

Program 2 - Federal and Unitary States

Australia is unique among federal systems in having little regional diversity.

Its relative homogeneity has made it easier to share power between the national government and the layers of government organised at sub-national levels.

However, federalism is sometimes regarded as a good way of combining ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity with an inclusive national political identity.

In multicultural India, federalism has helped to reduce communal tensions by allowing different cultural groups self-government within their own states.

Meanwhile, Indonesia has tried to head off secessionist claims by devolving more political and economic power to the outlying regions.

Can regional autonomy work? What is the trade-off between federal and unitary models of government?

VOICE:

We travel all over India, we cross many states where different languages are spoken. Religion, culture is different. But still we find that we are Indians, there's no problem with that, we are all Indians, that is what is called unity in diversity.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Hello, I'm John Westland from Radio Australia and welcome to our series on systems of government 'Sharing Power- The Ties That Bind'.

Today - 'Federal and Unitary States'.

In India, federalism has been used to help reduce racial and religious tensions by allowing different ethnic groups self-government within a federal political system. By contrast, multi-cultural Indonesia was established as a unitary state with 'unity in diversity', the national motto. But Indonesia has struggled to establish a system of government that recognises diversity while maintaining national unity. And while Australia's federal political jurisdictions were not created along ethnic lines, during the Centenary of Federation, attention focussed on the question, 'What holds nations together? '.

DONALD HORNE:

At the great period of nation-building after the Second World War, only two of the new nations formed federations: India because otherwise it would have just fallen to bits, and Yugoslavia which, in any case, did fall to bits.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Emeritus Professor Donald Horne at the Australian Federation Symposiums. When Wimar Witoelar addressed the Federation symposium he was spokesman for Abdurrahman Wahid, who at that time, was Indonesia's President.

WITOELAR:

President Wahid used to explain to me that the choice between unitarianism and federalism is not really a discreet choice but that really they are gradations in a continuum. And then the next person I campaigned with, Mrs Megawati Sukarnoputri was very much against federalism because her father set up Indonesia as a unitary state and unitary it should be. Well, the man I finally worked with, President Wahid, said, well let's forget the terminology and let's just work bottom up from the people.

PROFESSOR ANN BOOTH:

I think now most Indonesians (my suspicion is, even within the military and certainly within broader civil society) recognise that it's no longer possible to hold Indonesia together simply by military force. Traumatic though the breaking away of East Timor was, it has probably had the beneficial effect of making Indonesians realise that while ultimately perhaps secession may occur but it won't necessarily be the end of the Indonesian state. We're strong enough to survive bits breaking away at the periphery.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Professor Ann Booth, an economist from the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University is a frequent visitor to Indonesia.

PROFESSOR ANN BOOTH:

Many, many countries of course have had to deal with the sorts of problems Indonesia is now having to cope with; not just in Aceh and Irian Jaya, but in other parts of the country as well. And there's a lot of discussion of the various models of constitutional and fiscal federalism. And of course as we look around the world, now, there are a large number of different models; some of them successful, some of them less successful. There's the Australian model of course, there's the Indian model, there are several different models in Western Europe, several different models in both North and South

America, but ultimately, of course, Indonesia is going to have to decide on a system which suits its own special needs.

JOHN WESTLAND:

The Indonesian Army, or T.N.I, has been waging military campaigns against separatist rebels since forging the nation in 1945 and it's not clear that they would be prepared to see further parts of the Republic break away.

Dr. Ruth McVey was the keynote speaker at an Australian conference on Indonesia called 'Autonomy and Disintegration'.

DR RUTH MCVEY:

I think what they would argue about federalism in the States and in Australia is that the state divisions are not based on ethnic differences or religious differences too, that is, they're fairly arbitrary divisions. I mean, one's not going to talk about New South Wales separatism I should imagine, whereas in Indonesia that would be much more like the Soviet Union where you've got different ethnic groups which under a federal system had their own republic which was basically controlled from Moscow. But once Moscow's control flagged and people were unhappy with the leadership that there was at the centre, you very quickly got separatist movements. And I think the big thing that the TNI has been looking at, rather than the United States or Australia, is the Soviet experience.

JOHN WESTLAND:

When the Asian Financial Crisis precipitated the collapse of the Indonesian economy and the Suharto regime, the Centre could no longer hold the periphery together by force; as demonstrated by East Timor's successful bid for independence and the secessionist struggles in Aceh and West Papua.

It's led some Indonesia-watchers to question whether notions of democracy are too inclusive and decentralised to allow for the continuation of Indonesia in its present form. Dr Damien Kingsbury from Melbourne's Deakin University.

