

Participation Now!
Citizenship Education and Democracy in Times of Change

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Report

Forum V
**Politics and religion: Re-defining the relationship in
diverse societies?**

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Inputs:

Sara Silvestri, City of London University (UK)

Boudris Belaid, Centre de la Formation des Inspecteurs de l'Education nationale (Morocco)

Moderation

Andreas Jacobs, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V. (Germany)

Summary:

The general atmosphere of the both forums was very vivid; participants had many interesting questions and comments concerning the speakers' inputs. At the beginning of the forum, the moderator Andreas Jacobs from the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V. (Germany) pointed out that the participants present many different points of view, many different backgrounds, so he asked participants to devote the first few minutes to a quick introduction round. Many of the participants came from the North African countries (Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco) and most of them worked for different types of non-governmental organizations (Morocco Organization for Human Rights, The Danish-Egyptian Dialogue Institute, Egyptians-German Young Leaders Forum, Tunisian Association Fronts, Arab League).

During both session speakers gave slightly different inputs. However, the general topic is the same.

First session:

The first speaker was Sara Silvestri from the City of London University in the UK. At the beginning of her input she pointed out that at University she mainly teaches philosophy and religion, and because her students come from many cultural and religious background (some of them she described as "hard to reach learners"), for her, difficult discussions about religion and its place in the society is an everyday practice. She asked participants what do politics,

religion or diverse society mean for them? It would be easy to see that in different countries it can mean something completely different, even if they participate in a common cultural sphere (like France and Germany for example). According to Sara Silvestri this diversification of approach to this difficult subjects is an outcome of different histories of each country or cultural zone. Another problem related to the previous one was that sometimes we could even miss some adequate vocabulary to talk about this subjects (or even more – the same words used in different places can mean something different – for example “religious tolerance” would be understood differently in Libya and in USA).

Also, Sara Silvestri pointed out that even if religion itself is about more transcendent dimension of a human life, it needs practice to form the ability to understand how all religions touch the political and social life and how all religions create statements that can be understood differently. The idea that democracy should always be accompanied by secularism is a (Western) European tradition that goes back to the Enlightenment period (according to the approach stating that religion should be an individual issue only, we don't want to see religious values when we make important decisions). On the other hand we should remember that it is also possible to have democracy without secularism, or secularism without democracy. The Western approach brings up a general assumption that Religion in Politics should be treated as a factor that can get the society of balance. However, according to Sara Silvestri, there are many examples that show us that this doesn't have to be true. Because of that, we shouldn't automatically see religious parties as a threat to democracy. Democracy should be always about clashes and conflicts of different understandings and perceptions of symbols. Islamic parties were normal actors of democracy (and Shariah wouldn't be a direct and necessary outcome of their presence in politics). However, individuals who claim that they have reached an objective and unique truth we should always regard as dangerous ones, because in their opinion, the fact of this unique truth bestows them the right neither to listen to the others or to consider any opposite voices, nor to participate in any democratic debates. Nevertheless, we should be aware that it is a very difficult and risky task to categorize religious groups, and we should get rid of this kind of thinking that makes us believe that every Muslim involved in politics is a radical Muslim. This would be a very exclusivist approach and we should try to fight against it, for the majority of Islamic parties do refer to democracy as a framework.

Second session:

The second speaker, Boudris Belaid from the Centre de la Formation des Inspecteurs de l'Education nationale in Morocco started with the statement that to talk about the interdependence between politics and religion (and above all about the role of Islam in the North Africa region) we should always remember that prophet Mohamed was at the same time a political leader *and* a spiritual leader. Thanks to that, on the one hand we should be able to see how strong the links between these two spheres used to be (personal beliefs can interfere with public affairs), but on the other hand how even Mohamed was able to separate these two parts of his human life. It was clear to his followers that he can speak about Allah, but that he can also have his own, human, and anti-climax opinion (and that is why they sometimes disagreed with him).

Boudris Belaid also described some works of two Islamic thinkers: Averroes (XII century – Córdoba) and Ali Abdel Raziq (XX century – Cairo). They both focused on the question of interdependence between Islam and politics. They supported a statement according to which Islam should be a pure religion with no connection to politics (what was indeed very controversial in their lifetimes). The religious truths and political truths differed a lot (after

Averroes) and many pseudo-religious phenomena, such as Jihad, should be seen as a fight for power and not for religion.

Boudris Belaid said that we should understand that the Arabic Spring doesn't have to be a "Democratic Spring". Where Islam and politics mix we could face many problems – the most important problem could be (so called by Mr. Belaid) a "hiding behind God". Some politicians could present their political ideas as religious ones – they only truth apparently showed to them by Allah, an incarnation of his will, and not as a merely human decision. In that case these politicians could try to reject to responsibility for their ideas (as well as a rejection of the necessity for the justification of their implementations). They say that they don't have to defend their ideas and actions from the society, because the only one who can judge them is Allah. For Boudris Belaid that should be seen as a major threat to the Arabic young democracies. On the other hand he also highlighted the fact, commenting the current situation in North Africa (for example in Egypt), we should remember that in this culture exists a different understanding of secularism than the one that we use to know from the Western world.

From my point of view it was noticeable that many participants from the North African countries found the second input too "philosophical" and sometimes even naive (for example Boudris Belaid said that they should persuade Islamist to "not to hide behind God", and to moderate themselves and equally respect all citizens – regardless from if they're Muslims, Christians or atheists).

Discussion:

After both inputs participants could ask their questions. Unfortunately some of the questions transformed into few-minutes statements, some other remained unanswered, and both speakers actually replied to only few of them. I don't see it as anything wrong - to me this only showed that people who joined this forum were very involved in this subject and the discussion was very vivid (not even once a moderator had to encourage participants to take part in the debate).

