

# Preface

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It is increasingly clear that ethnicity and religion are among the most potent mobilizing forces in societies. This is exacerbated in societies in which ethnicity and religion mark the fault lines between the haves and the have-nots, the powerful and the powerless, those who have hope and those who despair. In the past few months, this has been graphically illustrated by the turbulence in the Middle East – but, as this annual review by Minority Rights Group International shows, these tensions are commonplace around the world. However, it is important to emphasize that ethnic or religious diversity alone is neither a precondition for nor a determinant of violent conflict. The existence of minority groups in what may be perceived to be an otherwise homogeneous society is not an inherent cause of conflict.

While acknowledging the reality of ethnic or religious dimensions in many conflicts, the more fundamental causes of these conflicts generally lie below the surface, buried, often intentionally, by those with an interest in fomenting conflict. In some situations, the purveyors of war are actually seeking power and profits by immoral or illegal means, and they often find easy cover in deflecting blame onto those who are most powerless and most different. Also, in times of hardship, racism is often employed to divert attention from the root causes of despair. And targeting an easily identifiable group for exclusion or exploitation allows some to feel comfort in a mythology that dehumanizes certain people based on how they look or what they believe, the language they speak or where their ancestors called home.

Wars with ethno-religious components are deeply complex and must be better understood if we are to stand a chance of preventing, in this century, the bloodshed that marked the last. We must dispel the myth that diversity is, in itself, a cause of tension and conflict.

In contrast, we must promote the understanding that diverse societies can be among the healthiest, the most stable and prosperous. Respect for minority rights is crucial to this understanding. Minority rights are based on the principle of an integrated society, where each can use their own language, enjoy their culture and practise their religion while still embracing a broader, inclusive national identity.

The opportunity to participate fully and effectively in all aspects of society, while preserving

group identity, is essential to true equality and may require positive steps on the part of governments. Minority rights are not about giving some communities more than others. Rather, they are about recognizing that, owing to their minority status and distinct identity, some groups are disadvantaged and are at times targeted, and that these communities need special protection and empowerment.

Equality for all does not always come naturally or easily when political power and influence over the institutions of state lie predominantly in the hands of certain groups, which, perhaps due to their majority status, have a political advantage. History has shown us, time and again, the immense damage caused to nations, peoples and regions by those who use the power at their disposal for the benefit of only some, while excluding or actively oppressing others as a means to maintain, entrench or extend their power.

For such societies, the exclusion, discrimination and resentment that are fostered by such power imbalance, create the conditions under which fault lines may occur along ethnic or religious grounds. It is perhaps here, in the fundamental flaws or dysfunctioning of governmental power, that the seeds of tensions and grievances are sown that later may emerge into conflicts. Such conflicts are misunderstood as being purely ethnic or religious conflicts, based upon difference and the perceived inability of different groups to live peacefully together. In fact they are often more correctly conflicts of greed and inequality than they are conflicts of diversity.

Today, in almost every corner of our world it seems that there is a growing suspicion of ‘otherness’ or difference, whether it be ethnic, religious or based on other grounds. This climate of fear is also open to abuse by those who might seek to exploit divisions between different religious faiths, or those who might justify oppression in the name of security.

In this worrying climate, the principles enshrined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities are as relevant today as ever, and as needed for healthy, diverse societies. In adopting this Declaration in 1992, states have pledged to protect the existence – and identity – of minorities within their territory, to establish conditions of equality and non-

discrimination, and to ensure effective participation of minorities in public life. The Declaration is a benchmark – codifying the minimum treatment that those belonging to minority communities should expect from their governments. It is central to my mandate to promote implementation of this vital Declaration, and I pursue my work in the knowledge that, in doing so, I am also promoting conflict prevention; urging that injustices and inequities be identified at an early stage so that lasting solutions may be found.

**Gay J McDougall**