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RESISTANCE

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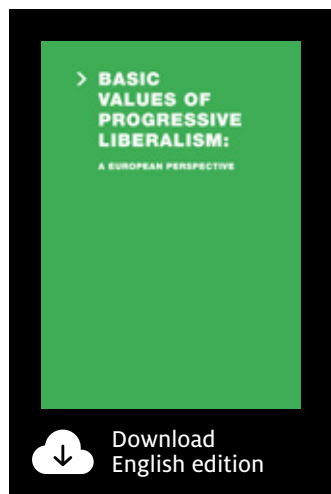
International Edition
December 2021

Back on the streets
in Iraq, Lebanon
and Tunisia

Meghna
Guhathakurta
'It's important
to believe
in your own
cultural legacy'

Diana
Moukalled
on independent
journalism
in the Middle East

Basic values of progressive liberalism in English and Arabic translations



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English edition



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If the history of Europe teaches us anything, it is that political ideas do not develop in a vacuum. They are shaped by debate. By silent and not-so-silent revolutions. And by exchange between countries and cultures.

This is certainly true of progressive liberalism; a political philosophy characterised by its international orientation, both now and in the past. In the Netherlands this political philosophy mainly took shape in the political party D66 (Democrats 66). In 2006, the party chose to add a number of 'Basic Values' to its manifesto for the national parliamentary elections.

In the ensuing years these basic values have been further developed into the essays featured in this publication. Together, these essays form the basis of the political choices of the Dutch progressive liberals. But – beware! – these are points of departure, not policy positions. They are starting point for the debate, not its final destination.

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Preface

RESISTANCE

Across the world, people are rising up to fight for a more just and democratic existence. In Iraq, the youth joining the *Tishreen* ('October') movement risk their lives demanding major economic, social and political reforms from a corrupt political elite. In Hungary, the opposition parties from the political left to the political right organized primaries together to present just one joint candidate against Viktor Orbán's Fidesz in next year's elections. In Bangladesh, where the authoritarian regime continues to close the avenues for resistance, people still speak out while carefully navigating the shrinking civic space.

In this edition of *Idee*, we highlight a few places where resistance movements and existing power structures clash. *Idee* is the magazine of the Mr. Hans van Mierlo Foundation; the political foundation of the Dutch social-liberal party D66 (Democrats 66). As is tradition, the last *Idee* of the year is an international edition, with a geographical focus on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). This special, digital edition includes all English-language contributions to the original publication. These contributions are written by both thinkers and doers, by activists and academics. The authors reflect on strategies of resistance, including civic education, the use of social media, and protests on the streets.

What makes resistance both legitimate and urgent? Diana Moukalled – leading journalist from Lebanon and co-founder of the independent media platform *Daraj* – gives a twofold answer to that question in her interview with *Idee*. On the one hand,

her resistance revolves around social justice. 'I am one of those Lebanese who has lost their savings when the bank system collapsed in 2019. I am one of those who was affected by the Beirut explosion. The one way in which I can respond to these injustices is to continue to do my job.' On the other hand, her resistance revolves around striving for a society in which different social and cultural are acknowledged. 'Between the two extremes [that the mainstream media represents], there are so many other voices and stories that are not being heard.'

This offers inspiration for (social-)liberals worldwide. In the Netherlands, the roots of the social-liberal party D66 were established in an 'Appeal' that was a call for debate and disagreement at a time when the rules of the game had made political parties uniform and politics predictable. But 55 years later, D66 is undeniably a part of the political establishment as a governing party. Indeed, across Europe, liberal parties have entered government office. How do you continue to resist social injustice within the existing power structures from that position?

And how do you continue to strive towards a space for diversity and difference, also – and in particular – when there is fundamental disagreement in society? The COVID-19 pandemic may very well be a litmus test for liberals in this respect. How do you provide space for clashing perspectives and conflict without excluding people? And how do you resist technocratic and populist ways of thinking, both of which suggest there is only one correct or desirable solution to societal problems?

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interview
**Meghna
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Meghna Guhathakurta is Executive Director of Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB), a non-governmental research-support organisation based in Dhaka, which specializes in action research with marginalized communities.

‘It is important to believe in your own cultural legacy’

The People’s Republic of Bangladesh was born in 1971, out of the resistance of the people of Bengal against the domination of West Pakistan. Meghna Guhathakurta, director of Research Initiatives Bangladesh, shares her memories of those turbulent times with *Idee* and reflects on the way in which her country is finding its place in an increasingly interconnected and competitive world.

Interview by Cécile Insinger

The People’s Republic of Bangladesh emerged from the Bengali people’s resistance against the Pakistani Government in 1971. You were a teenager at the time, witnessing the turbulence in your country. Can you tell us about the independence movement? ‘There was a growing demand for autonomy that gradually evolved into the demand for independence. The movement was based on the national outrage about the long-standing neglect by the central government in Islamabad in West Pakistan towards the people of East Pakistan, irrespective of the fact that we represented the largest community in the country.¹ In November of 1970, a great cyclone had raged over East Pakistan in which many people lost their lives or had become homeless. The government in Islamabad failed to respond adequately to this crisis and this underlined how irrelevant the lives of the Bengal Pakistanis seemed to the ruling elite on the other side of the country. A month after the cyclone disaster, national parliamentary elections were held which had been postponed earlier. The Awami League, the political party led by Sheikh Mujib Rahman who advocated for Bengal autonomy, won the election with a landslide. Mujib was expected to become the next Prime Minister of Pakistan much to the chagrin of both the political and military existing rulers. To prevent Mujib’s imminent premiership, General Yahya Khan, Pakistan’s military leader, declared the National Assembly sessions to be indefinitely postponed on 3 March 1971.’

And this declaration sparked the Bengali people to... ‘... to take to the streets, yes. Students, teachers, lawyers, doctors, professionals, even government officials in the end. It was the largest civil disobedience movement since Gandhi. Apart from the national news, the radio stations stopped broadcasting programmes from West Pakistan. They broadcasted their own programmes which revolved around the demand for autonomy and independence. Expectations rose for a free democratic country where marginalized groups would get equal opportunity

¹ | The Dominion of Pakistan (1947) consisted of two separate provinces, West Pakistan (since 1971: Pakistan) and East Pakistan (since 1971: Bangladesh). The national government was seated in Islamabad, West Pakistan, while the majority of the people lived in East Pakistan. In 1948 the government proclaimed Urdu to be the official state language. This was met with outrage in Bangla speaking East Pakistan, furthering Bengal identity.

for jobs and education. We saw a democratic society emerge, we had never seen until that time or even today. I was quite aware of what was happening, reading *Time* and *Newsweek* and I remember conducting animated discussions with my father, Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta. In a desperate effort to curb the Bengali nationalist sentiment, the West Pakistani army in Islamabad embarked on its *Operation Searchlight*, on 25th of March 1971. This operation consisted of massacres, rapes and other atrocities on Eastern Bengal territory. Intellectuals and universities were targeted first. Hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives, my father being one of them. He was assassinated by Pakistani troops during a raid on Dhaka University on the first night of the attack. This War of Independence, as it later became known, ended on the 16th of December 1971 when the Pakistani generals surrendered to Indian troops who had stepped in to help stop the violence. The People's Republic of Bangladesh was born. Ironically, before the 25th of March 1971 we would have settled for autonomy.'

Has the People's Republic of Bangladesh of today turned out to be the country Sheikh Mujib and the Bengali people hoped it would become in 1971? 'The dream and expectation for the new country was that the people would have the power. That had been Sheikh Mujib's, perhaps idealistic, dream. A socialist and secular state. However, since 1971, the world has changed, and Bangladesh has been affected by that globalization from the 1980s onwards. Before the 1980s, the country was primarily focused on its national political and economic issues. The assassination of Sheikh Mujib and his family by disgruntled army officers in 1975 led to the undoing of many of our ideals. That became reflected in new laws, even our Constitution which had been drafted in 1972 was amended. After the military coup of 1975 we saw the country go back on its foundational pillars.'

And after the 1980s? 'The world around us changed and we had to change with it. The Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini had had a huge effect on Bangladesh. An Islamic government taking over state power deeply affected us, a country in which 90 percent of the population was Muslim. Until then, our national identity had been based on being Bengali. After the Iranian Revolution, being Islamic was added to that identity. The language factor gradually changed into the factor of religion. Islam became a global phenomenon, and it still is. Domestic political issues were determined by religious developments outside the country. Bangladesh labourers went to work in the Gulf countries and in Malaysia. Their remittances became the most important source of our national income. People found common ground with other Islamic countries. Being Muslim became their social capital. Bangladesh is now known as a moderate Islamic country, moderate but Islamic nonetheless.'

'Our national identity had been based on being Bengali. After the Iranian Revolution, being Islamic was added to that identity'

How did this affect the international relations for Bangladesh? 'During the War of Independence, the Soviet Union and India were our allies. The United States, led by President Nixon at the time, did not support East Pakistan but backed the regime in Islamabad. After the Soviet Union crumbled in the 1990s and the United States was the only large political power left in the world, we started rebuilding our relationships with Europe and the United States. In the years that followed we managed to attract investors for our garment factories and subsequently our economic power started to grow. Our garment industry eventually became the country's second largest source of income. Today, we maintain a balance between our relationship with the West and our relationship with the Muslim countries. Obviously, China has recently become a very large economic partner for us as well.'

What is today's position of the Awami League, the party that had led Bangladesh towards independence? 'Today, the Awami League is the only ruling party in Bangladesh and it has been since 2009. The party has cleverly adapted itself to the global capitalist trend. From a party with socialist, egalitarian ideals it evolved into a neoliberalist party ready to accommodate private investors in the country. Its rhetoric may still contain words of social democracy but in its actions it has become a purely neoliberalist party. If we had had strong opposition parties, with an equal capacity to adapt and reinvent themselves, we would not have had this problem of having a one-party regime. Nowadays, the government of Bangladesh works with private investors on an unprecedented scale.'

