**Civilisation states**

BY N I A Z M U R T A Z A | 10/8/2019

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| SINCE the Second World War, the dominant global political idea is of equal nation states living under globally shared democratic institutions that emphasise peaceful interaction and negotiation. While actual practice has fallen short, few have rejected the ideal till recently.The two key components of this ideal are nation states and global institutions. Nation states ideally refer to developed states like Japan and Germany whose populace largely belongs to one race, faith and ethnicity.Multi-ethnic states like Switzerland were also accepted as nation states where people with different identities voluntarily live together due to its perceived benefits.Finally, newly decolonised states were treated as nation states though most of them were heterogeneous and their borders had been created by colonial powers. With increased immigration, nationhood in even developed states became defined less in terms of identity and more in terms of citizenship.These nation states are bound together by evolving global political institutions built on the liberal ideas of democracy, rule of law and human rights. Though these ideals matured in the West, their inherent rationality and utility made them universal ideals. They are seen as ideals for both global and national politics. So while each nation state may have its own unique history and culture, it is not those but these global ideas which serve as the basis for even their domestic politics.While the evolution of this global system was incomplete, the idea of civilisation states has challenged it in the last few decades.Civilisation is an ill-defined concept. But one can distill a definition from the traits of great civilisations such as Rome, Egypt and China.They were all large, complex and long-duration societies with unique social, economic and political institutions that produced significant scholarly and material outputs to benefit humanity at large.Many states today claim to be successors to a historical civilisation and aim to reclaim its lost greatness. Such states invoke not current global political norms but their own imagined or real civilisational history in crafting their domestic political norms. They also oppose global political norms that may police their domestic politics and interaction with other states. The number of such states is still small but they include key ones. They include the three largest states populationwise (Trump`s US, China and Modi`s India) and other large ones like Pakistan, Russia and even Brazil. They include six of the world`s eight nuclear states and a wannabe one, Iran. And the idea is spreading.But in no state has civilisational reawale ening produced novel ideas that improve over western liberal democracy. In fact, a closer look reveals that this move represents a desire to buck global democratic accountability and achieve a majoritarian dominance domestically, e.g., of whites in the US and Jews in Israel. Unsurprisingly, the movement is usually led by populist demagogues who appeal to crude emotions and not refined ideals.Nor do they present novel ideas that could lay the foundations of truly unique civilisations. Samuel Huntington had identinednine currentcivilisationsinhis`clash of civilisation` theory, i.e. Western, Christian Orthodox, Islamic, Chinese, India, African, Buddhist, Latin and Japanese. Most of them fall short of the definition by not possessing unique social, political or economic institutions and/or not producing significant scholarly and material outputs which benefits humanity.In some of these societies, there isn`t even much civilisational rhetoric. In India and Pakistan, the religion-civilisational rhetoric is vacuous. The political and economic insti-tutions in all these societies derive from Western ones without reaching their quality. Only the Chinese political system is unique and, to date, successful but its economic systemis not uniquely different from Western capitalism. Nor does it challenge Western civilisation. The Soviet system was unique in both ways and aimed to end Western civilisation, but it failed.While I reject the clash of civilisation theory, I also reject Fukuyama`s opposing theory about the `end of history` and the triumph of Western liberal democracy and capitalism.While liberal democracy is good, capitalism is not. Unluckily, all these new ideas oppose the strong point of Western civilisation, i.e.liberal democracy, but not its weak suit, i.e.capitalism. But while the challenge to capitalism is not emerging at the state level, it is emerging at the civil society level. Such social forces provide the hope for an alternative civilisation that combines social plurality and economic and political egalitarianism. The writer is a Senior Fellow with UC Berkeley and heads INSPIRING Pakistan, a progressive policy unit.murtazaniaz@yahoo.com www.inspiring.pk Twitter: @NiazMurtaza2 |  |