

Imperilled nation states
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The nation state is actually a fairly recent construct. Throughout history, our maps have always comprised of microstates, empires and city-states. For example India before independence was actually a confederation of 565 princely states and colonial territories.

However, the reign of nation states is under threat. As recently as the mid-19th century, the nation state was still an alien concept in many parts of the world. However, due to economic and security challenges, a consolidation rapidly occurred in the 19th and 20th centuries.

However, the end of the Cold War and the ascent of the European Union changed this dynamic significantly. Nation states - with their defined borders, central governments, imagined communities, and sovereign authority - are seen neither inevitable nor eternal.

The concept of the nation state has always had its challenges. One prime example is Belgium. Belgium is indeed a very unique country demarcated completely by language. I have visited Belgium twice and on both occasions I was befuddled.

Ian Traynor, writing in the Guardian newspaper in May 2010 articulated this divide best; "Language is the fundamental flaw at the core of Belgium's existential crisis, taking on the role that race, religion, or ethnicity play in other conflict-riven societies. The country operates on the basis of linguistic apartheid, which infects everything from public libraries to local and regional government, the education system, the political parties, national television, the newspapers, even football teams."

In 1830, the Belgian Revolution led to the separation of the Southern Provinces from the Netherlands and to the establishment of a Catholic and bourgeois, officially French-speaking and neutral, independent Belgium under a provisional government and a national congress. French was originally the single official language adopted by the nobility and the bourgeoisie. It progressively lost its overall importance as Dutch became recognised as well. This recognition became official in 1898 and in 1967 the parliament accepted a Dutch version of the Constitution.

And there has been no turning back since and this divide is so apparent that the country has gone without an elected government for 589 days, almost 2 years.

This problem can also be seen in the Middle East Africa where former colonial powers drew boundaries and created new nation states without a care for traditional ethnic, religious and tribal tension and rivalries.

However, the nation state in my view remains the best model for a world that is fast changing.

The recent independence in Catalonia sent ripples across the world and has opened complex battlefronts for countries like Italy, Belgium and the United Kingdom as all these countries are dealing with some form of secessionist movements.

Scotland wants out of the UK, northern Italians see their southern brethren as a drag and the Flemish want an independent country.

The decisive action taken by the Rajoy government in Spain was necessary to protect the integrity of the concept of the nation state.

While the European Union has been very successful in promoting close economic cooperation, borderless trade and mutual security; it has also undermined the need for large states and the EU functions as a macrocosm of smaller states and supra-nationalism has supplanted nationalism. In turn, this sense of stability has once again given rise to secessionist sentiments that are stepped in historical antecedents.

For example, the Catalans do not see themselves as Spanish. They have a distinct language and culture, and see the Spanish state as a bully. In order to fan this sentiment further, Catalonia's disproportionate economic contribution to the Spanish state and the horrors of General Franco's suppression of Catalonia has been effectively deployed as tools.

Furthermore, the rapid economic transformation of the global economic has created powerful cities. For example by 2050, the economies of New York City, Shanghai and Tokyo are projected to be USD2.5tril; making them economically more powerful than many nation states.

Also, technology has created a seamless and a "smaller" global community. Facebook has 2.06 billion users; hence if it were a country it would have a population almost double of India.

However, it is my fervent belief that the concept of the nation state, though imperilled, is absolutely relevant for global security and harmony. My conviction is driven by Malaysia's success as a nation state despite its ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural diversity.

Malaysia is a new kid on the block and we recently celebrated the 60th year of independence and the 54th anniversary of the formation of Malaysia. Before 1957, Malaya (as it then was) comprised of nine sultanates and three strait settlements. Independence and later the formation of Malaysia led to the formation of a nation state with 13 states and currently three federal territories.

We have been a lot more successful than Belgium or Spain because we have a strong central government and a composite national identity in Bangsa Malaysia.

Hence, these are important lessons for Malaysia to share with the world and we are evidence that nation states actually work if there is strong nationalism coupled with entrenched commonalities. Despite the challenges we face, we remain a successful and functioning nation state because we all see ourselves as Malaysian first.

A strong national identity is a sine qua non for the sustaining of the nation state and our European friends can heed these lessons so there will be less secessionist tendencies and more national unity.

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