'Today, we maintain a balance between our relationship with the West and our relationship with the Muslim countries'



2 | A cantonment refers to a permanent military station in South Asia.

3 | Durga Puja is an annual Hindu festival.

‘The avenues of dissent in Bangladesh have seriously decreased in the past years. Nowadays one must be fearful of the consequences of what one says’



The only other large party Bangladesh has ever known, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), was a conglomerate of movements which was formed in the cantonment 2 by the military. The power of the military had its basis on the far left of the political spectrum as well as on the far right. That is not a very viable basis for a political party. The BNP is no longer a factor of political influence in Bangladesh. The Awami League, the only ruling party now, has the power of giving any other party which tries to establish itself on the political scene a very hard time.’

Is there a freedom of the press in Bangladesh? ‘Free speech in Bangladesh is under attack these days. The freedom of the press is under serious pressure. Cartoonists and journalists are curtailed by the government. The newspapers have become large corporations which are suppressing the traditional social-democratic voices. It has become difficult for journalists to carry out their jobs properly and independently. If an article or a column is regarded as being too critical, advertisers will threaten to withhold their advertisements. Critical press is being silenced for political as well as for economic reasons.’

Is there no voice of dissent at all? ‘The avenues of dissent in Bangladesh have seriously decreased in the past years. Nowadays one must be fearful of the consequences of what one says. The ruling party, for instance, has a student branch at the universities through which they try and control any dissenting opinions which might emerge on the campuses. That used to be very different. Any form of criticism today is seriously discouraged. A lot depends on who speaks out. One can still voice criticism but when doing so one has to choose one’s words very carefully.’

Do you yourself feel free to speak out and act freely? ‘I have done it, but I will usually take precautions to protect myself. There is a law that says that you may not say anything against the Prime Minister as an individual or her family. You could, however, address a certain issue. It is a power game. There are many ways in which the state may put pressure on you so that you censor yourself. Bangladesh is not a dictatorial country, but it is an authoritarian one. There are cases where people who have spoken out against the government have ended up in court or even in prison. Or, if there has been a catastrophe, such as the attack on Hindu temples during Durga Puja 3 last October, the government will simply slow down the internet to 2G, so that people cannot communicate about it. They will not close the internet down altogether but just slow it down.’

Do women in Bangladesh constitute a force of their own? ‘In number, women are equal to men and therefore they constitute a potential force. However, Bangladesh, and many other Asian countries, are patriarchal societies and therefore the women in these societies are marginalized. Patriarchy underlies all systems of governance. Although the new liberal economies allow both women and men to go to the market, patriarchy will not allow that. Religious tradition, whether it be Muslim or Hindu forbids a woman to be seen or heard in public. Men use religion as a tool to uphold the patriarchal system. Still, Bangladesh has a large long-standing women’s movement. It is based on secular values and it is vibrant. It is not against religion at all, but its focus lies primarily on citizenship. The first feminist movement among Muslim women in Bengal was started by Begum Rokeya, an educationalist, in Calcutta in 1916. She was and remains an icon. She was the first woman to state that Muslim women should not let their religion dominate their identity.’

Long before the existence of Bangladesh, or even Pakistan. ‘Yes, the region that today comprises India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, was first ruled by the Moghuls and later by the British. Independence came in 1947 when the region was divided into India and Pakistan. The women in that region, both rural and urban, both uneducated and educated, share the same history and they have always participated in mass demonstrations and actions of political protest against their foreign rulers. Women have the tradition of being the proud guardians of their national and cultural identity by continuing to wear their saris and their bindi 4 on their forehead, whereas the men rather easily switched to wearing western shirts and trousers, for instance. Soft power can be dominated, but it also has the strength of transforming into strong power. In that respect I would say that women are a force to be reckoned with in Bangladesh and elsewhere.’

We see a number of countries around the world, countries in the Middle East and Central Asia for instance, where the people are actively pushing for democratic reform. Would you have any advice for these people how best to go about it? ‘It is important to believe in your own cultural legacy. Rally together, find internal but also external support. Engage with effective mobilization techniques, empower each other by using your shared history, shared national memories. Every country has its own history which is shared by all its citizens. Find yours.’ ●

‘Every country has its own history which is shared by all its citizens. Find yours’

4 | A bindi is a coloured dot worn on the centre of the forehead by Hindu, Buddhists and Jains on the Indian Subcontinent and Southeast Asia.



Cécile Insinger is a freelance editor and translator. She is a member of the editorial board of *Idee*.

A new generation of Polish protest

The Polish educational system is saturated with stories of constant struggle against an enemy trying to destroy the Polish state, culture, and spirit. Yet we failed to notice the threat that was growing before our very eyes, when PiS won the elections in 2015. Anger and helplessness reactivated the Polish freedom gene in a new generation.

By Miłosz Hodun

The Polish freedom gene

**At last they saw the number of them,
they felt their strength, their time,
And singing that the dawn is near,
they walked down the streets of towns¹**

¹ | Fragment of the song *Mury* ('Walls') by Jacek Kaczmarski, the unofficial anthem of Solidarity in the 1980s.

We Poles have a freedom gene. At least, that is what we like to think. The Polish educational system is saturated with stories of constant struggle against an enemy trying to destroy the Polish state, culture, and spirit. 'It wasn't easy to survive between two aggressive empires', is how Poles would briefly sum up their history. Most Poles will in one breath mention the communist oppression under the boot of Moscow, the Second World War, the Second Republic of Poland and the danger coming from the East, as well as the 123 years when Poland was not even on the map.

The victory of Solidarity

But the freedom gene always made Poles fight. Modern Polish identity was built on this fight. Generation after generation organised uprisings against foreign rulers, and the First World War brought a reward: the independence of a country reborn. When the Soviet revolution wanted to spill over to the West, the Poles in the Battle of Warsaw stopped the communists and saved Europe. World War II is a history of heroism, brave soldiers and scouts taking part in the fighting. It is, after all, the myth of the Warsaw Uprising, in which 200,000 gave their lives for the dream of freedom.



In this narrative, *Solidarność*, the Solidarity movement, has a very special place. Poles are proud that the fall of communism began in Poland, where the first partially free elections were held as early as 4 June 1989. Solidarity – a freedom movement unique on this side of the Iron Curtain – became the foundation of a democratic society. At its peak, it had ten million members opposing the totalitarian ideology and authoritarian state of generals and secretaries. And they won.

The victory of Solidarity – the Round Table agreements, the first, partly free and then completely free Sejm elections, Tadeusz Morawiecki's democratic government and choosing the legendary Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa for president – was a carnival of freedom. The communist party fell, and Poland began its journey towards democracy, development, and prosperity. Thanks to the consensus of almost all political forces, two great aims were achieved: membership of NATO and the European Union. We became a part of the West and made the European dream of the previous generations come true. The end of history.

The freedom gene reactivated

Yet we failed to notice the threat that was growing before our very eyes. In 2015, hiding behind the mask of a moderate right-wing ideology, Law and Order (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) won the presidential and parliamentary elections. For the first time after 1989, a single party had the majority in both chambers of parliament and did not need to create a coalition. For the first time, one party colonised all state institutions.

Exhibition in the European Solidarity Centre. The memorial museum was opened in 2014 in the Gdańsk docyard where *Solidarność* was founded.

Solidarity – a freedom movement unique on this side of the Iron Curtain – became the foundation of a democratic society

For the first time, the Constitution and human rights were insolently and deliberately trampled upon.

The actions of PiS have slowly woken the Poles. First, the right-wing populists destroyed the independent judiciary. They made the Constitutional Tribunal into a completely subjugated machine for passing judgement by introducing so-called 'duplicate judges' to the Tribunal and nominating judges subject to the party's will. Then, they politicised the National Council of the Judiciary, which is responsible for nominating judges. And finally, they moved to take over the Supreme Court. It came as a shock to millions of Poles. The rule of law became fiction, and the Constitution was no longer the most important source of law, replaced by verbal orders coming from the PiS headquarters. In short, the strategy of a government that does not have the supermajority to change the Constitution has been to change the Constitution through the arbitrary decisions of the government leader.

Anger and helplessness reactivated the freedom gene. We understood that the enemy threatening the greatest Polish achievements of the last thirty years was now coming from within. For the first time since Solidarity, Poles went out on the streets *en masse*. Every weekend, in Warsaw and other Polish cities, people marched. The largest protest gathered 200,000 people.

New, interparty social organisations appeared and directed the opposition against the authoritarian regime in the making. Interestingly, they were led by fifty- and sixty-year-olds who remembered the fight against the communist regime. Without hesitation, they pointed out similarities between the Polish United Worker's Party (*Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*) and PiS rule. Symbols from years past returned, including the logo of Solidarity, resistors as lapel pins as a symbol of perseverance, and going on a walk at 7.30 in the morning to avoid listening to the brazen propaganda of the main news programme on national television.

A new generation of protest

Young people, who were born in a free Poland and do not remember the times before the accession to the European Union, had not joined anti-government protests often. But in the fight for the Supreme Court's independence, their activity increased sharply. They showed discontent when the government began to limit freedom and human rights, especially of women and LGBT+ people. PiS politicians, urged on by the hierarchs of the Catholic Church, practically introduced a ban on abortion in Poland.² This cruel limitation of women's rights became a symbol of the despotic rule and the final reason to refuse to obey the anti-democratic party. The scale of the protests against the changing of the anti-abortion law was astonishing.³

Equally surprising was the engagement of adolescents in the protests. They introduced new methods of resistance, including a new language. *Jebać PiS* ('Fuck PiS') has become an official slogan of the new wave of

For the first time since Solidarity, Poles went out on the streets *en masse*. The largest protest gathered 200,000 people

2 | The politicised Constitutional Tribunal ruled on 22 October 2020 that a provision allowing abortion in the case of a high probability of severe and irreversible fetal impairment was unconstitutional.

