a violent setting to a constructive dialogue between groups (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall, 2005). The results of transforming conflicts through democratization have been mixed (Hippler, 2008; Ottaway, 2007). The question that will be discussed in this paper is whether the Western optimism is really correct about democratization being able to resolve such issues.

First the theories of Rustow (1970) will be discussed. Then theories that oppose Rustow's view are explored. Afterward, some case studies of states that seem to have democratically resolved national

identity problems will be considered. Then the distinction between civic and ethnic national identity will be examined, before conclusions about the impact of democratization on the national identity are presented.

Caution is urged with regard to concepts like democracy, which is a fundamental element of the sociopolitical context of Europe and the United States. It is the Western norm. It could therefore be said that the West is "biased" toward democracy. Western democratic principles are based on Western ways of living (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall, 2005). Other principles may work well for other countries in different situations. So the West must not impose Western principles on countries where local, indigenous ways of managing conflicts may work better (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall, 2005). This article will explore which aspects of democracy work, and why they work, while acknowledging that these particular features can also exist in other societies. Mostov's (1994) definition of democracy is used for the purposes of the present article: "Democracy requires that political participation and government offices be open to all citizens without distinction, that all citizens be similarly afforded the rights and protections associated with political liberty and equal citizenship, that restrictions on citizenship be minimal, consistent, and impartial, and that social choices be made through public decision processes that support and promote the equality and independence of citizens."

Rustow's theory of sequence

Rustow argued that a democratization process will fail if national identity problems remain unresolved (Rustow, 1970). According to him, democratization does not resolve a national identity problem. In his view, it is actually the other way around; having a sense of national unity is a precondition for democratization. Democracy can cope most effectively with political questions about major inequality in socioeconomic issues, but is not equipped to deal with antagonistic relations between religious, national, and racial groups (Rustow, 1970). Because of this, the national identity problem should be resolved before a democratization process begins. Otherwise, the nation undergoing such a process will likely fail and disintegrate. Rustow argued that this is due to the fact that, in national identity problems,

there is no middle position that will satisfy all parties. Thus, democratic principles (which are based on reaching compromises) will fail. A democratic system cannot exist when there are national identity issues, and thus cannot resolve such issues.

Events in recent decades seem to have partly falsified Rustow's theory. Countries have first gone through a democratization process and then focused on resolving the national identity problem. Recent developments in countries such as Taiwan, Thailand, South Korea and former Soviet countries, have demonstrated that solving the national identity problem is not a precondition for starting democratization, or even for consolidation of democracy. So this shows that the theories of Rustow are at least partially incorrect. Baogang He (2001) tries to unravel which parts of Rustow's perspective may be outdated, arguing that Rustow fails to distinguish between the membership boundary problem and the national identity problem. He also suggests that Rustow underestimated the role which democratic management can play in dealing with the question of national identity, thus suggesting that the idea of democratization may contribute to resolving the national identity problem (He, 2001).

Rustow seems to use the term "national identity" to refer to two different concepts; the membership boundary problem and the national identity problem (He, 2001). The membership boundary problem refers to the perspective that, in order for a democracy to exist, boundaries must be stable and the composition of the citizenry must remain the same. The other concept is simply that a democracy requires a shared national identity. He (2001) only accepts the membership boundary problem as a precondition for democratization. Because He confirms that there are preconditions for the development of a stable democracy, he can still explain why there are countries in which attempts at democratization have failed.

The influence of democratization

Baogang He (2001) is a fervent advocate of the idea of democratic management of the identity issue, and emphasizes the positive and constructive effects that democratization can have on the national identity question. Spain, Macedonia, Moldova, the Philippines and Nigeria have managed secession problems by granting autonomy, recognizing

minority rights, or establishing coalition government (He, 2001). Democratization grants the state legitimate power (He, 2001) to restructure intergroup relations and address inequality in these relations, thereby stimulating an overall national identity. The legitimacy thus attained allows the state to stimulate the development of dialogue and trust between groups (He, 2001).

