

Introduction

Ella Akerman

Much has been said and written in the recent years about the need for the developing countries to democratise. Not only would the democratisation process ensure the development of the society, the observance of basic human rights and the political participation of the citizens in the decision-making process, but it would also provide for stability and peace on the local, regional and therefore global levels. In particular, following September 11 2001, democratisation as a universal value and a means of achieving global peace has gained in importance, the governments in the West perceiving totalitarian regimes as a potential threat of future conflicts, and calling for substantial reforms in autocratic societies. At the same time, everybody agrees that democratisation is not something that is merely dependent on the will of people and can be achieved in the short-term; it requires a fundamental change of the political culture and political institutions in place. Differences in socio-political and economic development in various societies play a cardinal role in the way the democratisation process develops, clearly demonstrating that there is no single 'recipe' to follow, but rather an array of policies that lead to democracy. In this process, the political culture of a given country appears as a major element in democracy building, determining the pace of the democratisation process. Undoubtedly, countries with a long totalitarian tradition and a lack of any institutions that would allow for participation in the decision-making process are likely to face more difficulties than those countries where democratic tradition and institutions once existed.

The papers in this volume attempt to link the political developments in the South Caucasus, Central and West Asia to the political cultures of the regions, illustrating the importance of the socio-political models in place for political change. Examining the current political situations in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kyrgyzstan and Syria, the authors provide for a wide spectrum of opinions with regard to developments in these countries, and allow for comparisons and contrasts across the region.

These papers have been realised in the framework of the project 'Global and Regional Influences on the Democratisation Process in South Caucasus, Central and West Asia', launched by the Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research in 2002 as a part of a larger international endeavour. In 2001, the Toda Institute in collaboration with the Globalization Research Center (GRC) of the University of Hawaii initiated a new project entitled 'Globalisation, Regionalisation, and Democratisation (GRAD): A Multi-Civilisational and Dialogic Research Project'. This project is a continuation of the Toda Institute's pursuit of peace with peaceful means through participatory and collaborative research. In the current phase, the Institute and GRC will act as catalysts in launching a truly world-wide, multi-civilisational, and dialogic research programme on the most pressing problems facing humankind in the new millennium.

Consisting of research teams in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kyrgyzstan and Syria, this part of the project is aimed at identifying the mechanisms for the correlation of

Ella Akerman

the democracy-building process, regional co-operation and global development issues in these countries, as well as the role of outside forces in this process. Regional researchers using their knowledge of their respective countries not only share their experience, but also exchange ideas on how political participation and democratisation can be promoted, taking into account the political realities and institutions already in place. The experience gained from the comparison of political cultures, and the ways the governments in these countries deal with the challenges and opportunities of globalisation is valuable not only from the academic point of view, but also for a better understanding of the interconnection between local, regional and global politics. Finally, this project contributes to raising public awareness of the importance of political participation and democratisation for a more stable and safer world.

Disclaimer

**The views expressed are those of the
Author and not necessarily those of the
UK Ministry of Defence**