3 | <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/theyre-uncompromising-how-the-young-transformed-polands-abortion-protests/>

protests as well as an authentic expression of society's rage. Adolescents started to spontaneously block the streets of Warsaw and vandalise religious and Church statues with paint. Panicked, the authorities reacted brutally with arrests, beatings and court cases.

The systemic hate campaign against LGBT+ people,⁴ inspired and funded by the government, gave rise to an anticipatory and positively natured self-defence of the LGBT+ community. Multiple new organisations and informal groups supporting minorities were established. Most importantly, they were often local, and established in towns, far away from large cities. The rebellion against authority drew on the experience of Western countries, in which the dispute over key LGBT+ rights is long past. Pride parades, called 'equality marches' (*marsze równości*) were organised throughout Poland. In 2015, there were only seven prides. In 2019, before the pandemic, there were almost thirty of them – including in middle-sized towns such as Gniezno and Koszalin.

From protest to civil disobedience

The resistance that we have seen since 2015 goes far beyond a typical political dispute. It has the character of civil disobedience. Is such fierce resistance justified? Does it not exceed the boundaries of a permanent electoral campaign, which is acceptable in a democratic state under the rule of law? I have no doubt that civil disobedience is justified by the actions of the ruling party. I also have no doubt that this is widespread social resistance: Poles are speaking out against the government because it threatens the future of the country, divides society, involves systemic hatred, harasses

4 | Read more, e.g. <https://oko.press/pis-homophobia-how-the-president-chairman-ministers-and-deputies-aroused-hatred-of-lgbt-in-poland/>

The resistance that we have seen since 2015 goes far beyond a typical political dispute. It has the character of civil disobedience

Protest against abortion restriction in Kraków, October 2020.



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community members, uses vulgar propaganda, and destroys freedom of speech. By nature, this resistance is peaceful. Poles do not use violence in the streets. They do not attack the police or destroy property. The images of protests in cities in France or Spain are foreign to Poland. Instead of sheer physical force, there is perseverance and ingenuity.

The Poles know that this is their fight. The European Union should do nothing more than uphold its laws and the freedoms of all Europeans. But at present, it is doing a poor job by being too soft on the PiS. The EU must firmly stick to its values and show that they will always prevail against simple economic calculations by speaking the only language that populists understand: 'no values, no money'.

Change will come only when the democratic opposition wins the elections. For this to happen, it needs not only a majority of the votes, but also a majority in parliament in an electoral system that works to the advantage of large parties.⁵ The former will not be very difficult to achieve, since PiS has never even reached fifty percent support. The latter will largely depend on the wisdom of opposition leaders, their foresight, respect for political partners and ability to build strategic coalitions.

Unfortunately, the system created by PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński will resist giving up power by all means. We have already seen an example of this before the 2020 presidential election, when the entire state apparatus, including state television, worked to benefit the PiS candidate. Those elections may have been democratic, but they were certainly not equal. If the next election is not democratic either, one should expect that the forms of resistance will change dramatically, and that Polish society will split in two. Irreversibly. ●



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Change will come only when the democratic opposition wins the elections

⁵ | In 2015, for example, PiS won only 37,6 percent of the vote, but this translated into more than 51 percent of seats in the Sejm.

After years of competing with each other as much as against the ruling Fidesz party, the Hungarian opposition parties decided to join forces to compete with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in the running up to the 2022 parliamentary elections. But now the true challenge comes, and the stakes are very high.

By Rudolf Berkes

The story of a forced marriage

The Hungarian opposition attempting to take down Viktor Orbán



United opposition in Hungary

The ruling Fidesz party will face close national electoral competition for the first time since 2006

In September and October 2021, for the first time in history, the six major Hungarian opposition parties held primaries in all electoral districts. In so doing, they selected a joint candidate for prime minister to run against Viktor Orbán in the national parliamentary elections, as well as joint candidates in all 106 single-member constituencies. This provides the opposition with the rare opportunity to become political agenda-setters and, as a result, the ruling Fidesz party will face close national electoral competition for the first time since 2006. The path to the elections in 2022 will, however, be filled with substantial obstacles for the opposition.

The breakthrough of 2019

The municipal elections of 2019 marked the first time that the opposition fielded joint candidates. It denied Fidesz some key victories, primarily in larger settlements, such as most Budapest districts, Pécs and Szombathely. Not only was this a considerable breakthrough, but compared to the previous municipal elections in 2014 opposition parties also mobilised more new voters than Fidesz. Although it had been crystal clear since 2011 – when the current electoral laws were introduced and, for instance, the second round of voting was annulled – that there is no real alternative to cooperation between opposition parties, the 2019 municipal elections showed that the strategy can work in practice too.

After this breakthrough, the parties started negotiations on a joint run for the 2022 general election. The six major opposition parties – Democratic Coalition (social-liberal), MSZP (center-left), Párbeszéd (left-green), Momentum (centrist-liberal), Jobbik (center-right), and LMP (green) – came to an agreement on several important details in the second half of 2020. This included the agreement to field joint candidates in all the 106 single-member constituencies, as well as a joint candidate for prime minister, who would be elected via primaries. Voters could pick these single-member candidates in a single election round, while candidates for prime minister had to compete in two rounds. The election took place both offline and online. The parties also agreed on a single national party list, the composition of which will be a compromise.

The negotiation and electoral processes can be considered successful so far, although many decisions made by the opposition forces were not truly voluntary, but rather constituted a long-needed adaptation to the circumstances created by the ruling Fidesz party. While there could have

been a debate between the opposition parties about how many national party lists they would field in the 2022 general election, Fidesz solved the problem for them: it approved an amendment so that parties now have to have candidates in at least 71 – instead of 27 – constituencies across the country to field a national list. Since there are only 106 constituencies and the opposition does not want to compete with each other in any of them, the amendment ensured that they field a single national party list. The deals of the opposition thus merely reflect the required minimum to compete in a constantly changing political arena that favours the ruling party.

Organising the primaries

The first round of primaries took place in September 2021. Of the 106 constituencies, the Democratic Coalition won 32, Jobbik 29, MSZP 18, Momentum 15, Párbeszéd 6 and LMP 4.¹

By involving the electorate in picking candidates, the parties significantly reduced the time and resources needed to sort out the selection process. The primaries provided a ‘round of election’ in which voters could cast a ballot for their favourite party or candidate knowing that they would stand a real chance against Fidesz in 2022. Although independent parties struck several deals to support each other’s nominees before the primaries, there was meaningful competition in the vast majority of the 106 constituencies. Plus, candidates elected through the primaries have democratic legitimacy, so they are less likely to face criticism from the electorate or calls for a more competent local candidate.

The candidate for prime minister of the Democratic Coalition, MEP Klára Dobrev, also won the first round of primaries, receiving 34.8 percent of the vote. Gergely Karácsony, the mayor of Budapest, joint candidate of MSZP-Párbeszéd and LMP came second. Surprisingly, Hódmezővásárhely Mayor Péter Márki-Zay, the head of Everybody’s Hungary Movement (MMM), came third – instead of Jobbik’s Péter Jakab, who was widely expected to advance to the second round. The third place of Márki-Zay signaled a considerable discontent with the traditional opposition parties.

After the first round, fierce and exhausting negotiations started between Karácsony and Márki-Zay, which ended with Karácsony withdrawing in favor of Márki-Zay. This controversial and surprising move created a one-on-one scenario between Dobrev and Márki-Zay, reflecting a political cleavage between the ‘old versus new guard’ – a conflict that has generated tension within the opposition for years. Some even considered the primaries as a ‘referendum on the opposition’, providing an opportunity for opposition voters to force unpopular or corrupt actors out of the alliance. The electorate had the direct power to hold the parties or specific candidates accountable for their mistakes and reward them if they acted according to their needs. After a tense debate between the last two candidates and a week of spiralling tensions between them, Márki-Zay won by a landslide, claiming 56.7 percent of the votes during the second round in October 2021.

¹ | <https://infogram.com/primaries2021-first-round-results-single-member-constituencies-1hxr4zxg010n06y>

Although independent parties struck several deals to support each other’s nominees before the primaries, there was meaningful competition



Caricature of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán riding a rainbow pony at the ARC Exhibition, a politically critical outdoor exhibition in Budapest.

Meanwhile, Fidesz has once again become the agenda-setter via its constant stream of measures to raise the public mood, such as a thirteenth month of pension

Now the true challenge comes

Organising a political event and mobilizing almost 850,000 people before the election, or roughly 11 percent of the electorate, is a huge achievement, particularly for an opposition with scarce resources to reach voters via traditional means. The primaries forced the opposition parties to ‘burst the Budapest bubble’ and campaign in the entire country. The parties forced themselves into a limited competition, providing alternatives to each other and the regime. As such, the opposition was able to set the Hungarian political agenda, and Fidesz could only react. For the first time in years, the opposition presented substantive political debates and, for the first time since 2006, meaningful live discussions on national television about their political programmes.

It is, however, still up for debate how joint opposition candidate Márki-Zay will truly dominate and lead the alliance. While he currently has the largest direct mandate, he has no party structure behind him. Instead, the clear winner of the first round, the Democratic Coalition, will possibly attain the largest caucus in the alliance. This foreshadows a potential fight for dominance between Márki-Zay and the Democratic Coalition.

Also, the opposition has been relatively quiet in the past month after the end of the primaries, as they have formed their joint campaign staff only recently and are bogged down in negotiations concerning the joint list.

The following months will be spent on creating the joint list, but this will be done behind closed doors. There are several important issues that the parties need to solve, including the question of how to calculate the distribution of places on the list between themselves, and particularly the first forty to fifty names that have a realistic chance of making it into the National Assembly.

Meanwhile, Fidesz has once again become the agenda-setter via its constant stream of measures to raise the public mood, such as income tax exemption for people under 25 and a thirteenth month of pension. The opposition has not presented any answers to this. Fidesz will also have the constitutional majority to formulate the electoral rules as well as the wider playing field until the very last minute.