Fighting inequality through democratic means also seems a possible resolution for the national identity problem. If all groups have similar status, power and opportunities, then it should be easier for citizens to relate to a nation as a whole, and not just their own groups. Ultee, Arts & Flap (1996) argue, on basis of Weberian theories, that the degree of promotion of individual initiative by the state, is associated with the degree of inequality in a given state. There is less inequality in a state that fervently advocates individual initiative among its civilians than when the state does this to a lesser degree. In a democracy, individuals from different groups are given equal economic and political power resources (Ultee, Arts & Flap, 1996). Democracies promote individual initiative because they encourage people to achieve success (social mobilization). A lifestyle centered around individual initiative is one where social mobilization, and achieving a higher social status throughout one's life, are accepted norms. Success is achieved on the basis of education, intellectual capacities, etc. and is not based on membership in a particular ethnic or religious group. When a state does not advocate such individual initiative (for example in an autocracy), an individual is not encouraged to achieve success and is more likely to maintain the same social position throughout his or her entire life. In this way, lack of social mobilization leads to more inequality (Ultee, Arts & Flap, 1996).

In the perspectives of He (2001) and Ultee, Arts and Flap (1996), democratization can resolve the national identity problem. Jones and Smith (1999) have concluded on the basis of their research that democracy indeed stimulates the formation of a unified national identity. In the view of Rustow, it does not. There are many that still agree with Rustow that democratization cannot begin while there are unresolved national identity issues. Authors like Ottaway (2007), Giliomee (1995) and Freyberg & Richter (2010) argue that national identity problems

seriously hamper democratic reform. These authors conclude that, in such situations, only a weak democracy will develop and that this will make national identity issues worse and divide the country.

In the next section, we will discuss recent attempts to stimulate national identity formation and to foster constructive relations between groups through democratization processes. Features of the theories that have been previously discussed can be noted in the following case studies.

Taiwan and Thailand
The democratization process in Taiwan began after the end of the Cold War. Taiwan struggled with several national identity problems that were eventually resolved by democratic means. Taiwan used to be a part of China, and it struggled to attain an autonomous national identity that is capable of uniting its Chinese and indigenous inhabitants (Cook, 2005). This was extremely difficult because external pressures coming from China—which wanted Taiwan to be assimilated into China—and its population's own view of itself, were not always in harmony.

Before Taiwan became a democracy, its national identity was Chinese, even though ethnic Chinese were a minority within the country (Cook, 2005). However, this minority controlled the country, and the identities of the indigenous civilians were considered obsolete. But after Taiwan was made a democracy, a Taiwanese national identity rapidly supplanted the Chinese identity (Horowitz & Tan, 2005). Leaders of parties have embraced this Taiwanese identity, in which the ethnic cleavage between Chinese and indigenous people was transcended (Horowitz & Tan, 2005).

The transformation of Taiwan into a democracy enhanced the legitimacy of the Taiwanese government (Cook, 2005). This is a confirmation of He's theory about legitimacy in a democratic country, as discussed above. This transformation gave the state the power to construct a national identity in which all groups were represented. Previously, Mandarin Chinese had been the only official language of Taiwan and Minnan, the most commonly spoken language in Taiwan, had no official status (Cook, 2001). Nowadays inhabitants can once again speak their own language, and the learning of aboriginal languages and local dialects is even

encouraged (Wing-Wah Law, 2002). Instead of learning about China, students are allowed to learn about the history and culture of Taiwan, and of their own ethnic groups. (Wing-Wah Law, 2002). Thus, the national identity of Taiwan changed considerably after democratization. The national identity shifted from one in which the connection with China was stressed to an emphasis on the existence of different local and ethnic identities (Wing-Wah Law, 2002). Taiwan resolved its national identity problem by accepting and including all ethnic groups within Taiwan, thereby creating a national identity in which local identities and languages became important. As a result of this process, the gap between the Chinese, on the one hand, and native and aboriginal groups, on the other, narrowed, and Taiwan became a more unified nation.

Thailand is geographically divided into four culturally distinct regions: central Thailand, northern Thailand, northeastern Thailand and southern Thailand. There is a high degree of linguistic and cultural diversity among these groups (Jory, 1999). Thailand had a lot of problems reconciling these four major groups. After democratization, two processes emerged which were not so very different from the processes in Taiwan. Jory (1999) discusses these processes.

Jory (1999) argues that the resurgence of a national identity in Thailand is in part a result of democratization. He suggests that this happened in two different ways. Democratization lessened inequality by giving different groups new political rights to express themselves. In addition, the government no longer regards such expressions of identity as posing a threat to Thai national unity (Jory, 1999). His findings emphasize the lessening of inequality and are a confirmation of the theory of Ultee, Arts and Flap (1996).