DR DAMIEN KINGSBURY:

When the state was founded in practical terms in 1949 although declared in 1945, their concern was to bring together a diverse group of people within a cohesive state and the way to do this was to create a national identity out of what was really many disparate nations. And in that sense there was the creation of a myth of nationalism. The use of a new artificial national language, Bahasa Indonesia, the reinvention, in ways, of a common history to give people a sense of common past, and there's no real inherent logic in the construction of the state. And this has certainly been borne out in many of the regional rebellions and the sense of regional dissent. So, in one sense, if you don't

maintain the unity of the state through repression then the state won't hang together. Now this is what we saw at the end of the Suharto period; the lid was lifted, the repression came off, the states started to fall apart or appeared to start to fragment. The intention, now, very clearly, is to reimpose military authority throughout the regions and to bring it back into something that more closely resembled what we saw under Suharto. Now you say, well this will only again feedback into local resentment and lead to a longer-term problem. Well exactly, I mean the issue of the construction of the state, the nature of the state and the role of the armed forces in the state and the maintenance of the state is unreconciled.

JOHN WESTLAND:

When Megawati Sukarnoputri came to power in mid-2001 with the tacit support of the Indonesian army, she made the restoration of national unity her government's first priority.

MEGAWATI SUKARNOPUTRI:

First of all, to retain unity of Indonesia within the framework of the Republic of Indonesia, to continue reform and democratisation in every aspect of life, I will call this cabinet 'Gotong Royong', which is the Cabinet of Working Together.

JOHN WESTLAND:

President Megawati has also said that Indonesia would be incomplete without Irian Jaya or West Papua and although she's called for strict observance of human rights, the murder of West Papuan Independence leader, Theys Eluay, just three months after she came to office has fuelled fears that Indonesia has returned to the heavy-handed methods of the Suharto era to deal with dissent.

Yet, President Megawati carries with her the hopes of millions of ordinary Indonesians that she can restore their faith in Indonesia's system of government after more than thirty years of authoritarian rule. She is, after all, the daughter of Indonesia's founding father and first President.

NEWSREEL:

About another 100 miles have to be covered before we reach Bandung, our target for today, and the crowds may have been dense in Jakarta, but compared to the masses that turned out in Bandung, they were extremely meagre. One of the reasons is that it is President Sukarno's first visit since the transfer of sovereignty, and that Nationalist spirits are high in Bandung.

NEWS ITEM:

Destiny has been fulfilled, Megawati Sukarnoputri may soon return to her childhood home. She now has the prize she believed in 1999 was rightfully hers. This sense of entitlement does not just stem

from the family name, but that in 1999, her party was the most popular performer in Indonesia's first free elections in 40 years.

DR RUSLAN ABDOELGANI:

Every President, becoming President should also recognise this fact, this reality; that in Indonesia you cannot govern / centralise, from a central point. It's too big. If you superimpose the map of Indonesia on Europe, it is like London to the Caucasus. How can you make one state?

JOHN WESTLAND:

Dr Ruslan Abdoelgani was an official in President Sukarno's first post-independence government.

DR RUSLAN ABDOELGANI:

We prefer the terminology of a unitarian state; but what is in the unitarian state? It depends now if the unitarian state has provinces and the provinces gets their own autonomy. They can discuss their own interests, they can elect their own governors, why not? That is also actually a federation; a federation of provinces, not a federation of states.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Since becoming President, Megawati Sukarnoputri has warned Indonesians that the nation faced a stalling of the democratic reforms they'd come to expect since the fall of the Suharto government.

These reforms include the regional autonomy laws, designed to devolve power from the Central Government, in Jakarta, to local government across Indonesia.

Many Indonesians regard regional autonomy as critical to good governance after decades of authoritarian rule.

Radio Australia's Hidayat Djajamihardja spoke with Professor Affan Gafar from the Gadja Mada University who was involved in framing the regional autonomy laws.

HIDAYAT DJAJAMIHARDJA:

Do you think President Megawati, as the daughter of the founder of the unitary state of the Republic of Indonesia, would completely support the implementation of these autonomy laws?

PROFESSOR AFFAN GAFAR:

Frankly speaking, as far as I can observe of her perception of the implementation of this law, she'd prefer, I think, to make changes to this law. That's why there's a very strong inclination by the people

around her not to fully support the full implementation of this law. If this continues to be the case, the demand, the aspiration for federalism will become one of Indonesia's problems in the near future.

HIDAYAT DJAJAMIHARDJA:

Are the Indonesian people now ready for the autonomy law?

PROFESSOR AFFAN GAFAR:

I believe that the people at the local levels really expect this law to be fully implemented, but the problem is that there are people in Jakarta who are hesitant to defer authority to local governments. That's why I believe that if this law fails to be implemented then the demand for federalism will be very, very strong in the near future in Indonesia.

JOHN WESTLAND:

You're listening to 'Sharing Power' on Radio Australia. Today, Federal and Unitary States.