Presenting a unified message

The opposition campaign has lost its momentum. The parties will now have to focus their efforts on remedying this and presenting a unified message on the future of the country. Even if they can overcome these issues and win – and that is a big if – the system will surely be rigged against them. They must prepare for the possibility of leading the country in a hostile political, institutional, and economic environment. The six- or seven-party coalition government would have to face 2.5 million disappointed Fidesz voters, a united opposition, unmovable Fidesz party officials in every major institution – including the Prosecutor’s Office, the Constitutional Court, the State Audit Office, and others – and a highly indebted state. If they win unprepared, they risk falling apart within months, guaranteeing another eight to twelve years of illiberalism in Hungary.

The European Union faces a dilemma too. If member states and European politicians stand by their values and criticise Fidesz, they fall right into Orbán’s trap and reinforce the anti-West and anti-EU propaganda. Financial pressure will not work in the short term either. The government will just finance projects with debt acquired from the market, thereby further increasing the future economic pressure on the next government, whoever it will be composed of. ●

The European Union faces a dilemma too. If member states and European politicians stand by their values and criticise Fidesz, they fall right into Orbán’s trap



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‘We are trying to revolt against the model of the mainstream media in the Arab world’



How does one create space for independent media in a region in which the civic space is shrinking? Who better to ask this question than Diana Moukalled, who has been working as a journalist in the Middle East for almost thirty years. In 2017, Moukalled was one of the founders of *Daraj*: an independent digital media platform based in Beirut, Lebanon. It addresses the issues which remain underreported in the mainstream Arab media.

Interview by Afke Groen & Petra Stienen

In 2017, you launched the independent media platform *Daraj* together with two colleagues. What made you decide to launch this platform at that point in time? ‘I started working as a television reporter and as a journalist in 1991, the year in which the civil war in Lebanon ended. At that time, the Lebanese media were censored and contained by Syrian presence, Iranian influence, and the oligarchy that started to emerge in the country. It is true that Lebanon was freer than other countries in the Arab region, but we still had our own red lines. I was only able to practice my profession as a journalist under many restrictions and taught myself to work on those issues that were not being censored: social issues, international stories. It was a sort of compromise: yes, there was censorship, but in the end, we wanted to carry out our jobs.’

‘Then 2011 came, the year of the Arab spring. After the harsh and brutal counter-revolution, the compromise of the 90s and 00s had become unacceptable to us. There have been wars, crises, imprisonments, assassinations, and activists have been shot and killed in the streets. Meanwhile, the Lebanese media were heavily influenced by the regional powers, and the mainstream media have been receiving political funding. Fortunately, thanks to the technological revolution, it became possible to give voice to your own ideas with a minimal budget. That was a major shift. We then developed the concept of setting up an independent media platform which is honest and responsive to people’s needs, and in which we do not shun away from the topics that are taboo. So, we decided to create *Daraj* at a moment that was a very difficult one for the region. We felt as if we had fallen into a hole. The choice was between trying to move up or falling back into the hole. We decided to take up the challenge and to climb up the stairs. That is where the name of the platform, *Daraj*, comes from. It means ‘steps’ in Arabic.’

interview Diana Moukalled

Diana Moukalled is a journalist, correspondent and documentary producer in the Middle East. She is co-founder and Managing Editor of *Daraj*, an independent media platform based in Beirut, Lebanon.



‘You will always have two extreme viewpoints of two major mainstream media outlets. That is why we want to tell the third story: the independent, journalistic story’



The tagline of *Daraj* is ‘the third story’. What is ‘the third story’? ‘Due to the polarized nature of politics and international relations in the region, you will always find two extreme points of view in the media scene – especially after 2011. Take the Gulf crisis, for instance, you either got the point of view of *Al-Jazeera*, funded by Qatar, or the point of view of *Al-Arabia*, funded by Saudi Arabia. This is the same for any major story; the people will only hear the two extreme viewpoints of the two mainstream media outlets. That is why we want to tell the third story: the independent, journalistic story.’

In Europe, many people would indeed see the Middle East and North Africa as being polarized along the extremes of the tyrant versus the terrorist. Are you trying to show that there is a mosaic of other voices? ‘Yes, exactly! Between these two extremes, there are so many other voices and stories that are not being heard. We are proud to be able to offer a space for these people to tell their stories, whether they be refugees, women, or artists. For example, after the explosion of the Beirut port in 2020, the mainstream media completely failed to pay attention to the family members of the victims. These are the stories of people who are being let down by the policymakers as well as the mainstream media.’

How would you further describe the failure of the mainstream media in the Arab world? ‘The year 2011 was a turning point, not only for our political future, but also for the media landscape. Whenever there is a crisis, politically funded media either flourish or shut down when their funding dries up. We have seen this happen in many countries in our region, including in Lebanon and Egypt. We have also witnessed flourishing media projects funded by regimes. Qatar funds websites and television channels based in Turkey, London, as well as in the country itself on a huge scale. The same applies to Saudi Arabia. Millions and millions are being spent and will be spent over the next years on media projects that disseminate the point of view of the regimes and those who are in power. We are trying to revolt against this model of the mainstream media in the Arab world. We believe that to be editorially independent, you must be financially independent.’

When you were a speaker at the Day of the Middle East of D66 in 2018, we discussed the models of subscription that some media platforms use in the Netherlands. What do you do to gain financial independence? ‘For the first few years, to be able to launch *Daraj*, we opted for funding by institutions and entities which are politically neutral. It is a major principle of our platform that we are entirely transparent about this funding to our audience. We are now considering ways in which *Daraj* can remain sustainable and, in a way, also profitable. To generate some income for *Daraj*, we make media productions in collaboration with, for instance, think tanks. We manage to ensure that 20 to 25 percent of our yearly budget comes from these productions, while the remaining 75 to 80 percent comes from funding. It is our plan to turn this the other way around in the coming five years. The question about having subscribers is an important one. We live in a region where one crisis follows the



Beeld: Daraj.com

next. In Lebanon, poverty has dramatically increased. Across the region, there are millions of refugees, millions of people who have lost their homes, millions of people facing economic shortages. We want our content to be accessible to all. So, when we think of a subscription, we think of it as an open model to which you can subscribe while maintaining the freedom to look at the content without paying. Lately, we have been thinking about a subscription model for the Arab diaspora in Latin America, North America, or Europe, while keeping open access for the region.’

We can imagine that people who want to attack *Daraj*, will say that it is Europeanised or elitist. What is the profile of the people who turn to your media platform? ‘We have different backgrounds on our team, from moderates to progressives, from a woman with a hijab to a queer. This diversity is also reflected in our content and our audience is also very diverse. It is true that it has been used against us, that we would be elitist, agents of the West, modernised, and not representing Arab values. But frankly, this is to distort what we do. We represent the people who want to be heard. There are so many examples of injustice in our country and in the region – from women who are not granted the right to divorce, who are being forced to marry, or are subject to violence; to people who just want to have a drink or an open relationship but who are not allowed to do so. People just want to live their lives. They want to be granted their individuality. We offer a decent and progressive approach that represents these people, and we do not mistreat or misquote them.’

‘We want our content to be accessible to all’





‘The one way in which I can respond to these injustices is to continue to do my job, and to expose corrupt people, criminals, those who have led us down the hole that we are in today’

Would you say that making such injustices visible is an act of resistance against the regimes, against those in power? ‘Absolutely, this is the way to respond. I am one of those Lebanese who has lost their savings when the bank system collapsed in 2019. I am one of those who was affected by the Beirut explosion – mildly, luckily, as many people have lost so much more, even their lives. But I am also a survivor. The one way in which I can respond to these injustices is to continue to do my job, and to expose corrupt people, criminals, those who have led us down the hole that we are in today. Not only in Lebanon, but also in the region. I could have decided to leave the country or pretend that it is none of my business. But although I know that it is a long way to go, inaction is not an option. It is about doing the right thing for the future of the country, for the people who cannot claim their rights.’

How do you respond to people who suggest that the countries in the Middle East and North Africa are not ready for democracy? ‘We hear that statement around here as well. ‘Assad is a dictator, but what is the alternative, ISIS?’ No. When we say no to a dictator, we say no to radicals. We have upcoming elections in Lebanon and some people say that we have no other option than to work with the existing parties. No. At this moment, we are at rock bottom. Either we start building the foundations now, or we will repeat the same mistakes. In reality, there are many people here who think like me. However, we have not joined together in our protests, because the parties and those controlling the country – not only in Lebanon but in the entire region – have a strong influence

and have established deep roots here, fifty, sixty years ago. Still, the new, progressive people are finding their way and will not be silenced. Sometimes they take to the streets, sometimes they can be seen on the media, sometimes they are visible in the arts, and sometimes they just gather to have a drink and discuss. We will be defeated in certain battles, but it is very important to have an accumulation of thinking, of working, of building this country – as it has not been built on the right foundations. Of course, we will always be opposed by those who say that we are dreaming, that the superpowers are against us. But we are focused and we will not stop.’

The work of journalists comes with backlashes and security threats, both in the MENA-region and elsewhere in the world. How does that affect you? ‘I cannot compare Lebanon to Syria, Egypt or the Gulf, but we have seen an increasing number of intimidations and persecutions against people who express their views in the media. There are two court cases against me for something that we published in *Daraj*. Our editor-in-chief was arrested for a couple of hours, as a form of intimidation. We face non-stop backlashes and attacks on social media. Less than a year ago, one of the most important thinkers in Lebanon, Lokman Slim, was assassinated. This was very alarming. Yet no serious investigation was conducted.’

