

CONFERENCE REPORT

The Allure of Identity Politics in a Globalised World



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This is a report on a public session titled “The Allure of Identity Politics in a Globalised World”, held as part of the TRT World Forum 2019. The views, themes and discussion points expressed in this conference report are those of participants and speakers present at the TRT World Forum 2019, and do not reflect the official view of TRT World Research Centre.

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PREPARED BY

TURAN GAFARLI

TRT WORLD İSTANBUL

AHMET ADNAN SAYGUN STREET NO:83 34347
ULUS, BEŞİKTAŞ
İSTANBUL / TURKEY

TRT WORLD LONDON

PORTLAND HOUSE
4 GREAT PORTLAND STREET NO:4
LONDON / UNITED KINGDOM

TRT WORLD WASHINGTON D.C.

1819 L STREET NW SUITE 700 20036
WASHINGTON DC / UNITED STATES

www.trtworld.com

researchcentre.trtworld.com

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Speakers



Anwar Ibrahim

Leader of the Pakatan Harapan Coalition and President of People's Justice Party of Malaysia

Anwar Ibrahim is the leader of Malaysia's ruling Pakatan Harapan coalition, President of the People's Justice Party, and is expected to lead the country as its eighth Prime Minister. He served as Deputy Prime Minister from 1993-1998 and Finance Minister from 1991-1998. For his principled stance on issues of justice and the rule of law, he has spent over ten of the past twenty years in solitary confinement as a prisoner of conscience. During this time he has also written and lectured extensively on topics including good governance, human rights and political reform and has held teaching positions at Oxford, John Hopkins, and Georgetown universities.



Seyed Kazem Sajjadpour

Deputy Foreign Minister for Research and Education of Iran

Dr. Seyed Kazem Sajjadpour is the Deputy Foreign Minister for Research and Education of Iran and President of the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS). Prior to this, he served as Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative for the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations and Advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs on Strategic Issues. He was previously a Professor of International Relations. He received his PhD from George Washington University and was a post-doctoral fellow at Harvard.



Nazir Ahmed

Member of the House of Lords of the United Kingdom

The Rt. Hon. Lord Ahmed of Rotherham is a member of the House of Lords. Appointed by Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1998, he was the first Muslim Peer and is currently an Independent Member of the House of Lords. He led the first delegation on behalf of the British Government on the Muslim pilgrimage, the Hajj. At home, he speaks on issues of equality, and has spoken on several occasions on the topics of race, religion and gender. He has advocated legislation against religious discrimination and forced marriage and has been an opponent of the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Lord Ahmed is a successful businessman in the field of property development in South Yorkshire and the Founder of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on 'Entrepreneurship'.



Javed Jabbar

Former Senator and Federal Minister of Pakistan

Javed Jabbar is a retired Pakistani Senator and a former Minister in three federal cabinets, where he held ministerial portfolios ranging from Information and Broadcasting to Petroleum and Natural Resources. From 2015 to 2018 he was invited to serve as a member of the Senate Forum for Policy Research, the first parliamentary think-tank in Pakistan. He is the Chairman of the Social Policy and Development Centre, one of Asia's leading think-tanks. Since 1992, he has been a member of the longest-running non-reported Pakistan-India Track 2 dialogue, the Neemrana Initiative. He is a widely respected author and documentary film producer whose films have received several international awards.



Jeroen Schokkenbroek

Director of Anti-Discrimination at the Directorate General of Democracy of the Council of Europe

Jeroen Schokkenbroek has worked as the Director of Anti-Discrimination in the Directorate General of Democracy of the Council of Europe since 2018. He began his career as a lecturer in constitutional and administrative law at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands and he has worked for the Council of Europe Secretariat in various human rights positions. He has also served as the Special Representative for Roma Issues, Special Adviser of the Secretary General for Ukraine, and Executive Secretary of the Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman Punishment.



