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“Multiculturalism” in Europe: Losing Faith?

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Synopsis

Various European leaders have voiced their opinions and agreed that multiculturalism has failed in Europe. But what does the discourse actually mean?

Commentary

IN OCTOBER 2010, German Chancellor Angela Merkel declared that the “multikulti” approach to integration does not work in Germany. She stated that the policy to build a multicultural society with people of different backgrounds “living side by side” has “utterly failed”. Her comments came amid rising anti-immigrant sentiments in Germany, supported by a survey reflecting that 30% of Germans felt the country was “overrun by foreigners”.

“Multikulti” elsewhere in Europe

She was joined by British Prime Minister David Cameron who several months later argued a similar theme. In a speech in Munich he said the “doctrine of multiculturalism” has failed and only encouraged “different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream”. A week later, French President Nicolas Sarkozy echoed the same sentiments. He took the opportunity to reiterate his concerns on the need for better policies to promote cultural assimilation and ensure that immigrants follow the French model of political and cultural assimilation.

Analysts and observers of such narratives across Europe also point out a commonality across the discourse of all three leaders: they generally highlight concerns pertaining to Muslim immigrants, although they are careful to distinguish between Islam and radical extremism. Nevertheless, it is not by sheer coincidence that Merkel’s statements were made amid debates on Muslim immigrants. They followed the publication of former central banker Thilo Sarrazin’s controversial book accusing Muslim immigrants of lowering the intelligence of German society.

It also cannot be dismissed that Cameron singled out young Muslims for better integration to combat home-grown extremism. Sarkozy was even more blatant in directing at “Muslim compatriots” and the need for a “French Islam and not just an Islam in France”. What are the possible factors driving them to point to ‘multiculturalism’ as the source of their problems?

Compounded Issues

The first possible explanation is that blaming failed multiculturalism is an indirect strategy to confront greater issues at hand. Extreme right-wing parties have gained popularity through playing the immigration card. They tap into the sentiments of xenophobia and the fear of losing traditional cultural identity to alien cultures. By embracing the narrative of failed multiculturalism and championing the need for greater integration of immigrants, leaders such as that of Germany and France are executing a strategy of attempting to limit the discursive ground of the right-wing parties by widening their own scope.

This way, they hope to 'broaden the respectable right' (including integration efforts for immigrants) in order to restrict the reach of the extreme right (who are completely against immigration). Such was the assessment of Sarkozy's approach to the challenge of France's National Front. It is also applicable to Merkel who tried to accommodate two sides of a debate on addressing immigration and integration in Germany.

The second issue is that hostility to immigration is made complex with the problem of Islamist extremism, "home-grown" terrorism and Islamophobia. A classic example is Britain. The existence of a minority but vocal group of radical Muslims has threatened the image of the broader British Muslim community. Homegrown terrorism is indeed a serious security threat, requiring an all-inclusive national effort. Yet the roots of the problem cannot be tackled by approaching through the guise of failed multiculturalism. In fact, doing so may simply make matters worse. Such a wide narrative would only undermine the efforts and successes of well-integrated European Muslims as illustrated by the reactions following the speeches by the respective political leaders.

Finally, one must also not dismiss the socio-economic factor: All the frustrations and disgruntled sentiments which the extreme right-wing parties have successfully tapped into could also stem from socio-economic reasons. With Europe only beginning to rise from the ashes of an economic crisis, it is only convenient that the related frustrations are vented out in such a manner, against immigration -- a phenomenon produced by globalisation, and is gaining momentum.

Addressing Rootlessness

Indirect measures such as blaming failed multiculturalism may not produce effective results. Having identified the actual issues at hand, the solutions prescribed need to hit the nail on the head. The European leaders are already looking in the right direction by proposing more integration policies to cultivate a stronger national identity. However, these promising policies also need to be directed appropriately. As many scholars and analysts have pointed out, attention needs to be particularly focused on the youths of the second generation immigrants onwards who were born in Europe as they nurse both a sense of rootlessness and struggle to keep up in the socio-economic race.

The new policies must also actively consider the fact that effective integration must involve a substantial amount of engagement with the local host community. Indeed, integration is a two-way process that involves interaction within the greater whole. To do so, policymakers must be aware of a key coping mechanism common to Diaspora communities: they tend to maintain themselves as a separate community for familiarity and support. Here, policymakers could look into moderating the communal tendencies to help them break out of their comfort zones, hence facilitating integration.

Dispelling unhelpful mindsets

Finally, there is also the need to dispel the idea that being a Muslim would be incompatible with being a European citizen who ascribes to the European constitutional values and principles. It is in fact possible to distinguish between a French Muslim, a British Muslim or a German Muslim. Here, the distinguishing qualities stem from the characteristics normally associated or belonging to the respective nations.

National identity can be an added dimension to pre-existing multiple identities within an individual. It would, however, be overambitious to expect all other identities to be dropped in favour of one. In an era of globalisation, diverse identities and characteristics cannot be suppressed in the name of uniformity but the concept of belonging to a nation can still persist.

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