What is your perspective on the international support for the rights of journalists in the region? ‘The general mood is that nobody really cares about us. I do not want to put all international institutions in one basket, but the lesson we learned from the experience over the past ten years is that we must do this by ourselves. Not only in Lebanon, but also in many other countries this is the case. In Syria, there is a normalization going on vis-à-vis Assad even after all the brutalities he committed. In Lebanon, Macron asked the same political elite which was responsible for the Beirut explosion to form a new government – the so-called ‘French understanding’. In all honesty, we need support from people who think like us and who do not fail to recognize the tyrants and dictators. We do not want the corrupt political elite of Lebanon, of the region, to feel welcome outside of the region. They should be isolated, not accepted. I am not saying that there should be financial support, but I am saying: do not normalize those who have led us to this point.’ ●

‘In all honesty, we need support from people who think like us and who do not fail to recognize the tyrants and dictators’



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The use of social media by protestors during the Arab Spring was a breakthrough. Cyber-optimists predicted that the internet in general, and social media in particular, would allow the people living under authoritarian regimes to organize themselves to overthrow dictators. However, a decade later, there has not been a wave of democratization.

By Babak RezaeeDaryakenari

The internet in authoritarian regimes

A technology of liberation or repression?

In 2020, the American NGO Freedom House reported the fourteenth consecutive year of global decline in democracy and pluralism. This is concerning. Social science research finds that democracy, besides its normative values, is associated with positive political and economic outcomes, such as peace and economic growth. While there is an ongoing debate on the causality of these associations, there is a universal desire for democracy. This desire is even more vital in authoritarian states, where discontented citizens perceive that democracy is part of the solution to their problems. However, whenever these grieved citizens protest against authoritarian regimes, the regimes violently repress them.

The use of social media by protestors during the 2009 Iranian election protests and the 2011 Arab Spring was a breakthrough. Some pundits and scholars even called social media a 'liberation technology'. Cyber-optimists argued that the freedom and capacity of the internet to spread news across

Cyber-empowered protest and repression



the world within seconds could empower opposition movements in authoritarian states. Therefore, we should expect a new wave of democratization. However, after about a decade since protestors first used the internet, there has not been a wave of democratization. Instead, some scholars and practitioners have raised concerns that authoritarian regimes use the internet to repress the opposition and secure their own survival.

A cyber-empowered wave of democratization?

Within the scholarship on democratization, there is a rich discussion on the causes of authoritarian persistence. While some may cite cultural explanations, others will cite a lack of agency as the root cause of democratization failure. Although such factors may be crucial, we should not downplay the role of efficient repression in the survival of authoritarian regimes. Authoritarian regimes rely on their competent security forces to prevent any plans for organizing protests. And if dissatisfied citizens overcome these barriers and take to the streets, they are often suppressed violently.

Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter changed the battleground in the first decade of the 21st century. While authoritarian regimes were confident that the combination of media censorship and the fear of severe repression would discourage any collective movement, the millennials in some of these countries used social media platforms to raise awareness about the corruption, inequality, and kakistocracy¹ in their countries by discussing these issues in weblogs and online forums. Then, when the opportunities arose, they used the social media

Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter changed the battleground in the first decade of the 21st century

¹ | A kakistocracy is a government run by the worst, least qualified, or most unscrupulous citizens.

platforms to organize anti-government protests. They also used the internet to spread the photos and videos of state violence recorded on their mobile cell phones.

The widespread circulation of the undeniable evidence of state repression recorded and posted by the masses adversely challenged the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes in the eyes of bystanders. It also attracted the attention of democratic countries to these violations of human rights. These cyber-empowered revolutions led to the overthrow of several dictators, including Mubarak and Ben Ali, in the Middle East.

As a result of these new developments, cyber-optimists predicted that the internet in general, and social media in particular, would allow the people living under authoritarian regimes to pass the censorship walls so as to organize themselves to overthrow the dictators. They also predicted that citizen-journalists would use their cell phone cameras to record all the blatant violence committed by security forces. Therefore, it was expected that authoritarian regimes would become more conscious of using violence against the opposition. Consequently, as a result of the internet revolution, there was high hope for a new wave of democratization in the second decade of 21st century.

Upgraded authoritarianism?

When dissidents used the Internet against authoritarian regimes, censorship was the first reaction of the regimes to survive the threats that this new technology posed to them. However, the development of virtual private networks (VPNs) and other bypass proxy technologies showed that censorship could only slow down the exchange of information on the internet in the short term. Censorship is hence ineffective in giving state authorities complete control of the online space in the long term. Moreover, the economic benefits of the internet have made shut-downs and censorship a costly decision for authoritarians.

Instead, authoritarian states have upgraded their tools and have formed cyber forces to exploit the freedom of social media platforms to surveil their citizens, spread disinformation, and manipulate the flow of information on online platforms – both within and beyond their borders. Indeed, reports of the Information Operation of Twitter show that a group of mostly non-democratic countries has used Twitter to manipulate the discourse on the online platform.

Some authoritarian states have already developed their cyber forces to actively monitor and manipulate the online platforms commonly used by citizens.² The active presence of these government-backed online users has allowed the regimes to collect information on potential dissidents and protests; distract online users from conversations leading to a collective movement against the state; and disseminate disinformation on online platforms during political conflicts, in particular by spreading doubts about distributed evidence on corruption and human rights violations in these regimes.

As a result of the internet revolution, there was high hope for a new wave of democratization in the second decade of 21st century

² | For instance, 50 Cents Army in China, Cyber Army in Iran, and Web Brigades in Russia.

After about ten years since the Arab Spring, we have not seen any considerable wave of democratization in the world. Instead, the evidence and reports indicate that authoritarian regimes have used the internet to contain democratic movements within their borders and to attack democracies beyond their borders.³

Ready for the challenges of digital authoritarianism?

Both dissidents and state authorities use the internet, and research on how the internet explicitly influences the dynamics and outcomes of their interactions is ongoing. Yet the initial evaluation is that the internet is neither inherently democratic nor non-democratic. The internet, and in particular the online social media platforms, are new tools in the hands of different political actors. On the one hand, online platforms decentralized entertainment and news broadcasting, and offer marginalised citizens a low-cost and low-controlled space to challenge the status quo. On the other hand, the very freedom and anonymity of the platforms have also made them into an attractive tool in the hands of authoritarian states to monitor, control, manipulate, and repress citizens more effectively than before.

As the influence of the internet on protest-repression dynamics unfolds, democrats should ask themselves several important questions. What are the legal implications of the increasing use of the internet by authoritarian regimes? Does monitoring online spaces to repress dissidents violate the rights of these dissidents? And if so, under which domestic and international laws? What about using social media platforms to manipulate the behaviour and decisions of citizens? If the use of the internet by authoritarian regimes to repress citizens violates any laws, what is the way to launch legal procedures? How feasible is the legal attribution process? Are international institutions prepared to adapt to these new developments? Can authoritarians be held accountable for cyber-repression and cyber-enabled repression? And what about think tanks supporting democratic movements? Are they ready to assist the democratic movements worldwide against the cyber tactics that authoritarian regimes use to suppress them?

There is evidence showing that authoritarian regimes use their cyber technology and armies not just against their domestic oppositions, but also against their foreign rivals, in particular to target the democratic institutions in democracies. How well-prepared are democratic countries for the cyber-attacks and online campaigns launched against them by authoritarian regimes? And last but not least, are the educational and research centers training a new generation of students to be ready and capable to face the challenges and threats that digital authoritarianism poses? ●

³ | <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/rise-digital-authoritarianism>

The internet, and in particular the online social media platforms, are new tools in the hands of different political actors



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In October 2019, Lebanon witnessed a huge popular uprising. The demands for a better quality of life and access to basic needs were ignored by the political class and the situation continues to deteriorate. Today, resistance in Lebanon is a long-term game that should start with dialogue, civic education, and citizen engagement.

By Tracy Nehme

Resistance
as a long-term
project

On resistance in Lebanon

A landmark in Beirut, Lebanon, the monument in Martyrs Square still bears the scars of Lebanon's Civil War (1975-90). The monument honors people executed here in 1916 at the orders of the Ottoman military ruler Jamal Pasha.



In October 2019, Lebanon witnessed an unprecedented popular uprising. People took to the streets to denounce a corrupt political class that no longer represents them. Some say that October 2019 was the true end of the Lebanese civil war that began in 1975. It was, indeed, the first time after the civil war that a huge number of people from all religions, classes, and political backgrounds got together and fought for a common goal. The political and economic system reached a deadlock, and it was clear that the political class did not have the people's interest in mind. Citizens were united in misery. Ever since that moment, people have been eager to learn more about politics and the youth has been looking for new ways to engage in the public sphere. Some are joining alternative political parties, some are working with NGOs, while others are developing social media independent news platforms and podcasts.

The demands of the revolution were completely ignored by the political class, and the situation in Lebanon has been deteriorating beyond imagination since October 2019. Over the span of two years, Lebanon went through one of the three most severe economic and financial crises the world has seen since the mid-19th century.¹ People's money and savings are now stuck in banks, basic medicine is often unavailable, fuel and other daily commodities' prices have become exorbitant, and most homes do not have constant access to electricity.

A year after the beginning of the economic and political meltdown, 2,750 tons of improperly stored ammonium nitrate exploded in the port of Beirut, leaving 215 dead, wounding 2,750 others, and displacing 300,000.² The Beirut port explosion in August 2020 was one of the biggest non-nuclear blasts on record.³ It revealed what could happen to a country run by an extremely incompetent and corrupt government that has never been held accountable for its actions. Over a year later, the political class is still in power with little-to-no hope of a radical political change. No one was held accountable, and justice is yet to be served. For the few who have not lost hope, resistance is the only option.

Resistance as a long-term and uncertain project

When we think of acts of resistance, we tend to think of strong, specific actions that are being talked about decades after the fact. We think of wars won, or at least of fierce battles with a clear winner and a clear loser. But most of the time, resistance is a long and difficult process, an act of courage that needs to be cultivated daily. Under the collaborationist Vichy régime of World War II, resistance was definitely not a given for everyone: ninety percent of France's population either supported the

Some say that October 2019 was the true end of the Lebanese civil war that began in 1975

1 | Lebanon Economic Monitor (Spring 2021). *Lebanon Sinking (To the Top 3)*. The World Bank in the Middle East and North Africa.

