The Assertion of Identity

By [Dr. Chandra Muzaffar](#)
Global Research, October 31, 2017

Theme: [History](#)

News reports about communities and regions asserting their identity are capturing media headlines everywhere. While the media gives a lot of coverage to an event or action connected with the phenomenon — a referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan or a vote in the Catalonian parliament — the reasons that explain the assertion of identity are seldom analysed in depth.

The unique characteristics of the assertion of identity in a specific instance and why it is different from another similar episode elsewhere are hardly discussed in the popular media. The implications of identity assertion for the nation-state at this juncture and how it will shape the globalised world of the future are issues that are not on the radar screen of both the conventional and alternative media.

In covering the quest for identity in different parts of the world the media should as a general proposition pay serious attention to their varying histories and how they have evolved over time. The public will then begin to understand why the quest for identity of the Muslims of Mindanao is different from that of the Tamils of Sri Lanka. Both would be different — though there are some similarities — with the identity struggle of the Irish of Northern Ireland.

A historical-cum-evolutionary perspective will also enable us to appreciate why communities and states that have been annexed or were conquered assert their identity in a different manner from those who were forced to assimilate into a dominant culture. In the former category would be the Malays of the Pattani kingdom in relation to their Siamese Rulers or the Rohingyas of Arakan (now Rakhine) in relation to their Burmese Rulers in contrast to the African slave population vis-à-vis the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) wielders of power in the United States of America.

Power and politics are also significant in shaping identity. Power elites play a decisive role in influencing identity consciousness, for better or for worse, in most societies through laws, policies or simply through their rhetoric. It is largely because of the arrogance of Israeli occupation and usurpation of Palestinian and other Arab lands that its victims have sought to re-assert their identity through nationalism and religion.

Indeed, religious consciousness has become a major factor in the formation of identity consciousness in many Muslim majority societies. It has in some instances given birth to Islamic states. In other cases, it has intensified the clamour for Islamic law, Islamic institutions and an Islamic way of life often expressed through form rather than substance.

Religion's impact upon identity consciousness is not just among Muslims. It is happening in almost every religion. In the United States of America, the Christian Right which received a boost with the election of Donald Trump as the US President has become a powerful force in

domestic politics and public life pursuing an agenda which repudiates justice for the many. In Israel, the Judaic Right with its belligerent stance towards non-Jews commands more clout today than 15 years ago. Likewise, in India, the Hindutva movement which in a sense reached its pinnacle with the massive electoral triumph of the BJP and Narendra Modi in 2014 is seeking to recast Indian identity in superficial Hindu terms. Buddhist monks in Myanmar are also actively projecting a distorted version of Buddhism which privileges the majority Burman community.

While politics and religion are fundamental in identity conflicts, economics should also be considered. Sometimes disparities in economic power — as in the case of Serbs, Croats and Bosnians in the demised Yugoslavia — impact upon the expression of identity in conflict situations. Economic differences also shaped to some extent the Hutu-Tutsi conflict in Rwanda in 1994.

Then there is the territorial dimension to identity. It not only strengthens the identity consciousness of the community in question but also strains the cohesiveness of the larger entity to which that community belongs. Witness the break-up of Pakistan and the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971. It is partly because of an ethnicity-territory nexus that Timor- Leste could assert its independence from Indonesia in May 2002.

Majority — minority issues also shape identity. A majoritarian psychology within segments of the majority could persuade them to emphasise symbols and practices that privilege majority identity to the detriment of the minority. As we have hinted, this has been happening in Myanmar. At the same time, a well-heeled minority may have no empathy for the majority and pursue a self-serving identity agenda. This was perhaps true of the Indians of the Fijis or the Indians in East Africa in the past.

There are also moments when identity assertiveness goes beyond the nation-state. The significance of the regional dimension in the Kurdish push for an independent state with its consequences for at least four nation-states in West Asia is only too obvious. Has the idea of a transnational Muslim identity grown partly because of Islamophobia?   Has the rise of China as a global power bolstered the notion of a global Chinese identity?

From our analysis it is apparent that the assertion of identity is a complex phenomenon. It is partly because of its complexity that there are no easy solutions to the many identity-based conflicts that confront us today. What we should do is to avoid resolving conflicts of this sort through violence and war. However difficult it may be we should strive to find solutions through negotiations and dialogues. A peaceful resolution of each and every conflict caused by the assertion of identity is what the world would like to see.

Dr. Chandra Muzaffar is the President of the International Movement for a Just World (JUST).

Featured image is by Xavi | CC BY 2.0.

Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Dr. Chandra Muzaffar](#)