

DEMOCRACY AND IDENTITY CONFLICTS IN ASIA: IDENTIFYING THE ISSUES FOR CANADA AND MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS

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I BACKGROUND

With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union and other communist governments in East and Central Europe, some Western governments, analysts, and scholars have triumphantly declared a victory for liberal democratic and economic principles and a mandate to promote them around the world. At the same time, the outbreak of violent conflicts linked with claims of ethnic, religious, and other cultural differences in some of these societies has drawn academic and journalistic attention to a link between political and economic liberalization and the rise of ethnic conflict. These concerns have expanded in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. The fall of the Suharto government in particular has been associated with communal violence in parts of Indonesia as democratization and economic liberalization progressed. Events in societies such as Sri Lanka and Indonesia suggests that, under certain circumstances, the process of democratization contributes to ethnic and nationalist conflict. Some writers have even suggested that the dangers are so great that outside governments, multilateral organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should not be promoting democratization without first taking long-term conflict-prevention measures (Snyder 2000). However, the experience of India and Taiwan since 1987 particularly suggest that in some contexts democratizing societies can enjoy a relatively high degree of peace amongst culturally distinct groups.

This paper reflects upon the policy implications of recent scholarship on transitions from authoritarian rule, particularly in the culturally divided societies of East, South-East, and South Asia. It aims to raise awareness of the dangers of the tendency of Western governments and non-governmental organizations to associate democratization mainly with the introduction of elections and the protection of individual civil and political rights, neglecting the legitimate grievances of minorities, aboriginal peoples, and other

* The views presented here are those of the authors and not necessarily of the institutions to which they are associated. Details on the institutional associations of the authors are provided below.