2 | <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-53668493>

3 | <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/beirut-blast-judge-issues-arrest-warrant-ex-finance-minister-khalil-2021-10-12/>

4 | Wilkinson, S. (2011), via: <https://www.historynet.com/french-resistance-resistant.htm>

When we think of acts of resistance, we tend to think of strong, specific actions. But most of the time, resistance is a long and difficult process, an act of courage that needs to be cultivated daily



Vichy regime or was not willing to be involved in any risky endeavors.⁴ Most people just wanted the war to end and did not want to fight anymore. Those who resisted decided to take risks that could get them arrested, tortured, or killed. Whoever resisted did so in any way they could: some by writing clandestine newspapers, others by helping Jews escape across borders with fake passports, and some by organizing guerrilla warfare activities. When we look back at the French resistance, it seems so simple now that we know who won, but it is important to remember that the resistance was fought with no prior knowledge of its potential success in liberating the country.

That said, now is a pivotal time in Lebanon's history. In the post-war era of the last thirty years, the ruling elite was able to provide the illusion that 'all was well', and most people took advantage of a system they knew was not sustainable. After the civil war, people were tired and did not want to fight anymore. They endured one crisis after another and refused to fight back, or to become involved politically. Now, the Lebanese people need to stop being resilient and start resisting. In this context, there is nothing more comfortable than radical ideas, especially in times of crisis. Economic crisis coupled with political instability leaves people feeling disillusioned and looking for immediate change, making extremist propaganda attractive to a larger part of the population.

The parliamentary elections due in March 2022 will be an important political battleground in this respect. To this day, elections remain the most democratic way for change to happen incrementally over the long-term and for parliament to be gradually renewed. Elections also encourage political parties to work harder both internally, by organizing, educating and developing, and externally, by building coalitions and recruiting new members. Indeed, doing politics means compromising and building alliances. It will be impossible for the opposition to win unless the opposition parties form a large alliance for the 2022 parliamentary elections. This will require putting some ideals to the side. Through forming a united opposition front, the Lebanese opposition can aspire to get a few more seats in parliament.

Resistance is not a settling of accounts, but it is a project: an endless and uncertain battle for justice and freedom. It is firstly personal, then societal, and, finally, political.

Breaking the barrier of fear through civic education

Another way of resisting is by breaking the barrier of fear. The political regime has understood that fear can be used as a tool. The Christians are told that there is an international conspiracy to erase them from the Middle East, the Sunni are told that the Shia are taking over – instilling fear that the country will be completely isolated from the Arab world – while the Shia are told that the state is not capable of protecting them from external threats. This will not only keep the various Lebanese communities fearful of each other but will also have them fear for the survival of their own culture and religion.

While fear separates us, resistance brings us together. Breaking barriers happens by re-appropriating our historical narrative. We have been raised with an unclear history and false narratives about the civil war, our Arabic roots, our religion and our national identity. That is why supporting education and pushing for new ways of learning should be at the center of our resistance. Education can happen through art, books, history classes, complementary school programs, discussions, talks and debates. Over the last two years, the multiple crises leading to an increase in poverty rates – with 74 percent of the population living below the poverty line⁵ – have greatly impacted demand for education and student retention. Since the beginning of the uprisings in October 2019, many schools have been forced to close their doors for long periods of time, affecting over 1.3 million children and keeping over 700,000 children out of school.⁶ Investing in children's education will not only transform their future but will also be a vital step in ensuring the country's recovery, both economically and socially. It is time to reclaim Lebanon's history and culture so that the nation is built on more solid grounds.

Lastly, resistance requires courage. It is by being courageous and taking a leap of faith that one can fight for freedom and sovereignty. Without courage, the people remain without a country. To despair is to abandon. No matter the difficulty of the present moment, and regardless of the lethargy currently felt by the Lebanese, one should not deny the importance of the times we are living. Only people can save other people. This is the splendor and misery of politics. ●

We have been raised with an unclear history and false narratives. That is why supporting education and pushing for new ways of learning should be at the center of our resistance

5 | <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1099102>

6 | Lebanon Education Sector (2021). *Data on Children in Education in Lebanon for the year 2020–2021*.



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Ever since the popular uprisings that shook the Middle East and North Africa in 2011, Tunisia has been considered a hopeful example in a region otherwise characterized by authoritarianism and conflict. But this status as the poster child of Arab democracy is now in danger. A decade after the revolution, Tunisians are back on the streets.

By Kevin Koehler

Disenchantment, resistance and democratic decline in Tunisia

On 25 July 2021, against the background of protests driven by economic discontent in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Tunisian President Kais Saied dismissed the Prime Minister and suspended the parliament. Vowing to fight corruption in the country's economic and political elite, Saied extended the suspension of the constitution indefinitely. He also claimed the right to rule by decree, extending even to changing the constitutional order.

A decade after the revolution of 2010/2011, Tunisians are thus back on the streets. Some have come to protest against what they see as a presidential coup d'état; others mobilize in support of the president and against a post-revolutionary political establishment perceived as corrupt and self-serving. The conflict has traits that are frighteningly similar to the polarization along the secular-Islamist division that previously brought down the short-lived Egyptian democracy in 2013 and that Tunisia only narrowly avoided in 2013 and 2014. Pro-Saied protestors, on the one hand, frequently direct their anger against Rached Ghannouchi, the speaker of the suspended parliament and leader of the Islamist Ennahda party. Anti-Saied demonstrators, on the other hand, protest what they perceive as a coup (*inqilab*) against the achievements of the revolution.

Back on the streets in Tunisia

Some have come to protest against what they see as a presidential coup d'état; others mobilize in support of the president

Even more concerning is that this domestic struggle is beginning to reflect larger regional alignments, with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates coming out in support of Saied, while Qatar and Turkey back the opposing side. Tunisia's hard-won but fragile democracy is in serious danger of being crushed between these competing camps.



How did we get here?

To understand the current Tunisian impasse, we have to go back to the crisis of 2013-2014. At the time, there was deadlock in the Tunisian constituent assembly that had been elected to draft a new constitution following the revolution. It finally came to a head following the assassination of two leftist politicians, namely Chokri Belaid in February 2013 and Mohamed Brahimi in July 2013. The murders were widely blamed on Islamist terrorists and demonstrators called for the resignation of the government led by the Islamist Ennahda party. Tunisia thus seemed to be poised to follow the Egyptian trajectory, where an elected Islamist government had been overthrown after widespread protests in July 2013.

And yet, Tunisians chose a different path. A national dialogue, facilitated by the famous quartet of civil society institutions – the Tunisian Human Rights League, the Bar Association, the powerful UGTT trade union, as well as the employers' association UTICA – managed to resolve the political deadlock. A technocratic caretaker government came into office in December 2013, the new constitution was adopted in early 2014, and parliamentary elections took place later that year. The immediate crisis

Even more concerning is that this domestic struggle is beginning to reflect larger regional alignments

was resolved and the 2014 elections resulted in a government of national unity, including both the secular Nidaa Tounis party of then-president Béji Caïd Essebsi and Rached Ghannouchi's Islamist Ennahda. The threat of political polarization between secular and Islamist forces was contained. In 2015, the quartet was recognized with the Nobel Peace Prize for its role in sustaining Tunisian democracy.

Yet, not all was well

While the post-2014 consensus succeeded in containing divisions between opposing political camps, big questions relating to transitional justice, as well as economic and institutional reform ultimately went unaddressed. For example, according to estimates by the International Labour Organization, youth unemployment in Tunisia continued to hover around 35 percent. Sharp regional disparities also remained, with the less privileged regions of the south and the interior suffering disproportionately higher levels of economic disenfranchisement than the areas around Tunis and at the coast. While these problems have their roots in the pre-revolutionary period, disenchantment with the slow pace of socio-economic progress soon began to spread. Tunisia saw an increasing number of protests,¹ many of which focused on economic demands.

1 | Weipert-Fenner, I. (2020). 'Unemployed mobilisation in times of democratisation: the Union of Unemployed Graduates in post-Ben Ali Tunisia', in: *The Journal of North African Studies*, 25:1, pp. 53–75.



President Kais Saied at a press conference, Libya 17 March 2021

The political system struggled to incorporate this mobilization. There had long been an undercurrent of populist protest politics in the nascent Tunisian party system. In the 2011 founding elections, this undercurrent found expression in the surprising results of a previously unknown party, the Popular Petition, which made inroads in particular with more marginalized constituencies.² Over time, turnout in elections began to decline. Public opinion research showed, moreover, that popular dissatisfaction with the large political parties, both the secular Nidaa Tounes and the Islamist Ennahda, steadily grew,³ as did support for authoritarian forms of government.⁴

This prepared the ground for the rise of a populist challenger in the form of Kais Saied. Around the world, populist movements thrive on the distinction between the 'real people' and 'the elite'.⁵ Political outsiders frequently use anti-elite sentiments to present themselves as the champions of the 'real people', capitalizing on anti-elite opinions and channeling such sentiments into opposition against the institutions which support these elites. In Tunisia, the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections represented such a populist backlash.

The 2019 electoral cycle saw the collapse of the post-revolutionary Tunisian party system.⁶ Nidaa Tounes had already disintegrated into several parts before the contest, and Ennahda saw its electoral returns significantly reduced in the legislative election in October. Just days later, two relative newcomers, the independent candidate Kais Saied and media mogul Nabil Karoui, competed in a run-off for the presidency, having defeated representatives of more established political forces in the first round. Saied, running on a platform of institutional reform with a strong anti-corruption message, won the run-off with 73 percent of the vote. The process of forming a new government proved difficult and developed into a power struggle between newly elected President Saied and the leader of Ennahda, Ghannouchi. Following a presidential threat to dissolve parliament and rule by decree until fresh elections would have been held, Ennahda finally agreed to support a technocratic government.

