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**Book Review**

**Autonomy: Flexible Solution to Ethnic Conflicts by Ruth Lapidoth**

**Washington DC: US Institute of Peace, 1997. 298pp..**

**Unity and Autonomy**

**A Review Essay**

**Rene Wadlow**

As humanity moves from the end of the Piscean period to the Age of Aquarius, there is a short but violent rise in conflictual situations. These conflicts are due to karmic effects of past actions and to a loss among many individuals of the “we-they” identities developed during the Piscean period. The early years of the Age of Aquarius will be conditioned in the way the previous cycle is released, whether gently or violently, with compassion or animosity, with courage or fear.

Given that the ‘we-they’ mentality will not dissolve overnight, many of the conflicts will need to find their accommodation in forms of autonomy so that the sense of the “we” can continue while at the same time there is a healing of past animosities and a growth of wider loyalties and cooperation.

As Ambassador Max Kampelman, who had long experience in disarmament and security questions points out: “Across the globe- from Sri Lanka to northern Iraq, Chechnya to Bosnia – minority groups are asserting their distinctive ethnic, religious, or national identity and demanding greater control over the expression of that identity, not only in cultural and social matters but in political and economic areas as well... Heard less often are pleas for accommodation and self-restraint. Indeed, such pleas are more typically heard from those whose authority is being challenged – the governments of ethnically heterogeneous states but all too frequently such official declarations of restraint seem intended to support and embattled status quo or even at times to disguise government attempts to repress dissent.”

Yet flexibility, compromise and cooperation are the hallmarks of success when it comes to resolving ethnic differences peacefully, keeping both the unity of the existing state and allowing autonomy so that the local community may develop its potential for cultural, economic and political interests to the fullest.

Autonomy is not a panacea, but a tool that can provide a constitutional framework for cooperative action. As Professor Lapidoth emphasizes: “Autonomy cannot create the wish for compromise, but it can help shape its content. Like any tool, it must be used in accordance with the special circumstances of each case... One of the great advantages of autonomy is its flexibility. It includes a wide range of possibilities from a minimum of competence on the one hand to a great number of powers just short of full independence, on the other hand.”

While much of the current discussions of autonomy is highlighted by ethnic-national differences, of which the conflicts in Kosovo and East Timor are recent examples, the questions of autonomy can also be considered as part of good governance, even within a generally ethnically homogeneous state but with great economic diversity – such as the decentralization efforts within France. We can use the term autonomy for the broad concept of the diffusion of authority and responsibility. It can take many different constitutional forms: federalism, decentralization, self-government, self-administration, associate status. Today, most discussion of autonomy concern territorial autonomy and deal with the authority of the autonomous entity to legislation, adjudication and administration. What is sometimes called “administrative autonomy” is not really autonomy but decentralized decision-making on policies set at a higher level. For autonomy to be real, goals as well as means must be set at the autonomous entity level. As Lapidoth points out. “In order to avoid disputes and misunderstandings, it is important that the powers of a regime of autonomy be defined as clearly as possible when it is established. In fact, there are usually four different areas of powers to be considered: powers reserved for the central authorities, those fully transferred to the autonomous entity, parallel powers, and powers that can be exercised jointly ... In fact, there is usually a need for cooperation, coordination, and consultation between the central authorities and the autonomous entity. This is crucial because there is likely to be a close link between their respective powers. In addition, certain powers are likely to require joint action.”

Not all powers are divided between the center and the autonomous units. Undivided powers may either be shared or exercised in parallel. The acts of the autonomous authorities are not subject to full control, but the central government may have a veto power in severe cases such as abuse of power or the autonomous unit may have a veto power over decisions of the central government as John Calhoun had proposed for the United States.

Probably the most practical part of the book for those actively engaged in autonomy discussions is the final section “Establishing an Autonomous Regime: Issues to Consider”. This is a check-list of issues to consider: education, energy, agriculture, transportation, environment, financial matters, and taxes. Yet attitudes remain as important as structures. As Lapidoth writes: “The most important and indispensable condition for a successful autonomy is a prevailing atmosphere of conciliation and goodwill. This condition must be generated by an energetic and sustained effort to explain and to engage in patient dialogue... Autonomy should be established before the relations between the majority in the state and the majority in the region deteriorate considerably; if there is hatred and frustration, it is too late, and autonomy will not be able to soothe the strained atmosphere”.

[Rene Wadlow is Editor, Transnational Perspectives, Geneva]