



How Effective, How Many, How Enduring?

James A. Paul

July 1997

Failed States, Hollow States and Diplomatic Recognition

Many very small states have recently joined the UN. Old states continue to fragment. There is doubt and confusion about the legitimacy of states new and old. Most states cannot command the same fervent admiration and loyalty as they once did.

Some states are "failing" (as Somalia, Afghanistan, Rwanda, Liberia, Cambodia and the two Congos). Even the most powerful states are losing their lustre, as global financial pressures strip them of social programs and diminish or discredit their democratic institutions. Some call this the "hollow" state.

Though UN membership conveys a certain cachet on statehood, there is surprisingly little agreement on the legitimacy of some states and nations. Nor are UN decisions, governed by vetoes, always a clear reflection of international opinion. The government in Beijing faced more than two decades of non-recognition by the United States and exclusion from the United Nations, to mention only the most astonishing example. The government in Taipei, by contrast, for long years recognized as "China" and seated in the Security Council, now does not even have a presence in the UN at all.

Count 'Em

Le Monde Diplomatique, in its July 1996 issue, published a fascinating article by Francois-Gabriel Roussel reporting on this question. He concluded that there may be anywhere between 168 and 254 nations, depending on who is doing the counting.

Roussel reports, for example, that there are 168 separate currencies in the world, 239 two-letter country codes recognized by the International Standards

Organization, and 185 participants in the Universal Postal Union that issue their own stamps. Germany, it seems, has established a list of nations for its diplomatic corps, containing 281 names, but 65 names carry a notation that another nation is sovereign over its territory. Presumably that means 216 sovereign states, a very large number.

Roussel reports that as of November 1994, France recognized 190 states. Switzerland 194 and Russia 172. Since the article appeared, the 1996 Atlanta Olympics included 197 national teams.

Pressures from Below and Above

Canada, Belgium, Britain, Spain, Italy and many other well-established nations face separatist claims and they are ceding increasing autonomy to regional (sub-national) bodies. In some cases, regional languages and cultures are enjoying a renaissance. Even regional economies are proclaiming their independence from central authority. Catalonia in Spain has revived the Catalan language, set up its own parliament and claims a unique economic status linked to France and the Mediterranean as well as to Spain. Quebec, Flemish Belgium, Scotland and Northern Italy have staked a claim to special status, too, and some of their citizens favor complete national separation. Meanwhile, France grapples with independence forces in Corsica, China has indigestion over Tibet, Mexico faces insurgency in Chiapas.

States are not just under pressure "from below." They are also under pressure "from above" -- losing some of their sovereignty to larger entities like the European Union and the North American Free Trade Association at the regional level, and the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO at the global level. Multinational institutions like NAFTA and the WTO are beginning to nullify national laws in areas like the environment, human rights, labor protection and the like. In recent polls, even citizens of the United States have expressed doubt that their powerful nation is capable of solving problems independent of others. But citizens don't want to give up their habitual rights and privileges. Citizens protest the many negative social results of the pressure from above -- angry that NAFTA or the EU monetary union are pushing up unemployment or undermining wages and social benefits.