And then COVID-19 hit. The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Tunisia on 2 March 2020, just days after the new government had finally been formed. In addition to 25,000 deaths related to the pandemic, Tunisia's economy suffered significant losses. According to UNDP estimates, crucial sectors of the Tunisian economy contracted during 2020. Manufacturing decreased 29 percent, tourism decreased by 23 percent, and unemployment spiked to almost 22 percent. In the midst of the crisis caused by the pandemic, Saied appointed Hisham Mechichi as the new Prime Minister in September 2020, yet power struggles between the speaker of parliament, the Prime Minister, and the president only escalated. In this charged political atmosphere, people began to take to the street, targeting Rached Ghannouchi in particular and attacking offices of Ennahda in the process. These protests, finally, served as the backdrop for President Saied's decision to suspend parliament and rule by decree.

2 | Koehler, K. & J. Warkotsch (2014). 'Tunisia Between Democratization and Institutionalizing Uncertainty', in: Anani, K & M. Hamad (eds.): *Elections and Democratization in the Middle East*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 9–34.

3 | Grewal, S. & S. Hamid (2020). *The Dark Side of Consensus in Tunisia: Lessons from 2015–2019*. Foreign Policy at Brookings

4 | Albrecht, H., Bishara, D., Bufano, M. & K. Koehler (2021). 'Popular support for military intervention and anti-establishment alternatives in Tunisia: Appraising outsider eclecticism', in: *Mediterranean Politics*.

5 | Mudde, C. (2018). 'How populism became the concept that defines our age', in: *The Guardian*, 22 November 2018.

6 | Grubman, N. & A. Şaşmaz (2021). 'The Collapse of Tunisia's Party System and the Rise of Kais Saied', in: *Middle East Report Online*, 17 August 2021.

The 2019 electoral cycle saw the collapse of the post-revolutionary Tunisian party system

The EU as well as European countries should formulate clear expectations of a return to constitutional order, and promise substantial aid in return



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What can be done?

Tunisia has entered its deepest political crisis since the 2011 revolution. While earlier political crises, in particular the 2013/2014 episode, could be contained by compromise between the main political players, it is these very players who are now being challenged. What is more, there are signs of ideological polarization between the opposing camps along the secular-Islamist division. Regional actors associated with either of these two sides were quick to take advantage. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates stand ready to support an anti-Islamist strongman in Tunisia; Qatar and Turkey, by contrast, have voiced support for Ennahda and their demand to reinstate parliament. On the international stage, the European Union has called on Saied to reopen parliament, while the United States have remained more cautious and have merely stressed respect for the constitution. The Tunisian leader has reacted sharply to perceived external interference, emphasizing Tunisian sovereignty over internal affairs.

While the situation is difficult, not all is lost. Tunisian civil society has helped overcome deep political crisis before. In early November, the president of the Tunisian human rights league, Jamel Msallem, called for a renewed national dialogue modelled on the efforts of the Quartet in 2013/2014. While such attempts yet have to bear fruits, a resolution of the crisis can only come from within.

At the same time, the last thing Tunisia's European friends should do, is to give up. President Saied will not be amenable to bullying and external pressure, yet European countries should use the means at their disposal to support dialogue and compromise, including by offering further economic support. Tunisia is under immense economic pressure with its credit rating downgraded by Moody's in October, while the country continues to negotiate an aid package with the International Monetary Fund. The EU as well as European countries should formulate clear expectations of a return to constitutional order, and promise substantial aid in return. The path toward a transition back to constitutional normality has to be set by Tunisian actors, yet European countries should do everything they can to make such a course of action seem attractive to all parties. ●

Climate activism in Iraq

A dangerous undertaking

By Maha Yassin



The climate in the Middle East and North Africa is warming up twice as fast as the average global temperature rise, but in Iraq, this is happening two to seven times faster. Although drought is a natural phenomenon in the region, global warming is adding to the challenge for people living there to adapt to water scarcity. In its latest report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change marked the region as being extremely vulnerable to climate change, mainly due to rising temperatures and declining water resources. The region's recurrent violence due to political conflicts and wars further complicates an adequate response to these problems.

Climate-induced conflict

A well-known example for a climate-induced conflict is embodied in the 2018 protests which took place in Basra, southern Iraq, where extreme heatwaves eventually led to the deterioration of the water supply in the city's main river, the Shatt al-Arab. The violent protests against the dire situation were led by the youth and culminated into a series of protests across the country known as the Tishreen Movement – grassroots protests started in 2019 and have been demanding major economic, social and political reforms. Climate change is thus not the only culprit that is causing the problems with water supply and the related issues like water pollution and desertification. These problems result from a series of interrelated issues, ranging from poor water governance to institutional corruption.

Despite the recent efforts of the Iraqi government to ratify the Paris Agreement and heighten the ambition at the COP26, the past decades of inaction continues to frustrate Iraqi climate activists. This can be attributed to a preoccupation with armed and political conflicts within the country and the failure to recognize climate change as being a security threat to Iraq. Motivated by concerns about their future, several NGOs and campaigns led by the youth have initiated projects in the field of plantation, monitoring, and raising awareness. However, these efforts are not sufficient to stop the trend of the devastating climate-induced impact which, for instance, wide-spread desertification and salt-water intrusion have on the lives of the citizens of southern Iraq.

In the last twenty years the number of citizens of the city of Basra, the second-largest city in Iraq, has increased to around three million people. Although agriculture is not the largest economic sector in this region, the area of greater Basra hosts numerous farming communities. Because of the desertification these communities find it increasingly hard to survive on the revenues from agricultural activities. Mostly in southern Iraq, the country loses 250 square kilometers of arable lands each year, forcing many farmers to migrate to urban areas.

Many activists took part in the Tishreen Movement and, as a result, are being regarded with suspicion by the Iraqi government and non-state armed groups

Paying a heavy price

Feeling compelled by the urgency of the situation, climate and environmental activists put pressure on the authorities and plea for support from the international community. The activists showcase the effects of climate change on farming communities and urban settings by tracing stories of individuals from the southern parts of the country, including the marshes, and by using simple tools such as mass media platforms. They eventually succeeded in bringing international and local attention to the grave impacts of climate change, but some paid a heavy price for their efforts. Many activists took part in the Tishreen Movement and its call for reforms and, as a result, are being regarded with suspicion by the Iraqi government and non-state armed groups. They have been threatened, sometimes kidnapped, and even killed.

Coupled with limited funds and capacity issues, climate activism in Iraq has become a very harsh undertaking indeed. This situation is blocking the chance of initiating climate adaptation, climate mitigation, and connecting with international donors. In other parts of the world, climate activists often face harsh realities as well, but compared to these other countries, the situation in Iraq is very grim as not only are the activists under threat, but so are their families.

Climate-related migration

Migration to the urban centres in Iraq has been ongoing for decades, driven either by the loss of livelihoods within the farming communities or by declining water supplies in small towns. In recent years this trend has become the norm and it has led to an increase of social and economic tensions between the newcomers and the original inhabitants. Urban centres, like Basra and Baghdad, were already struggling with deteriorating water and power infrastructure making the limited efforts of the local NGOs to guide policies ineffectual. Incidental reports indicate a decline in employment rates among the newcomers which increases the possibility that they gravitate towards criminal or militia groups.

There is a growing uncertainty about how Europe is going to prepare itself for such a climate-refugee influx

Indicators of migration towards regions and countries that are less climate-stressed have also been registered despite a lack of data. However, it is unclear whether climate migrants will be able to leave Iraq for Europe and it is unlikely that they will be able to pay human traffickers the hefty amounts required. Nevertheless, recent events such as the desperate attempts of Iraqis to reach the European Union via Belarus, indicate there are many Iraqi migrants who want to build a new future for themselves in Europe. There is a growing uncertainty about how Europe is going to prepare itself for such a climate-refugee influx, especially since populism and semi-authoritarian regimes are on the rise here too. Moreover, the European continent itself is not immune to climate impact, and it might even face situations similar to the ones southern Iraq is having to deal with currently.

It may help if European actors could reinforce collaboration and work with Iraqi civil society as well as with the Iraqi government in setting up early response plans and creating a safe environment for foreign investment in renewable energy. And, most importantly, supporting capacity building in the field of climate activism, ensuring the safety of climate activists and raising awareness with Iraqi politicians. Instead of having to fear for their lives, the Iraqi climate activities should be ensured of support. Climate change is not a partisan issue, but one that affects us all. ●



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A reader based in Europe might question why she or he should pay attention to what is happening on the southern shore of the Mediterranean. There are good reasons to why they should. There can be no long-standing solution to the great challenges on both shores, if Europeans consider the Mediterranean to be a different planet. We must imagine a future together.

By Gianluca Solera

Building a common Mediterranean space of rights and citizenship

We often think of progressive activism as something that belongs to Western political traditions. It is with this mindset that many of us watched the movements of the Arab Spring with curiosity and detachment. And with the same mindset, many of us quickly classified the Arab Spring as an unfortunate failure. Mistakes were certainly made by the leaders of those social movements.¹ Yet 2011 has substantially changed the perceptions, visions, and understandings of hundreds of thousands of Arab youths. The current regression towards authoritarianism could not erase the comprehension of change, which will be ready to re-emerge when conditions allow for public engagement without ending up in jail. Moreover, historically, revolutions calling for more rights and freedoms take a long time to change realities in contexts where authoritarianism has been the rule.

Europe should be paying attention to the Southern Mediterranean...

A reader based in Europe might question why she or he should pay attention to what is happening on the southern shore of the Mediterranean. There are good reasons to why they should. Firstly, many of the latest developments in Europe are interrelated with the destiny of its neighbours. The most recent refugee waves are strictly connected to the implosion of political systems and the annihilation of socio-economic opportunities in Northern Africa and the Middle East. Addressing the establishment of a European Islam has become our 'litmus test', and the outcome of the dilemma of open versus closed societies will depend on the political power games around 'identity' played in national constituencies. Neoliberal solutions have made the economies of Europe's neighbours fragile,

Mediterranean mobilization

¹ | I have tried to describe some of them in my book (2017): *Citizen Activism and Mediterranean Identity. Beyond Eurocentrism*. Palgrave Macmillan.

