occasional paper no. 6
world summit for social development

the search for identity: ethnicity, religion and political violence

by yusuf bangura

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geneva, november 1994

preface

The World Summit for Social Development, to be held in Copenhagen in March 1995, provides an important opportunity for the world community to focus attention on current social problems and to analyse the dimensions, roots and directions of social trends. In particular, the agenda of the Summit specifies three areas of concern: the reduction of poverty, the generation of productive employment, and the enhancement of social integration. UNRISD work in preparation for the Summit focuses on the last of these: as countries confront the seemingly intractable problems of social conflict, institutional breakdown and mass alienation, the topic of **social integration** has assumed increasing importance in public debate.

The UNRISD Occasional Paper series brought out as part of the Social Summit preparatory process takes up a range of issues relating to social integration. This paper addresses the issue of identity, especially in the context of ethnicity, religion and political violence. It draws on UNRISD research projects on Ethnic Conflict and Development, Ethnic Diversity and Public Policies, and Political Violence and Social Movements.

One of the major dilemmas confronting humanity at the end of the twentieth century is the growing significance of ethnic and religious conflicts at a time when the world is experiencing deeper forms of global interdependence. Confidence that ethnic and religious ties would slacken as countries were exposed to modernization and globalization has not been well founded. Conflicts based on ethno-religious differences have undermined the economic progress and social fabric of a number of countries in recent years, and pose a challenge to the cohesion and tolerance of several relatively stable societies. Indeed, there is hardly a region in the world currently unaffected by problems of ethnicity and religiosity.

This paper examines the complex ways in which ethnicity and religion shape social identities, and how people get mobilized in support of movements based on such cleavages. It also looks at the role of violence in social conflicts, at why certain types of violence are preferred by social movements, and how violence, in turn, structures the identities of group actors and the dynamics of the conflicts. Finally, it examines a range of policy issues relating to the resolution or management of ethnic and religious conflicts, and political violence.

The first part of the paper looks at the formation and dynamics of ethnic identities and conflicts. It reviews two common explanations of ethnic consciousness — ethnicity as an attribute of human nature and as a phenomenon that is socially constructed — and highlights three developments which would seem to have made ethnicity one of the major defining characteristics of social conflicts in the world today. The first is the collapse of communism and the weakening of secular ideology. The ethnic dimensions of many social conflicts have become more visible than in the past, when they were more likely to assume the ideological labels of the major Cold War antagonists. The second development is the erosion of state capacity and legitimacy in a number of developing countries as a result of protracted economic recession and the adoption of painful stabilization programmes. The changing pattern of world migration is the third development. As peoples from the South increasingly seek to settle in the North, reversing previous Northern migration flows to the South, ethnic and racial problems have emerged in the Northern societies which are the new receiving states. Four main types of conflicts are then reviewed in order to understand the dynamics of ethnicity: those that are separatist in nature; those that are concerned with distributing advantages within a single state structure; those that focus on the rights of indigenous peoples; and those that seek to protect the rights of minorities.

The second part of the paper examines the reasons for the growing salience of religious identities and conflicts. It highlights the destabilizing nature of social change in developing countries, which often results in individuals being caught between two worlds — the modern and the traditional — without an effective set of anchoring values. The paper argues that for Western and ex-communist societies higher levels of secularization have tended to generate feelings of anomie among large groups of people, leading to a search for spiritual upliftment. Four types of movements are then discussed to bring out the political significance of religion in most regions of the world: culturalist, community-oriented, syncretistic and fundamentalist.

Part three looks at the nature and dynamics of political violence. It discusses the ambivalent nature of political violence. On the one hand, violence negates the values of human well-being, but, on the other hand, it is seen by some social movements as an important medium for the formation of group identity. The paper reviews three standard explanations of violence — culture, psychological factors and rational choice. It argues that, although the rational choice model is important in the study of violence, it suffers from shortcomings. For example, social movements are not always in control of their violence and thus may not be able to make rational calculations about its use; violence tends to develop its own logic, interests and clientele when it penetrates society and politics. Four different types of political violence are then examined based on the way violence-prone groups are organized, their ideological orientation and preferred methods of violence: legally oriented mass militant actions which can result in limited use of violence, terrorism, revolutionary violence and civil wars.

The final section discusses policy issues. It highlights the links between marginalization, exclusion and political violence, and the need to make the development process all-inclusive and sensitive to the cultural and social needs of people at local levels. The paper examines specific policies relating to the promotion of stable ethnic relations: proportionality and affirmative action, devolution of power, power sharing arrangements, electoral schemes for balanced political representation, and public education and culture. It calls for changes in the orientation and organization of the contemporary state system, including a review of the concept of the "nation state" and its underlying principle of self-determination. It argues that the concept of the "nation state" has largely become an anachronism in the light of the ethnically plural character of states throughout the world. Rather than give support to policies aimed at creating ethnically pure states, much more attention should be given to efforts aimed at reforming existing states, i.e. making them more representative of, and accountable to, the diverse peoples they are supposed to serve. The paper concludes that such reforms would need to be grounded on solid foundations of civic and common citizenship rights.

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November 1994

Dharam Ghai
Director

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