

The enemy of my enemy is not my friend

Fundamentalist Non State Actors, Democracy and Human Rights

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The world has changed since the first international human rights organizations developed as we know them today: most conflicts do not any more occur between two armies of two nation states, hence most armed conflicts involve one or more non state actors and many human rights violations are committed by non state actors.

Among these non state actors are political movements, ranging from very conservative to extreme right, aiming at political power but working under the cover of religion, that are known as 'fundamentalists'.

These movements exist on all continents and use all religions to disguise their political agenda, and they have been steadily growing since the end of World War II.

Just to give a few examples at random:

- the Christian Right in the US, which assassinated, for instance, the pro abortion doctors and assaulted the clinics are the same people that also back and inspire Bush's program against social welfare, reproductive rights, gays, etc... , and promote war, teaching of 'creationism' in schools, etc...
- The Hindu Right, which assassinated Ghandi in 1948, perpetrated mass massacres of Muslims (the latest in Gujrat in 2002), as well as assassinations of Christians and burning of churches and convents, also inspires and manages the RSS that serves the electoral ambitions of BJP.
- the Orthodox Church has led a successful offensive in Central Europe in the past few years, putting an end to secularism in Croatia three years ago and in Serbia this year, by gaining a specific political representation, while, for instance they forced the teaching of religion into schools in Russia, eliminated sex education from the curriculum in Lithuania and secured in Slovenia and in Poland, the right for medical professionals to refuse assistance for services deemed immoral.
- Buddhists groups, rarely talked about, who were behind the assassination of the Prime Minister by a monk in 1959 to oppose an agreement with the Tamul dissidents that was leading to more autonomy, managed to obtain recognition for Buddhism as the first religion of Sri Lanka in the 1972 constitution and now push for communal war in Sri Lanka.
- Better known are the Orthodox Jewish forces that support the aggressive military occupation policy of Israel in the Middle East

- and Muslim fundamentalists, - pointed at the world over in all international media for their bloody bombings in Europe and North America- who, in Muslim countries, not only decimated left opponents, intellectuals, artists and the Muslim masses that they call 'unbelievers' (kofr) when they do not abide by their political program, as they did in Afghanistan, Sudan, Iran, Algeria, etc..., but also put an end to democracy and imposed (or attempted to impose) theocracies.

It is important to note that, although i am deeply convinced that fundamentalism is now a shared disgrace all over the world which operates through various religions, most of the examples I use involve Muslim fundamentalists: the only reason for it is that, as an Algerian citizen now living in Europe, it is the one form of fundamentalism I know best, from many years of living experience as well as as a researcher and as an activist.

In all cases, what we see at work is by no means religious movements, but political extreme right forces that manipulate religions to further their political agenda and to gain political power. Ambiguities and cowardice in the Left, Far Left and progressive forces at large - whether in the West or in the Third World -, in condemning fundamentalist forces, stem from this confusion they entertain between religion and politics.

Human rights concepts and instruments designed for other times often prove inefficient when applied to present day rise of fundamentalism. If the responsibility of fundamentalists as perpetrators of human rights violations may be addressed, their identity as extreme right political forces is not unveiled, while the unholy alliances they knit across religions and across nations should be a first indicator of their political nature.

We saw these unholy alliances at work, for instance, during the UN World Conference on Population in Cairo (1993), when the Vatican and Al Azhar publicly allied against reproductive rights; and again during the UN World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1996.

But even more telling is the verbal support that Le Pen, leader of the extreme right national Front Party in France, and Haider, leader of the extreme right Freedom Party in Austria, lent to the fundamentalist FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) of Algeria in 1995, i.e. at the peak of the massacres they perpetrated against the civilian population during that decade. This reminds us of the inspiration and support given by the German Nazi Party to the emerging Hindu Right.

The failure to recognize the political nature of fundamentalisms, regardless of their political agenda, ultimately benefits fundamentalists: they often enjoy the protection of human rights organizations, in the name of religious rights, minority rights, cultural rights, etc...

It is even more so in situations where fundamentalists claim to represent an oppressed minority, when they face repression by their own governments, or when they are under threat of imperialist powers.

This is now in full bloom, due to the U.S. attacks on the Middle East and the war on terrorism: it has devastating consequences on democratic anti fundamentalist forces in Muslim countries and communities as well as on the citizens of migrant descent in Europe.

Let us look at some of these consequences on human rights and on democracy.

- The exclusive focus of human rights organizations on state responsibility and accountability, frees non state actors of any responsibility and accountability for the crimes and violations they commit. Fundamentalists end up being seen exclusively as victims - which they may be in some cases, while they are, also and primarily, violators. If and when they are persecuted by states, they definitely should enjoy protection of their basic human rights (such as: no arbitrary detention, protection

against torture, fair trial, etc...); but as perpetrators of many crimes and violations, they should not enjoy some of the provisions designed for victims only (such as asylum), and they should not be given a political platform from which to propagate their views. Their double identity, as victims and as perpetrators, is overlooked by most human rights organizations, who fail to face the consequences of such a situation.

- Moreover, seeing fundamentalists exclusively as victims induces a hierarchy among victims.

As an example, Algerian fundamentalists benefited from political asylum in many European countries, on the ground that they would be persecuted by the state in their own country; meanwhile, their victims were denied asylum and were slaughtered in Algeria by the Islamic Armed Groups (GIA), on the ground that they were not persecuted by states but by non state actors.

