



## **DPI Brief: Minority Culture, Language and Identity in Conflict**

The 20th century saw major transformations in the political organisation of the world, often following the dissolution of empires. In this time of change, one of the most influential visions about what these new states should look like was influenced by the idea of the nation-state; a state serving comprised of a single nation of people sharing a common culture, language, and identity.<sup>1</sup> Many of the new states replacing empires in the twentieth century, such as India, Indonesia, and Egypt, were to some extent shaped by the attempts of post-independence governments to solidify and strengthen common national identity.

It is important to note that the promotion of a particular culture or nationality in states both old and newly emerged has in some cases led to conflict with minority groups whose culture, religion, ethnicity and language may serve to set them apart from the dominant national identity. In a wide range of cases, confrontation with the state over issues of minority culture and identity has entailed human rights violations perpetrated against minority ethnic groups; states as diverse from one another as Norway<sup>2</sup> and Colombia<sup>3</sup> have experienced difficulties pertaining to issues of minority identity and culture. This short briefing paper will outline the ways in which the rights of minority groups are commonly oppressed to examine the typical repercussions regarding conflict and peacebuilding of the repression of minority groups by the state.

That all people have the right to speak the language of their choosing and practise their own religion and culture is enshrined in international human rights law.<sup>4</sup> Despite this, a large number of states

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<sup>1</sup> This is a commonly accepted working definition of a concept which lacks definitive terminological consensus. See Connor, Walker (1998), *A Nation is a Nation, is a State, is an Ethnic Group, is a...* *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 1 (4): 377–400; also Tishkov, Valery (2000). *Forget the 'nation': post-nationalist understanding of nationalism.* *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23 (4): 625–650

<sup>2</sup> The treatment of the Sami minority by Norway has been subject to criticism by the international community, most recently in 2011 by the UN Racial Discrimination Committee (UN ref: CERD/C/NOR/21-22)

<sup>3</sup> Benavides Vanegas, F. S. (2009) *Indigenous people's mobilization and their struggle for rights in Colombia*, International Catalan Institute for Peace, Working Paper No. 2009/8

<sup>4</sup> These are laid out in, amongst other places, the International Bill of Human Rights; In particular, see Articles 1, 2 pertaining to cultural identity and discrimination on the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

have engaged in measures to repress aspects of minority identity. The attempts of states to limit the use of particular languages have frequently contributed towards conflict, particularly because language is closely tied to issues of identity.<sup>5</sup> Attempts to limit or eradicate a language can take the form of legislation that criminalises or prevents its use in schools, workplaces, and other public spaces; limitations on the use of language in the media; and bans on the use of a language in government institutions, such as parliament.

In Spain, the Basque language *Euskara* has been described as ‘the central feature of Basque self-definition’;<sup>6</sup> correspondingly, it was driven underground by the language policies of Francoist Spain,<sup>7</sup> which required, for example, those with Basque second names to change them to Spanish.<sup>8</sup> The restrictions on the use of *Euskara* was one of the original founding objections of *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna*, or the ETA, the primary Basque armed separatist group which became embroiled in a protracted armed conflict with the Spanish state in which well over a thousand people were killed.<sup>9</sup> Conflict between Tamil separatist groups and the Sri Lankan government also included issues of linguistic identity. When Sinhala (the mother tongue of the Sinhalese ethnic majority) was made the primary language of Sri Lanka post-independence, Tamils found themselves at a disadvantage in the Courts and unable to secure government posts, for which Sinhala was a requirement. Many Tamils feared the loss of their language, culture, and identity, contributing to the outbreak of violence in 1972.<sup>10</sup> In both Spain and Sri Lanka, restrictions on the ability of people to speak their mother tongue convinced many people that their identity conflicted with the aims and ideology of the state. The placing of barriers to the ability to work in government or access education encouraged alienation of the minority population, and deepened pre-existing grievances, increasing the likelihood of conflict.

Where a religion widely practised amongst a minority group differs from that practised by the majority of the country or that promoted by the state, religion may become a target for repressive policies. For example, while freedom of belief and religion are formally recognised in the Egyptian constitution, in practice there have been bans on the building of churches, conversions to Christianity, marriages between converts to Christianity and those born in Christian communities and Christian proselytizing.<sup>11</sup> In China, restrictions are placed on the ability of the Muslim Uighur

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<sup>5</sup> See DPI Expert Paper, *Language Policy in Conflict Resolution*, Ned Thomas 2015

<sup>6</sup> See DPI Expert Paper, *After ETA? Catalonia, Euskadi and the Spanish Constitution*, Ned Thomas 2012

<sup>7</sup> See DPI Expert Paper, *After ETA? Catalonia, Euskadi and the Spanish Constitution*, Ned Thomas 2012

<sup>8</sup> Alfonso Pérez-Agote, *The Social Roots of Basque Nationalism*(2006)

<sup>9</sup> The figure of 829 casualties killed by the ETA, and 368 deaths as a result of Spanish government forces, paramilitary organisations, and other groups is accepted by the Spanish interior ministry and the Basque government, as well as most major news agencies

<sup>10</sup> Kearney, R. (1978). Language and the Rise of Tamil Separatism in Sri Lanka. *Asian Survey*, 18(5), 521-534.