During the discussions participants didn't focus on the given questions - in both sessions we turned to this questions at the very end, when the moderator asked everyone to answer them on their papers (that were later collected). Moreover, in the second session the moderator decided to discuss only one of the given questions (That was: what are the consequences for citizenship and human rights education in the face of the recent changes?) – that the participants welcomed as very suitable.

Most of the participants who participated in the discussions were from the North African countries. That is why the discussions mainly focused on the question of the role of Islamist parties in the process of creating new democracies in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. The debate also concerned new constitutions for these countries besides the fact that everywhere Islamists gain majorities in the Constitutions Assemblies and they try to create constitutions that are not democratic.

Participants asked, for example, how to respect each other when there is so much emotion that are dividing people, and how to discuss when one side refers to the science and knowledge and the other to the Holy Source? If one speaks in the name of God and the other in the name of people – how can we find connection between them? Moreover, usually Islamists say that they possess the unique truth – and this approach can indeed divide the society. Also it doesn't connect with many issues that are extremely important in the democratic society – such as responsibility and duty (which was mentioned by Boudris Belaid in his input).

The other difference between democracy and religion is that where in politics everyone can participate (it's voluntary), in *religion* everyone *has* to participate (at least according to some radicals it's obligatory). Some participants from Egypt also said that Islamists wouldn't stop until they will win everything, because they don't accept compromises (even the slightest renouncement from their demands for them was a sin). They wouldn't accept any other rights (even human rights) to stand above the law of Shariah – that is their only point of reference. That is why citizens in North African countries should do everything to moderate Islamists' impact on new constitutions. As one participant from Tunisia said: "We lost a battle against religious fundamentalists, but we have to work more now, in order not to loose the whole war".

One reason of that defeat is that wide masses in North African countries are extremely poor – and thus very vulnerable to populist propaganda. Other reason is that in the last decades these societies lived under dictatorships – because of that people are used to listen and obey, but not to fight for their own rights. That facilitates manipulation. In these societies the issues of citizenship and human rights almost don't exist – that is why democratic activists had to start from the beginning – they had to start with teaching masses some of the very basic democratic values, they had to try to raise some awareness of the poor masses of their common rights. In many cases, Islamists succeeded because of people being ignorant.

That raises an additional question: will Islamists now, when they are in power, find it useful to support education, especially civic education? Few participants pointed out that one very important group of Islamists' supporters are teachers, who for the Arabic NGOs are a very hard-to-reach target. The other sign that shows the importance of education for Islamists is that when it turned out that they would form the government, the first ministry that they claimed was a Ministry of Education - they want to educate people, but educate them in their own manner – that is not to think, but to obey.

During the discussion another issue came up. For many participants it was clear that Islamists don't only hide behind Allah - they also hide behind democracy and human rights. They play a democratic game (they protest when someone censors them, or tries to derive them from their other rights) but on the same time they place themselves outside of democracy. The question is how to fight against them and meanwhile not to destroy democracy itself? For in that case, North African countries will go back to some kind of dictatorships.

Still, according to many participants we should try to fight hard – because the whole process of democratization may be at stake. There is the possibility that if once the whole power was in Islamists' hands, they might never let it go. As one participant from Morocco said, "When religion goes into politics the power becomes eternal – it stays forever. Winner will use a state itself to gain even more power that will let him rule with no end." The difference between Europe and Africa is that in Europe an elected politician serves the whole society (not only his voters), and sometimes they can loose their power (and they actually let it go). In Africa, when a politician won the elections he would try to stay in power even if it's against the law and democracy (that is how military used to govern, and how Islamists parties try to rule nowadays).

Some other participants said that we should be always aware that there are many faces of Islam, and that we should fight for a just opinion about this religion, because nowadays people tend to associate Islam with extremism (at least that is a most common picture in mass media). Instead of this, we should try to find some common points and focus on them (as the main purpose of democracy should be to make possible to live together for people with different believes). For the Islam is a very pluralistic religion (some examples we can see in European countries such as Germany).

On the other hand some other participants pointed out that this negative image of Islam is not totally abstract, and it has its reasons.

Of course there were many voices during the discussion that disagreed with the most common statement that we should separate state from religion. According to some participants the state should take responsibility for the religion to not to let it go into hands of radical Islamists (in the old Tunisia Constitution the first article said: “Tunisia is a free state and its religion is Islam” – that shows that religion should play an important role in the politics). Also we should be aware that in societies there are people who want their religion to be an important part in politics – in a democracy these people are able to vote and support their political leaders who support that idea. We should also remember that for many people the Islam is now a reaction and an escape after decades of tyranny and corruption.

Mr. Belaid said that on the other hand we should be aware that in the present situation in the North African countries where “politics hijacked religion” – some people who present themselves as clerics, but who in fact are pure politicians, use religion (and people that are devoted to religion) to obtain power. This point of view should allow us to see that Islamists are not outside of democracy as some people might think. We should treat them as every normal political party and count on their self-moderation when the development goes in the direction of an establishment of the Shariah law as the only base for a society. Many participants from Northern Africa found this opinion as totally naive and abstract. In fact I personally found some of his inputs very theoretical, with no connection with an everyday practice.

Conclusion:

Basically it is hard to conclude if this debate had any stable outcome. Participants agreed that radical Islamists can be a threat to the democracy, but there was no common view on how serious that threat is, or how to deal with it. Definitely we should remember that the process of the democratization of the North African countries is very fresh and vulnerable, so, on the one hand we shouldn't have too much expectations on what we have already established, and on the other hand we need to be aware that there is a lot of patience needed, because this process can turn out to be very long and unstable.