François Burgat

Senior Research Fellow at the French National Centre for Scientific Research

François Burgat is a scholar and Senior Research Fellow (Emeritus) at the French National Centre for Scientific Research and a member of the European Council on Foreign Relations. He was the Director of the French Centre for Archaeology and Social Sciences in Sana'a from 1997 to 2003, and at the IREMAM in Aix-en-Provence from 2003 to 2008. He was the Director of the French Institute for the Near East, first in Damascus and then in Beirut, from 2008 until 2013. He is the author of 'The Islamic Movement in North Africa' (1997); 'Face to Face with Political Islam' (2002); 'Islamism in the Shadow of al-Qaeda' (2008); and 'Comprendre l'Islam Politique: Une Trajectoire sur l'Altérité Islamiste 1973-2016' (2016).

Summary

The panel “The Allure of Identity Politics in a Globalised World” discussed the current increase in social and political instability that has ignited economic, religious and ethnic divisions in various societies around the world.

In his keynote speech, leader of the Pakatan Harapan Coalition and President of People’s Justice Party of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim, stated that one of the greatest threats the world is facing is ignorance, defined by an absence of appreciation of difference rather than the absence of knowledge. His remarks on globalisation marked the argument that defines globalisation as an experience and rejects Western dominance over the concept.

Jeroen Schokkenbroek and Lord Nazir Ahmed drew attention to the debate around the usage of identity politics and the importance of media, the checks and balance mechanisms of democracies and necessary concepts such as the protection of human rights and the separation of powers. According to Schokkenbroek, the rise of populism and politicians who exploit instability and the fears of masses has become visible not only in developing countries but also in the developed countries of the West.

A philosophical and academic debate took place among panellists on the importance of the immediate response to the negative usage of identity politics. Schokkenbroek provided remarks on the threat of the rise of the populism while discussing the dangers of increases in social inequality and its exploitation by politicians to gain votes and scapegoat minorities, refugees or migrants. For Seyed Kazem Sajjadpour, both politics and media have become the main tools in this process to exploit and spread fear in society.

Panellists also discussed the universality of human rights as a unifying doctrine, which all societies can build their political system on and stand against the rising tide of populism. Javed Jabbar stressed the positive sides of globalism such as the reduction of poverty and developments in global connectivity and argued that we should build globalisation upon our collective sense of humanity rather than on aggressive capitalist expansion. On the other hand, François Burgat criticised former colonial powers and their denial of their imperialist history -especially by France- in the context of ongoing social breakdown that has its roots in the colonial period.

Report

A New Vision for Cooperation Between Civilisations

Leader of the Pakatan Harapan Coalition and President of People's Justice Party of Malaysia Anwar Ibrahim began his speech by criticising concepts such as "clash of civilisations" and "end of the history", positing that Edward Said's words as "clash of ignorance" is more representative of our current situation. Ibrahim stated that securitisation concerns and fear of "religious" terror are mostly based on such ignorant prejudices. According to Ibrahim these beliefs can only be tackled with dialogue, tolerance and a rigorous acceptance of diversity.

While speaking on the issue of globalisation, Anwar Ibrahim emphasised the necessity of dialogue and debate in order to understand different views. He also accepted that globalisation might have limitations, however, he argued that this cannot be a barrier for the creation of dialogue between cultures.

The Rise of Populism

Jeroen Schokkenbroek argued that politicians are playing the nationalism and populism cards to exploit people's fears and insecurities. Agreeing with Schokkenbroek, Lord Nazir Ahmed commented on the global political exploitation of the issue of insecurity. He stated that political parties or leaders used to make promises on creating new jobs, welfare, opportunities and prosperity, however, since 9/11 they mainly make promises to keep people secure. He also mentioned that populism continues to gain in popularity and that media has a significant responsibility in this regard.

In this context, he stated the need for a new vision, one which can stop societies from going down the path of extremism with regards to identity politics such as Islamophobia or strong anti-Western sentiments. Ibrahim praised the attempt of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to initiate an alliance of civilizations despite the opposition of some Western and even some Eastern and Muslim countries.

He concluded his speech by expressing his faith in a new vision for a world where every single person is given her or his right as a citizen, provided with good education and health and guaranteed the opportunity to elect a legitimate government to represent the voices of conscience of the majority

Political parties or leaders used to make promises on creating new jobs, welfare, opportunities and prosperity, however, since 9/11 they mainly make promises to keep people secure.