<sup>11</sup> Pew Forum, *Global Restrictions on Religion – Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life* (December 2009)

ethnic minority to practice their religion, including bans on aspects of Islamic dress in public<sup>12</sup> and the observance of Ramadan,<sup>13</sup> that clearly violate the right to freedom of religion.<sup>14</sup> The Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region has been subject to conflict, part of which has been influenced by the desire of some Uighurs to gain greater autonomy or independence from China. The Chinese state has linked these aspirations to the operations of global Islamist terror networks, and linked expressions of Islamic faith by Uighurs to separatism and terrorism, a contention which has been challenged by expert analysis.<sup>15</sup> In any case, the placing of further restrictions on the Uighur's right to freedom of religion is seen by many to be more likely to encourage than discourage Islamist terrorism.<sup>16</sup> What is clear is that in both Egypt and China, restrictions on the ability of ethnic minorities to practise their religion and associated cultural practices has had the negative effect of increasing hostility to the state amongst members of the minority ethnic population.

Programmes that attempt to force people from minority ethnic groups to adopt another culture have also proven counter-productive for governments. One such example is the Government of the Philippines' policy of 'Filipinisation' of the Moro people during the 1950s and 1960s, which aimed to ensure that the majority Christian and minority indigenous, Muslim Moro populations could be assimilated into a dominant culture.<sup>17</sup> The Moro people had a history of resistance to imperial rule, with many unhappy at being incorporated into the new Philippine state. Yet government policy, including the practise of 'swamping' of Moro populations by introducing large numbers of Filipino settlers that demographically overwhelmed previously Moro-majority areas, inculcated further tension, contributing towards the outbreak of conflict in 1969.<sup>18</sup> It has been suggested that similar actions by the Vietnamese government in the Central Highlands, historically the homeland of the

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<sup>12</sup> See Guardian reporting, *Chinese city bans Islamic beards, headwear and clothing on buses* 6 August 2014: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/06/chinese-city-bans-islamic-beards-headwear-and-clothing-on-buses>

<sup>13</sup> See Independent reporting, *China gain bans Muslims from fasting during Ramadan say Uighur Community* :<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/china-again-bans-muslims-from-fasting-during-ramadan-say-uighur-community-10326671.html>

<sup>14</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, Article 18: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.'

<sup>15</sup> See Elizabeth Van Wie Davis (2008), *Uyghur Muslim Ethnic Separatism in Xinjiang, China*, Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies; Human Rights Watch (2009) *Behind the Violence in Xinjiang*

<sup>16</sup> Nick Holdstock, (2015) *Forgotten People: Xinjiang, Terror and the Chinese State*; also see reporting by Foreign Policy (February 2015) *Is China Making Its Own Terrorism Problem Worse?*: [http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/09/is-china-making-its-own-terrorism-problem-worse-uighurs-islamic-state/?wp\\_login\\_redirect=0](http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/09/is-china-making-its-own-terrorism-problem-worse-uighurs-islamic-state/?wp_login_redirect=0)

<sup>17</sup> Nelly van Doorn-Harder. Southeast Asia, Islam in, *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*. Edited by Martin, Richard C. Macmillan Reference, 2004. vol. 1 p. 647

<sup>18</sup> Hiromitsu Umehara; Germelino M. Bautista (2004). *Communities at the Margins: Reflections on Social, Economic, and Environmental Change in the Philippines*. Ateneo University Press. pp. 22–

Degar people but now with a majority ethnically Vietnamese population, it is likely to serve to increase tensions in the region for the foreseeable future.<sup>19</sup>

In summation, states which view particular ethnic minorities as a threat to security, stability, or national unity may take measures that curtail the civil rights of these minorities. In these cases, the culture of ethnic minorities is often specifically targeted; the expression of minority languages and religion, in particular, can be restricted. Experience and practice demonstrate that the culture, religion, language and identity of ethnic minorities must be respected if they are to be successfully included in the state; indeed, attempts to homogenise and assimilate cultures to hold together a unified state risk exacerbating, rather than alleviating, tension. Especial risk derives from privileging one or several groups above others, or failing to take action to counter high degrees of economic inequality along ethnic lines.<sup>20</sup> Clear historical precedent demonstrates that these measures are counter-productive, motioning to minority groups that their place within the state is not valued, causing deep seated issues which may not find genuine redress until the repression of minority culture and identity is ceased.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Human Rights Watch, June 26, 2015, *Persecuting "Evil Way" Religion: Abuses against Montagnards in Vietnam*

<sup>20</sup> See eg. John D. Huber and Laura Mayoral, *Inequality, Ethnicity and Civil Conflict*, Columbia 2014; Tolga Sinmazdemir, *Economic Inequality and Ethnic Conflict: A Cross-National, Group-Level Analysis*, Washington University in St. Louis 2012

<sup>21</sup> For further discussion of this issue, see for example *International Approaches to Governing Ethnic Diversity*, ed. Jane Boulden, Will Kymlicka, Oxford University Press 2015, especially *Introduction* (p.1-25)