SUNIL GANGOPADHYAY:

India has so much diversity in culture, in language, in religion, so sometimes it's amazing how it's holding in one piece; that is as one country. Of course there is tension in the fringe areas, in the mountains. There are some groups who want to be separated from India but these are small groups, and they're extremists. They're not well prepared for a war or anything. But the Indian army is strong, Indian government is still so much integrated that, still now, there's no question of disintegration in India.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Sunil Gangopadhyay is one of Bengal's foremost writers. Sunil's generation remembers the communal violence associated with Partition and he recalls it, as a time of great turmoil, when a strong government at the centre was justified.

SUNIL GANGOPADHYAY:

It was unfortunate that India was divided and religion was the main cause. But in India at that time in the middle of the 20th century it led to the partition of the country, and one part of the country called Pakistan had a religion, a state religion. India decided to be secular, no particular religion would be the state religion, and people are free to practice any religion. And because there was so much communal violence before this Independence, there were riots and merciless brutal killings in the Punjab and in Bengal, just to retain a hold over, over all the country. India's constitution rested solely on the central government. We should have a federal kind of government. I feel personally

that we should have a federal kind of government, but I think at that time it wasn't necessary because that was a troubled time. But now I think a federal system of government is ideal for India.

ROBERT STERN:

I never refer to India as a federation. India's really a quasi federation because the states can be carved up by an act of parliament. Parliament acting through the President of India can depose a state government. And it never really federated, you know the way Australia and the United States did; they were pre-existing units that come together and that didn't happen in India.

JOHN WESTLAND:

India scholar Robert Stern.

ROBERT STERN:

India's a federation in part because of its imperial history, it was structured as a federation in part because of the aerial concentration of its heterogeneity also. Gujarat people who speak Gujarati live in Gujarat, and that's an area. People who speak Bengali live in Bengal, and that's an area. And if someone asked me what's the most important thing holding India together I would say democracy at the provincial level because people are getting what they want at the basic level. They're talking in their own language, they're eating their own food, they're watching their own movies. Whatever they want is, there, in their local arena. So the whole political cultural world is there and generally at the state level there's no one who can dominate. So democracy at this level is terrific, it works. At worst, people know who their enemies are and it's all self-contained within that group. And the Indian government, generally speaking, has facilitated this, and I think more and more over the years where interests are, loyalties follow.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Robert Stern is the author of 'Democracy and Dictatorship in South Asia'.

Robin Jeffrey from Melbourne's La Trobe University is also a frequent visitor to India. His most recent book, 'India's Newspaper Revolution' tracks the role of the Indian-language press in India's evolving democracy.

ROBIN JEFFREY:

For a diverse plural society to hang together, most of the jigsaw pieces have to have an interest in being part of a greater entity. And my own suspicion is that where the middle classes are strongest, where capitalism is strongest in terms of people making things that they want to sell to other people and doing things that they want to do on a bigger canvas than simply that of their own state, there, the Indian state is less threatened. It's off on the fringes, the crumbly bits where there's less of that

kind of economic activity. There are less bourgeois nationalists with things to sell wanting a national market. Where you don't have a flourishing newspaper industry, there you've probably got conditions where people have less of a stake in the Indian national project and you'll find the break-away movements are likely to arise there.

JOHN WESTLAND:

While separatist movements in India have tended to arise in those poorer regions where people are not integrated into the national economy, in Indonesia, by contrast, break-away movements are strongest in resource-rich regions like West Papua and Aceh. Economist, Ann Booth.

ANN BOOTH:

The Acehnese of course have always had a very strong, if you like, national consciousness. They've always been aware of their rather distinct history, culture, language. However, the Acehnese did decide, I think it was a genuinely free popular decision, to join the new Republic in 1949. But I think it's true to say that they've never been entirely comfortable within the framework of the unitary state. I think the problems in Aceh really came to a head in the latter part of the 1980s, early 1990s, when the huge natural gas reserves around Lhokseumawe were developed, developed mainly by the American company, Exxon Mobil, and the Acehnese were aware of the contrast between their natural resource wealth, which was almost entirely being drained off to Jakarta, and their relative backwardness in terms of development, in terms of infrastructure, education and so on. And I think there were other issues at stake also in Aceh to do with religious autonomy and so on. But certainly I think the awareness that they were not benefiting from their natural resource wealth was a factor contributing to the troubles, there, over the last decade.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Next week in - Thinking Beyond the Capital - we'll track the progress of new power sharing arrangements - in Indonesia, the Philippines and Papua New Guinea.

'Sharing Power' is produced by Radio Australia's Sue Slamen with academic advice from Victoria University's Dr Richard Chauvel. Technical production by Ryan Egan - I'm John Westland, bye for now.