

Confronting Multiple Injustices - “Progressives will need to engage in a multi-directional attack against all forms of injustice”

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We live in a period where one-size-fits all explanations for the injustices and challenges facing the world often do more to obscure than enlighten. This poses a challenge to progressives, human rights and pro-democracy activists because there is always the temptation to lean heavily on black and white narratives where the heroes and villains are easy to identify, and the tactics and policies needed to bring about the desired social or political changes are relatively easy to understand. Unfortunately, this sort of narrative is woefully ill-equipped to explain the myriad of threats facing the world today.

Dispensing with this type of mindset is of paramount importance because the world faces a multiplicity of injustices – climate change and environmental threats, gender inequality, religious fundamentalism, autocracy, patriarchy, economic inequality, etc. — that require nuanced and complex thinking and creative solutions. One area where this type of approach is sorely needed is when the concept of democracy is discussed. There is a great need to distinguish between bare-bones democracy that solely consists of casting a ballot for one’s preferred candidate every four years and more inclusive types of democracy that include equality under the law for all citizens, guaranteed economic rights such as the right to health care and education, and government-supported labor rights such as the right to form a union and the right to organize against exploitive working conditions.

While democracy is often an effective tool to wield against oppression, this is not always the case. For example, the ascension to political power and influence of religious political groups such as the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria in the 1990s, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Ennahda in Tunisia caused legitimate fear and concern among grassroots women’s rights groups, citizens supportive of the separation between church and state, and religious and sexual minorities.

In an interview with the Marginalia Review, Karima Bennouna asks some tough questions about the concept of democracy:

"The biggest question for the region now is, in my view, what is democracy? Is democracy only about elections or also about values like equality? Can you have genuine democracy when vast swathes of the population are impoverished due to failed neo-liberal economic policies? Can you have meaningful democracy when ruling parties do not believe in the equality of men and women, or between Muslim and non-Muslim citizens. I think the answer is no. Otherwise, we are left with the narrowest possible democracy. [1]"

Bennouna is the author of the book, *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here*, where she interviewed 300

people from almost 30 Muslim-majority countries who were on the front lines of the fight against Islamic extremism. She makes a strong case that progressives must engage in a multi-directional battle against both autocracy and religious fundamentalism while supporting equality in all its forms. Bennoune is one of many women's rights activists from the Middle East and North Africa who have seen first-hand the savagery and brutality unleashed when religious fundamentalism turns violent.

Unfortunately, violent strains of religious extremism are not confined to Muslim-majority countries in North Africa and the Middle East. Far Right Buddhists and Buddhist nationalists in Myanmar [2] and Sri Lanka, Hindu nationalists and extremists in India [3], Vladimir Putin's alliance with the Russian Orthodox Church [4], Jewish extremism in Israel [5] and Christian nationalism in the United States [6] are all examples of how religion can be manipulated and exercised in a violent and repressive manner. This brings up some uncomfortable questions for progressives living in countries where religious fundamentalist groups have a reasonable chance to prevail in democratic elections. If a religious fundamentalist group prevails in an election that is regarded as free and fair, should those elections be respected by religious and sexual minorities, women and citizens who believe in the separation between church and state even if respecting these elections means they will risk being subordinated to the level of second-class citizens in their own countries?

This is a tricky question because the real or perceived threat of religious fundamentalism has been instrumentalized and weaponized by mass murdering dictators such as Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad and Egypt's dictatorial President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi [7]. They have used the real or perceived threat of Islamic extremism to bomb, murder, imprison and torture [8] any person or group they consider a threat to their totalitarian rule. In addition, the United States has formed alliances and security agreements with reactionary governments such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE and Israel in the Middle East in the name of stability and containing Islamic fundamentalism. These governments often amplify, distort and manipulate U.S. fears of the "Islamic menace" to justify fierce repression of all domestic dissent while also attempting to further their hegemonic aspirations in the region. This leaves progressives with a complicated situation that requires careful thought and examination. While the election of a religious fundamentalist group in any country poses a risk to human rights and equality under the law for all citizens, there is also the danger of this fear being used by reactionary political elites to justify their continued rule and delay any moves towards democratic governance.

There is a strong case for taking a multi-faceted approach to the often interlinked and interconnected problems posed by religious fundamentalism, autocracy, imperialism and economic inequality. It is imperative for progressives to not focus so much attention on one of these problems that they ignore the others. For instance, Algeria's dark decade in the 1990s where Islamist jihadi forces killed 200,000 people [9] is not the same as the situation in Syria despite the fact that both countries citizens have been the victims of both state-backed persecution and violent religious extremism. However, in Algeria's case, the jihadists were responsible for the majority of the atrocities - although the government also committed serious human rights abuses - while in Syria the Assad government has killed vastly more people [10] than those killed by the Islamic State and other local religious extremist groups.

Progressives will need to engage in a multi-directional attack against all forms of injustice combined with unflinching support for social, political and economic equality for all to create a roadmap where a more just and inclusive world is possible.

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Footnotes

- [1] <https://themarginaliareview.com/karima-bennoune-on-human-rights-religion-and-democracy-in-the-arab-spring/>
Available on ESSF (article 29257), [On Human Rights, Religion, and Democracy in the Arab Spring](#).
- [2] <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/may/08/buddhist-extremists-anti-muslim-mandalay-ma-ba-tha>
- [3] <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/14/asia/india-hindu-extremist-groups-intl-hnk-dst/index.html>
- [4] <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/26/ukraine-war-russian-orthodox-church-support-patriarch-kirill-homophobia/>
- [5] <https://choice.npr.org/index.html?origin=https://www.npr.org/2022/06/02/1102728946/a-look-at-jewish-extremism-in-israel>
- [6] <https://choice.npr.org/index.html?origin=https://www.npr.org/2022/01/14/1073215412/christian-nationalism-donald-trump>
- [7] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/14/al-sisis-western-benefactors-are-betraying-egypts-democratic-struggle>
- [8] <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2016/08/syria-torture-prisons/>
- [9] <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/algeria-twenty-years-on-words-do-not-die/>
- [10] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35806229>