The current regression towards authoritarianism could not erase the mindset of change

2 | In the Euro-Med space, only 9 percent of current trade traffic is between MENA and EU countries, and 1 percent between MENA countries themselves. More on the matter in the OECD's progress report (2021): *Regional Integration in the Union for the Mediterranean*.

3 | UNICEF (2019). *MENA Generation 2030 Report*.

In a multipolar world, building such a space for common rights and visions can only be achieved if we go beyond the interest and ideologies of nation-states

consolidating inequalities and shrinking markets and trade opportunities.² Global warming has accelerated violent meteorological events in the region, disrupting food chains and putting in danger the unique hotspot of biodiversity that the Mediterranean basin represents.

Secondly, in the Southern Mediterranean lies an amazing potential of young and vital energy. That is not just a matter of demography since half of the population is below the age of 24 years.³ It is also a matter of social resilience, of strength in claiming rights and aspiring to a better life which might rejuvenate the democratic forces and ideas also in a more and more sceptical and self-referential European society. 2011 has already shown how social movements can mutually learn about practices of resistance and engaged citizenship: what happened in Tunisia or Egypt was partially inspired by the uprisings in Serbia or Greece some years before, and in turn inspired social protest in Israel, Spain, and Slovenia. The social protests on the two Mediterranean shores had many elements in common, including the occupation and re-appropriation of public spaces; the creation of spontaneous and voluntary structures of assistance to support people in-need; the refusal of prejudice and biased divisions based upon identity; and the struggle against corruption.

...and must imagine a future together

The citizens' mobilisation of 2011 was nurtured by three main demands: civil and political rights, socio-economic opportunities, and the recovery of human dignity. These demands are in fact the pre-conditions of any liberal system: freedom of expression, organisation, and participation in public life; social justice and a fair economic system allowing for progression in social hierarchy; and a new social contract, in which the state serves the citizens as holders of natural rights. In a multipolar world, building such a space for common rights and visions can only be achieved if we go beyond the interest and ideologies of nation-states. Especially in a region where, for centuries, peoples exchanged knowledge, goods, and ideas, and moved from one coastline to the other – either as conquerors, merchants, refugees, or scientists.

Indeed, the Mediterranean is the place where the Western world was forged. It was where religious traditions were born (think of the three Abrahamic faiths), the concept of democracy was shaped (think of Pericles' Athens and its first democratic order), capitalism was first experimented with (think of Tuscany's banks in the Middle Ages), and scientific research was promoted and disseminated (think of the medicine developments under the Arab rulers of the Middle East and Al-Andalus).

If we want to build a common space of rights and citizenship today, we must retrieve the conditions for exchange and cooperation. We must imagine ourselves as having a common destiny, whereby freedoms, ecological balance, legal human mobility and social equality can be achieved only if we can all aspire to them. There can be no long-standing solution to the challenge of the recurrent refugee waves or global warming, nor to the fulfilment of fundamental freedoms on both shores, if Europeans

consider the Mediterranean to be a different planet. That would be historically and politically wrong. If progressive activism is to contribute to shaping a better future for both the European continent and the Mediterranean basin, we must imagine a future together.

This idea of having a common destiny, however, requires a fundamental change of mentality. It is difficult to overcome our own national identities and to think of all of us in terms of citizens – rather than as 'nationals' of Egypt, France, or Morocco. It is difficult to dream beyond the current constraints that make it so hard to cross borders between both the states of the southern shore, and between the Schengen Area and its neighbouring countries.⁴ But today's reality is not normality. Normality in the history of the Mediterranean is exchange, mobility, and rules of law that extend across nations.

A manifesto for a 'Free and United Mediterranean'

In the early 1940s, a group of anti-fascist intellectuals and militants interned on the island of Ventotene wrote a manifesto for a 'Free and United Europe'. The manifesto launched the vision for European integration at a moment when nobody was betting on it. That vision started becoming a reality a few years later. Today, we are living in a new time of conflict that pits cultural and religious identities against each other; frustrates the struggle for freedom and justice in the name of stability, growth, and national interest; pushes families to flee despair; and puts human beings and nature in opposition to each other. The most important frontline of this conflict runs through the Mediterranean. That is why it is time to call for a 'Free and United Mediterranean' – at a moment when nobody would bet on it.

This vision of a common destiny – launched by the Maydan Association in 2017 – does not only aim at cooperating and exchanging, but also at building an integrated space in which opportunities are forged jointly.⁵ The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership that was born with the 1995 Barcelona Declaration must be reinvented on new bases, what includes defining the notion of 'being Mediterranean' on equal footing (rather than being Eurocentric), and building on the culture of rights, democratic renewal, and justice that many Arab nations and neighbouring nations have been struggling for. It is up to citizens to inspire and fuel this process.

Historically, Mediterranean citizens embody multiple identities, and in recent years, a new generation of citizens that feel truly and intrinsically part of this region – often holding two passports – has grown on all shores. To invest in this new generation, we must launch a far-reaching, bottom-up constitutional process based on the idea of a common destiny among the peoples of the two shores. That process will not question European integration, of which we admire the historical significance and critically assess the current structure. It will build on the experiences of success and failure of the European Union, empower Southern European nations, and provide new prospects to North African and Middle Eastern nations as part of a common Mediterranean space.

4 | I experienced this firsthand at Vision Med North South 2030, Brussels, in November 2021. At this gathering of civil society representatives from both shores, 20% of invited participants could not join as they were denied a Schengen visa.

5 | <http://www.maydan-association.org/the-manifesto/>

We must launch a far-reaching, bottom-up constitutional process based on the idea of a common destiny among the peoples of the two shores

How to start such a process? First, we need to invest in a large campaign to raise awareness across the region about what we have in common, on our collective identity, as well as on the best practices concerning citizenship that may inspire the forging of a Mediterranean citizenship. Such a campaign could have different facets, including debate, arts, and political initiatives. Then, we should set up non-governmental consultative bodies that prepare the ground for the next institutional framework for the Mediterranean. It would be a kind of cross-border shadow-cabinet run by citizens in the style of those created by opposition parties in our democratic nations. Finally, my dream is to launch an initiative to draft a 'constitutional treaty' through a massive consultative exercise, and submitting it to a popular, voluntary referendum in the region. Even if it were a private initiative, non-binding and not effective in the current legal arena, it would be an act of transnational citizenship, reopening the debate on the future of the region.

Redefining the frontiers of citizenship

Of course, the peoples of the Mediterranean have substantially different access to civil, political, economic, and cultural rights. An important divide remains between urbanised citizens who are exposed to foreigners and innovative ideas, and rural or secluded communities where people live a kind of timeless life. However, I am confident that the notion of unifying nations to face mutual threats and crises can be understood also by traditional social groups and classes, because it is not about the left versus the right, nor is it about religious versus secular people. Rather, it is about redefining the frontiers of citizenship. We want to go beyond the definition of citizenship as something that is exclusively granted by nation-states, and seek a non-conventional citizenship that can be shared within the Mediterranean transnational space. It would be based on the human values inherited from the Western and Eastern traditions, and strive towards a society in which social justice, human mobility, and participation in public affairs are within reach.

Some would say that Europeans need first of all to deepen relations amongst European nations and protect their democratic achievements if they want to better support their neighbours. I disagree. Embracing the Mediterranean means saving Europe and its dream of a united space of freedoms and rights. There cannot be an 'in' and an 'out' when we refer to the region that gave birth to shared cultures, civilisations, landscapes, and family lineages. Rather, the opposite is true: rejecting the Mediterranean means bringing about the conditions that might put an end to those European dreams and betraying the message of a 'free and united Europe' that was put into writing on the island of Ventotene.

This is like a treasury map, sealed in a bottle floating on the sea surface: it is still waiting for a crew of courageous sailors to read it, to understand it. And to act. ●

Embracing the Mediterranean means saving Europe and its dream of a united space of freedoms and rights



Gianluca Solera is a writer, activist, and co-founder of Maydan association for Mediterranean citizenship.

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The power of sharing ideas

Resistance comes in many shapes and forms. It can be small and go almost unnoticed, or it can be huge and explosive. One may resist an entire regime, or 'just' one's own family. As such, resistance may be individual or collective, or anywhere in between those two. This edition of *Idee* highlights resistance in all corners of our world. One common theme shines through: the firm belief of the authors and activists in the equality of people and their right to be heard.

At the international foundation of D66 (Stichting IDI/D66 Internationaal) we are proud to support organisations that stand up for these ideals, which are so close to the values of D66. With funding from the Fund for Regional Partnerships of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Stichting IDI/D66 Internationaal engages in projects that, broadly speaking, strengthen the rule of law and democratisation. Projects that enable people to work towards inclusive, just, and sustainable societies for present and future generations. This may sound enlightened and vague. But in reality, it is tangible and dear to the many people facing challenging (un)democratic situations. The publication you are reading is a solid example of the power of sharing ideas. Exchanging experiences, knowledge, and best practices can make a world of difference. We are thankful to have this opportunity to contribute to more open, democratic, and connected societies.

For citizens of prosperous and well-structured countries, it is all too easy to take everything for granted. But in these countries too, civil liberties, the rule of law, the functioning of democratic institutions, and even human rights can – and have – come under pressure. It is easy to forget that it is not necessarily 'normal' to have a guaranteed minimum wage, access to the judicial system, and protection of the rights of minorities. These are things to appreciate and actively support, and to improve and build upon. It is our shared responsibility that everyone can live in a world in which we are connected, in freedom.

So, take some time to ask yourself that question: what can I do? If you learn that your government violates the rights of refugees, would you ignore it? If you know that your government does not recognize your marriage, would you shrug your shoulders? If you see that the mainstream media broadcasts hate speech, would you look the other way? Or would you stand up, in your own way, and with your own form of resistance?

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