



Majority Rule, Minority Rights

On the surface, the principles of majority rule and the protection of individual and minority rights would seem contradictory. In fact, however, these principles are twin pillars holding up the very foundation of what we mean by democratic government.

✦ Majority rule is a means for organizing government and deciding public issues; it is not another road to oppression. Just as no self-appointed group has the right to oppress others, so no majority, even in a democracy, should take away the basic rights and freedoms of a minority group or individual.

✦ Minorities—whether as a result of ethnic background, religious belief, geographic location, income level, or simply as the losers in elections or political debate—enjoy guaranteed basic human rights that no government, and no majority, elected or not, should remove.

✦ Minorities need to trust that the government will protect their rights and self-identity. Once this is accomplished, such groups can participate in, and contribute to their country's democratic institutions.

✦ Among the basic human rights that any democratic government must protect are freedom of speech and expression; freedom of religion and belief; due process and equal protection under the law; and freedom to organize, speak out, dissent, and participate fully in the public life of their society.

✦ Democracies understand that protecting the rights of minorities to uphold cultural identity, social practices, individual consciences, and religious activities is one of their primary tasks.

✦ Acceptance of ethnic and cultural groups that seem strange if not alien to the majority can represent one of the greatest challenges that any democratic government can face. But democracies recognize that diversity can be an enormous asset. They treat these differences in identity, culture, and values as a challenge that can strengthen and enrich them, not as a threat.

✦ There can be no single answer to how minority-group differences in views and values are resolved—only the sure knowledge that only through the democratic process of tolerance, debate, and willingness to compromise can free societies reach agreements that embrace the twin pillars of majority rule and minority rights.