Schokkenbroek underlined the fact that populism does not only rise in unstable societies and weak economies. As seen today, the rise of populism has

been most successful in the strongest economies where people have a fear of losing their prospects for the future.

The Fragility of the Social Order

Schokkenbroek argued that protecting human rights is mutually beneficial because protecting other's rights is ultimately protecting one's own rights and dignity. According to him, democracy should never be only about winning elections but also allowing minorities to become possible majorities in the future, respecting people and ensuring that their basic rights are always protected.

Lord Ahmed also stated that the times have changed and it is now more common to see examples of

Islamophobia, alienation and the rise of racism supported by certain elements of society. Seyed Kazem Sajjadpour defined those elements as being people who believe that they have lost their supremacy and are now seeking to regain it. François Burgat agreed with Sajjadpour by mentioning that people who feel that they are losing their superiority do not want to become outsiders in a new age where the discourse of universality is being redefined by those outsiders.

Identity Politics

For Javed Jabbar, the question of identity politics must be rooted in the specific context of each country. As each nation-state has a different category of origin, there can be historical states, mass migration states, and post-colonial states whose borders were drawn arbitrarily by the departing colonial powers. All these factors can be crucial in the character of identity politics. Therefore, there is a need for constructive and progressive politics to positively accommodate identity politics in each case while considering the dynamics of each country.

Schokkenbroek, agreeing with Jabbar, stated that the best way of respecting diversity is respecting

rights and giving equal opportunities to people to participate in society. Lord Ahmed contributed to the debate by arguing that if identity politics are calling for people's rights, for example, trade unions, and women rights defenders, it can be a positive development. However, according to François Burgat, it becomes dangerous when identity politics are used to oppress others and create fear. For Burgat, if we had perfect and equitable institutions that distributed political resources equitably, we would not need identity politics.

The Effects of Globalisation

François Burgat opened his discussion by stating that there is no moving forward without acknowledgment of colonial history and dark pages of the Western civilization because of the fact that globalisation is often seen as a tool to spread European ideas, values and culture. Moreover, on the economic front it has been regarded as a new way to exploit developing world via what Burgat referred to as 'aggressive' capitalist measures.

Burgat expanded his thoughts on the issue and argued that to fully benefit global developments, there is a need to get rid of the remnants of colonialism and stand against aggressive capitalism on our way towards a globalisation, which can also empower the developing world.

Seyed Kazem Sajjadpour stated that accepting others as they are is the key to advancing equally beneficial globalisation and we should defend our spaces from the negative effects of identity politics, which deepen rifts among and between societies. According to Sajjadpour, globalisation holds the potential to have different patterns of development

while simultaneously promoting diversity, the coexistence of various communities and life without fear of alienation. These are the values that should be at the very heart of the concept.

Globalisation holds the potential to have different patterns of development while simultaneously promoting diversity, the coexistence of various communities and life without fear of alienation.

Javed Jabbar gave the example of international charity and the desire to help people on the other side of the world as representing a positive understanding between societies without ethnic or language connection. He argued that humanity needs to see the process of globalisation as a progressive

step towards the future. However, forms of neo-colonialism such as what Francois Burgan referred to as 'aggressive capitalism' should be rejected in order to create a fair and equal balance between developed and developing countries.

Key Takeaways

- The rise of populism is the result of the growing insecurities and the exploitation of them to spread fear in society by populist politicians.
- Democracy should not be limited to the ballot box and total rule of the winner by the majority but should consider the rights of minorities and the oppressed.
- Identity politics can be necessary if it is protecting rights and calling for positive developments in society. It can become dangerous if it is used to spread fear and to create dominance over others.
- Globalisation may not be just about the Western domination and it may have different patterns of development while centring diversity, the coexistence of various communities and life without fear of alienation in its very heart of the concept.
- Diversity and respect towards various ideas, nationalities, ethnic backgrounds, faith and genders is the key to achieve social stability and peace.

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