

# THE STATE

Nearly all present-day political activity occurs within units (or polities) based on geographical territory known as states. Today's conception of the state emerged in the modern West; however, states are now widespread and accepted as the basic unit of international affairs.

## **Fundamental Tenets of States**

### **Territoriality**

States defend their territoriality and police their borders, effectively claiming exclusive ownership of the land against any contending parties.

### **Sovereignty**

Within the demarcated territory, the state has ultimate and sole authority, i.e. 'sovereignty'. Sovereignty further requires reciprocity, whereby states should not interfere in each other's domestic affairs.

### **A Monopoly on Legitimate Force**

States are centralised polities that exercise the right to organised, legitimate force in the pursuit of law and order within their territory.

### **Plurality**

The international political environment is a plural space of different states that are self-regulating and self-governing. In principle, states are each other's equals. Clearly, however, states also have interest in each other's affairs in practice. Therefore, relations can sometimes become complex and strained.

### **The State's Relationship to the Population**

Through the exercise of various legal means, by creating and deploying instruments such as constitutions, states exert binding power upon their people. This power forms a political community, entrenched in a common identity that is mobilised towards the achievement of common goals.

## **Citizenship and Nation**

At times, political groupings such as political parties do not find common ground and are organised around historical, social, ethnic, religious or class differences. In such scenarios, the threat to the unity of the state is addressed by using the strategies of citizenship. Through citizenship, states have endeavoured to lessen inequalities by endowing each member of the state with civil, political, and social rights. Under the principle that all citizens are equal before the law of the state, with each individual able to exercise their franchise, more citizens are able to participate in electoral politics and in the competition between different parties. With such competition creating some form of fallout for certain sections of the population, mechanisms such as the welfare state have come into operation to reduce socio-economic cleavages.

## **History of State Development**

In the historical trajectory of the modern state, there are three distinct phases. First came the consolidation of rule whereby a powerful centre emerged that asserted its dominance over competitors often by defeating them in war and by absorbing conquered land into a unified territory administered by the centre. The rationalisation of rule was the second phase in which the centre structured itself into a hierarchy of offices that would oversee control over the state. Finally, the expansion of the state was its assumption of numerous functions related to evolving social needs and the ever present need to manage various societal sectors. Different states have exhibited these three phases in different degrees.

## **Distinctions**

Despite the basic similarities, many states differ from one another in noticeable ways. Some are centralised entities, while others have a federal structure. Some states enact policy driven development, while others leave development to the dictates of an untethered market. These differences between states are the result of contestation between parties within a state regarding the management of citizens and the decentralisation of power, which give each state its national character.

Adapted from Gianfranco Poggi, 'The nation-state' in Daniele Caramani (ed), *Comparative Politics* (OUP 2020)

## Further Reading

Richard Lachmann, *States and Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2010)

Gianfranco Poggi, *The Development of the Modern State: A Sociological Introduction* (Stanford University Press 1978)

Max Weber, 'Politics as a Profession and Vocation' in Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs (eds), *Weber: Political Writings* (Cambridge University Press 1994 [1919])

Shelby E Ward, 'The Postcolonial State as Container: Lessons on Nation-Building and the Nation-State from Sri Lanka' (2020) 42 *New Political Science* 521

Lakshmanan Sabaratnam, 'The boundaries of the state and the state of ethnic boundaries: Sinhala-Tamil relations in Sri Lankan history' (1987) 10 *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 291