Ethnic and civic national identity

The theories and case studies regarding Taiwan and Thailand that have been discussed here suggest that democratization can resolve the national identity problem. An essential element of this process, as demonstrated by the cases of Taiwan and Thailand, is the recognition of the diversity of religious and/or ethnic groups within the state. Democratization seems to make this easier because it provides the state the legitimacy to construct a national identity in

which the diversity of the country is acknowledged (He, 2001) and because it gives groups equal political power (Ultee, Arts & Flap, 1996). The specific outcome is influenced by how the state uses the democratic system to form a national identity. There is a distinction between two kinds of national identity. The civic type of national identity takes citizenship as the foundation for national cohesion, while the national or ethnic variety defines the nation in terms of conceptions of ethnicity, in which one ethnicity is preferred (Rhodes, 1995; Jones & Smith, 1999; Mostov, 1994). Taiwan and Thailand followed the principle of democracy in which all ethnic and religious groups are equal, and formed a civic national identity, which led to equal social positions for all groups. There are other examples where democratic states foster an ethnic national identity (Rhodes, 1995). One could argue that such countries are not really full democracies because power sharing is not conducted on all levels (Mostov, 1994). Rhodes (1995) compares Slovakia with the Czech state and concludes that the Czech state has been doing considerably better than the Slovaks in dealing with the national identity issue. This is due to the fact that the Czech state has based its national identity on the civic principle, and Slovakia has not. By fostering an ethnic national identity, Slovakia has exacerbated the problems of fostering national unity by antagonizing its large Hungarian minority (Rhodes, 1995). This means that democratization on its own is not enough to resolve national identity issues, and that the government has a role to play in resolving such problems.

Conclusion and implications

The main questions of this paper were as follows: Can democratization resolve the national identity problem? Does democratization stimulate or hinder the development of a national identity? And exactly what elements of democratization stimulate and/or hinder?

Rustow (1970), Ottaway (2007), Giliomee (1995) and Freyberg & Richter (2010) were each partially correct; democratization is in itself not enough to resolve national identity problems. Without additional conditions, democratization will lead to a collapse of national identity. He (2001), Ultee, Arts & Flap (1996), and Jones & Smith (1999) were also partially correct: Democratic reform does

offer ways of resolving national identity issues. However democratization on its own is not enough. The country must develop a civic national identity (and not an ethnic one). A civic-based national identity provides groups with both political and social power. In order to develop a civic national identity. political will is needed, and this means that the government must commit itself to democratic principles. Therefore, an enforced democratization by the international community does not seem helpful. In countries where the international community imposes democratization, there will be no political will to follow democratic principles or to build democratic institutions. When democratization is enforced, it is rarely the wish of the political forces in the country itself (Ottaway, 2007). The existence of political will is crucial for democracy to flourish. The democratization of Taiwan, for example, would have ended in conflict if the political parties were not strongly committed to democratic reform (Tien & Shiau, 1992). A second disadvantage of enforced democratization is that the Western type of democratization that is enforced can be alien to the experience of the residents of the state (Ottaway, 2007). As mentioned previously, we must be careful not to impose our own ways of living on others who live in very different situations. When a nation turns to democratization by itself, it automatically assumes a type of democracy that is suited for its own situation (Ottaway, 2007). It is no accident that the cases in which democratization has proved successful in dealing with national identity problems involve countries which *voluntarily* underwent democratization (like Taiwan and Thailand). Ottaway (2007) contends that countries that voluntarily undergo democratization have a higher chance of success than those in which democratization is enforced.

Other preconditions for democratization being able to resolve national identity problems exist as well. Rustow has pointed to the need for governmental control over territory and policy and a constant composition of the population over the years (the membership boundary preconditions of Rustow, 1970 and Ottaway, 2007). In nations where democratization is enforced, these factors are less likely to be present (Ottaway, 2007). Seleti (1997) has emphasized the support of the media and the development of civil society – the realm between politics and individuals where citizens are encouraged to have a voice in policies and politics. These conditions strengthen democracy and thus give the democratic system the tools to transform national identity conflicts.

Berman (2007) observes that the euphoria in the West surrounding democratic reform has faded away. This has occurred due to the realization that democratization on its own cannot resolve conflicts, and instead often leads to an escalation of conflicts. This is exactly what this article shows. Democratization can resolve national identity problems, but only when it is accompanied by certain other conditions.

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