Moreover, as victims of state repression, fundamentalists were repeatedly invited by human rights organizations, and their views on violence in Algeria were the only ones represented at their gatherings.

- The plight of democratic forces struggling for survival under both undemocratic states and neo fascist fundamentalist forces is ignored by the very progressive forces that should be their allies, and their struggles and resistance are made totally invisible. As if some victims (for instance, of imperialism) were more legitimate victims than others (for instance, of extreme right fundamentalist forces).

- Fundamentalists launch an attack on democracy, in the literal sense of the word: they want to impose on all citizens what they claim is The Law of God (as interpreted by them), by definition a-historical and unchangeable, i.e. a theocracy; and to eradicate the laws of the people, by definition changeable according to the will and vote of the people, i.e. the essence of democracy.

- Further, they want to impose a religious identity on all citizens, by virtue of their birth place rather than by choice, thus denying freedom of thought, freedom of religion, freedom of consciousness. This is an insult to both believers, whose personal faith is reduced to fate, and to unbelievers whose rights as free thinkers is totally denied. As an example, Muslim fundamentalists have successfully induced Europe to label "Muslims" all immigrants and even the second and third generations of migrant descent from Muslim countries, regardless of their individual religious beliefs. A faith is slowly being turned into a "race" - the only historical precedent being the Jews during World War II.

- In Europe as well as in our countries of origin, we witness the erosion of secular space, under the huge pressure of fundamentalists to introduce religious laws for minorities.

Muslim fundamentalists make similar demands in different countries in Europe: all of them revolve around gender apartheid (separate schools with different curriculum for boys and girls, in particular no teaching of biology, art, music, sports, and teaching of creationism; separate wards and women-only personnel in public hospitals for men and women (a real joke in France for instance, where public hospitals cannot afford enough medical personnel, let alone female ones); separate swimming pools for men and women; the introduction of Muslim Personal Law (or Family Code) for presumed "Muslims", i.e. laws that affect primarily women insofar as they regulate marriage, divorce, polygamy, repudiation, custody of children, inheritance, etc...to the benefit of men.

After the hierarchy of victims, we are now confronted with a hierarchy of rights in which women's rights come last, after minority rights, after religious rights.

- Governments are generally prepared to trade women's rights for social rest, - this is no surprise; but human rights organizations and the Left at large also trade

with fundamentalists, in the name of tolerance and cultural relativism. They do so despite the outcry by migrant women, many of whom have fled from such an oppressive situation in their own countries, or women of migrant descent who are accustomed to more freedom and equality.

They do so despite the outcry of all secularists from migrant descent, believers and unbelievers alike. They do so for fear of being accused of 'Islamophobia', a concept coined by fundamentalists in order to silence dissent. As if fundamentalist neo fascists were the only legitimate true representatives of 'Islam', and of all citizens whose parents once migrated from Muslim countries.

- This situation leads to the erosion of citizenship to the benefit of 'communities'. It raises a number of questions: who speaks for the so-called community? who speaks in the name of religion? who speaks in the name of culture? Generally it is male conservative religious self appointed 'leaders'. This is a highly undemocratic process of representation.

Why should religion represent a whole population? I can see no other example in the present European context, where religious men are called to solve social problems, except when 'Muslims' are concerned. Do governments call on the Vatican when there is a minors' strike? or do they negotiate with unions? !

- With the erosion of the notion of citizenship comes a growing fragmentation of the people into smaller and smaller entities. While a few decades ago, migrants in Europe united and organized for their rights with vigor and success, it is now "Muslims", "Sikhs", "Hindus", etc... who seek separate rights, status and representation and make varied demands. How to ignore the fact that this fragmentation of the people weakens struggles and ultimately serves capital?...

That could well explain the tolerance that fundamentalists in Europe enjoy from governments. But what of the Left with its short sighted defence of fundamentalists?

These are frightening consequences of the lack of political analysis regarding fundamentalism.

When the Left supports fundamentalist movements and parties on the ground that they are popular forces oppressed by undemocratic states or by imperialism, they are blind to their political program and to their societal project.

Popular they are. And populist too. So were fascists, and Hitler indeed was elected by the people.

To a situation of oppression, exclusion, marginalization, racism, etc... there are responses from the Left at large, from progressive or revolutionary forces; and there are responses from the Right, there are fascist responses. Fundamentalism is a response from the Extreme Right, it is not a legitimate answer that can or should be supported.

Progressive secular oppositions to undemocratic states, imperialism and capitalism exist in all Muslim countries and they exist among migrants and citizens of migrant descent in Europe as well. They exist despite fierce repression by states, despite physical elimination by fundamentalist non state actors and despite abandonment by those who should be their natural allies: democrats, progressive, secular, human rights people in Europe.

Progressive forces in Muslim countries warned the world for the past few decades already, regarding the fascist nature of fundamentalism. Largely in vain, it seems.

We feel as lonely as must have felt the anti nazi Germans in the early thirties, when those who should have listened to their warning were busy compromising in Munich, supposedly for keeping peace in the world, with a Frankenstein monster that was soon to impose its rule over many peoples

and nations.

Give us visibility. Give us a voice. We are the alternative.

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P.S.

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