

Participation Now!
Citizenship Education and Democracy in Times of Change

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Report

Forum IV
Radicalism in politics and society:
Reasons and prevention strategies

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Inputs:

Erica Meijers, Bureau de Helling (the Netherlands)
Habiba Mohsen, Arab Forum for Alternatives (Egypt)

Moderation

Reem Abu-Zaid, The Danish Egyptian Dialogue Institute (Egypt)

Summary:

Although the sessions were interactive and the discussions diverse in nature, the topic was superficially tackled. Not all relevant points were discussed thoroughly and a lot more could have been investigated. Nonetheless very important questions were raised and relevant answers presented.

Both speakers presented two different aspects; the European and the Arab understanding of radicalism in both societies. Referring to the European definition, the main point was that populism is a resurrection of fascism – described as a political style that utilizes emotional simplistic and manipulative rhetoric where the concept of people plays the crucial role. On another note, the question of the opposition site of radicalism was clearly distinguished, as well as the introduction of the strategy how new right-wing populism is evolving in contrast to the old fashioned.

First Session:

The first speaker Erica Meijers from the Bureau de Helling (the Netherlands) presented the “neo-nazi” example in Greece, defining three main points of how populism grows or is being grown in the past ten years. First of all, the new right-wing populism is being democratic, second defying Modern Europe from populism and as the third point rejecting violence. With

these three pillars the use of media helps in framing the political debate in a strong fashion. The third main theme in the European context was the question of the existence of people. Erica Meijers put forward that people's severity defines democracy and that if no representation is achieved, an unjust society emerges.

Second session:

In the Arab definition, the second speaker presented two main concerns, which were the relation between radicalism and Islamism. Habiba Mohsen from the Arab Forum for Alternatives in Egypt put into consideration that radicalism is not just about Islamism, and what political radicalism is defined as. The example of Egypt was set forth in order to describe the change in social structures and the system of values with the writing of the new constitution. As Islamists frame their rhetoric in the name of God, while always defining the others as the bad elite, political discourse becomes a heritage of populist nature. Habiba Mohsen used three examples of extreme groups that form radicalism. On that note she mentioned Islamist Jihad as a third generation of newcomers information that rely on populist rhetoric, radical leftists or revolutionary movements who reject political policies, without putting forward an alternative, and the grouping of mainly young activists, who are largely unorganized and more secular without having any trust in power structures. According to Habiba Mohsen's argumentation the main problem is that there is no agreement on the role of the game, regarding the Egyptian Revolution, as well as weak and insufficient acting state institutions that constitute one of the major challenges in finding solutions to the problem of radicalism.

The ultimate and most debated question of the forum in both sessions was whether it is justifiable to allow radical groups to participate in any democratic process of elections in both the Arab and the European contexts. The debate went along and was swiftly polarized between the participants agreeing on the postulation to ban radical groups from any participation in the democratic process as they represent a threat to the peaceful motion of political struggle. On the other hand, other participants said that it is inevitable to deny radical groups from participation in the democratic process as long as they play with the rules of the democratic game. A very interesting argument was set in disagreement with the question of what democracy really is. It challenged the classical definition of democracy as being rather exclusive in nature than inclusive. Democracy would have showed to be fragile, besides politics having begun to be overruled by economics. This also led to the question about how to bring back the core of democracy in order to find ways for people to be subject again and prosper in political opportunity and its' structure dynamics.

Discussion

The two sessions were concluded by securing the findings through the method of constructive discussions. In this way the speakers invited the participants to set a guideline of how to limit the threat of radical groups from destroying democratic processes. On finding solutions on how to protect democracy, the organisers framed four main points that were setting the rules of the game of political struggle through constitutions and legal framework and seeking an alternative to hierarchal, rigid and non democratic political groups, preparing the third generation (young activists) in all of the political trends to work together and reforming state institutions.

Other strategies that may assist the same purpose as defined by the participants were the introduction of citizenship education in schools in order to teach and stabilize democratic values, as well as relying on awareness campaigns that advocate the respect of diversity and mutual understanding.

It is interesting to note that both societies clearly agree on the same notion of how to protect democratic political process - in this regard, participants agreed on the need of more dialogue for the finding of cooperation opportunities of how democratic western societies can help states in transition. This will contribute to the moderation of any kind of populist rhetoric manipulating people through religious or unorganised political groupings, and build the foundation of the socio-political questions to be solved through institutionalised processes and legal framework.