Federalism: A Challenge to Conflict Management in Less Developed Countries/South Asia

Panel Organiser: Zubair Faisal Abbasi, Visiting Associate, SDPI, Islamabad
zubair@sdpi.org

The literature around federal structures discusses principles of dividing authority and power amongst the participating groups - be those states or associations or common institutions. Tekena Tamuno (1998) observed that federalism is a ‘form of government where the component units of a political organization participate in sharing powers and functions in a co-operative manner though the combined forces of ethnic pluralism and cultural diversity, among others, tend to pull their people apart’. It is argued that to accommodate diversity and ensure political and social participation, federalism offers a broad range of institutional arrangements that can help strive for autonomy to exercise political action and accrue benefits while maintaining an identity for political groups.

However, under federalism, the participating units must show an urge to cooperate for mutual advantage and strong penchant to preserve socio-political, ethnic and regional identity and some space for political action. These are difficult propositions, which can make segments of society cohesive as well as divergent enough to pave way for secessionist tendencies under situations of irreconcilable conflicts.

Alongside federalism, interest of political scientists has increased around the concept of ‘non-majoritarian democracy’, which was either thought of federalism as distinct from consociationalism or being part of the same streak of thinking which tries to stabilise states while accommodating minority interests. Under a consociational regime, the majority rules but the system is designed to generate broader consensus than possible in simple majority systems. In South Asia, there are a number of challenges to federal structures, which require some serious soul searching and recommendations for political actors. Therefore, in this context of federalism in relation with democracy and conflicts, this panel proposes the following issues for discussion:

1. Political, economic and social challenges to federalism in South Asia
2. Federalism as regulation of conflict management: Challenges and opportunities in national and regional contexts
3. Necessity of federalism and consociationalism to hold together multiethnic states
4. Federalism, horizontal inequalities and ethnic mobilisations
5. Comparative analysis and transferable lessons from successful fiscal federalism for South Asian countries

Abstracts followed by papers with a focus on the above aspects of federalism would be
presented and discussed. The Conference would also enable an exchange of views and experiences among the participants regarding federalism and consociational regimes in their respective countries.

The authors’ guidelines are available at the following Conference weblink: http://www.sdpi.org/13thsdc/authors_guidelines.htm

Reference: