

Peaceful co-existence and conflicts between communities and human rights

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Peaceful relations between ethnic, religious, linguistic or other communities make an important contribution to the promotion of social cohesion, public security and human rights. The impact of these horizontal relations, peaceful or not, on human rights will be analysed here independently from the vertical relations between states and their various communities.

All political leaders, whether their government is democratic or not, endeavour to prevent conflicts likely to oppose some of their communities identifying themselves as ethnic, religious, linguistic or political, first of all for their own survival.

France and other French-speaking countries have strived to preserve and strengthen their 'living together' through various policies and initiatives. Other countries congratulate themselves for their culture of tolerance and practice interreligious and intercultural dialogue, even when their laws restrict the rights of their citizens and affect the communities to which they belong.

The collapse of peace between communities, the temptation of outside intervention and human rights

The breakdown of peace between communities or social groups can come about from an internal revolution, as was the case with the collapse of the former Yugoslavia, and lead to conflicts both between new emerging states and their populations, to massacres and to purges of an ethnic or religious character. Over the years, the struggle for human rights has lost much ground in such situations.

On the other hand, a popular uprising can also open the way for rapid transition to democracy without much bloodshed, as was the case with most of the communist countries in Central Europe that have since become members of the European Union. In these situations, human rights have advanced.

The breakdown of peaceful relations within a country can also be the result of a wider regional conflict that has been triggered by specific local political and religious conditions. Syria is one example. Faced with the catastrophic situation in the country and a harsh regime in place, Western democracies were tempted to intervene with air strikes against Bashar al-Assad. Syria's Christian minorities were opposed to this, as they saw a real threat to their survival if the country found itself faced with an antidemocratic and barbarous Islamist regime.

The breakdown of peaceful coexistence between ethnic or religious group can likewise be sparked by an external military intervention. The US military campaign in Iraq, ordered by George W Bush to overthrow the bloody dictatorship of Saddam Hussein and occupy the country, was the trigger that prompted the fragmentation of Iraqi society along ethnic, political and religious lines. The result has been a civil war for more than ten years, increased hostility between Sunnis and Shiites, massacres of an ethnic or religious nature, ongoing attacks and the mass exodus of Christians from the country.

Libya is another tragic example of Western intervention into the internal affairs of a country under a dictatorial regime. The country is now aflame, a 'failed state' awash in blood. All trace of peace and security has been pulverised, the respect of human rights is in a coma and victims continue to fill the cemeteries. Among the 'collateral damage' of this horrific state of affairs is the massive human trafficking coming from Africa to the European Union, organised by lawless elements within an equally lawless country. The

tragedy of boats overloaded with migrants desperate to reach Europe only to sink into the Mediterranean is heart wrenching.

The Western plans to export democracy

The will of peoples to rise up against their oppressors must be respected.

The European Union prides itself on being a normative power in human rights and the promotion of liberal democracy. The United States has repeatedly expressed its intent to get rid of dictatorial regimes - except when they serve its interests -, to export democracy, the rule of law and human rights through military intervention. In both Iraq and Libya, Western military interventions have opened a Pandora's Box of disorder, chaos, war and barbarism.

These experiences of the early 21st century have demonstrated that to overthrow a dictatorship or contribute to its overthrow in a Muslim-majority country with a complex ethno-religious fabric will not necessarily lead to peace and democracy. Result: the peaceful coexistence of ethnic and religious groups have given way to conflicts of this nature and to a catastrophic human rights situation in several countries. Democracy has not come, nation-building has failed and what security there was has vanished completely.

Peaceful coexistence between communities and human rights

Peaceful coexistence between communities of various kinds exists in countries with the most varied political regimes. The international community should praise such achievement and encourage the states concerned to preserve it because it prevents uncontrollable deterioration of human rights. It would be useful for any state facing tensions between its diverse communities to map and analyse those countries which have successfully maintained peaceful coexistence between communities within their own borders. Such states would find what recent world events have already amply substantiated: that the magnitude of human rights violations generated by sudden or prolonged conflicts is exponentially higher than what is experienced during peace time.

These same states, guarantors of this peaceful coexistence between communities and domestic peace, can nonetheless find themselves sharply criticised for legislation that is incompatible with international standards or that restricts freedom of expression, freedom of religion or belief and other fundamental rights. The implementation of such legislation then leads to human rights violations that are condemned by various UN mechanisms or penalised by regional tribunals such as the European Court of Human Rights or by the International Criminal Court.

The international community may criticize the poor human rights record of several of such states but at the same time it can also recognise that positive policies have been put in place for ensuring peaceful coexistence between their various communities.

Conclusions

The peaceful coexistence of diverse communities in any country is a major line of defence against the outbreak of massive human rights violations reaching unmanageable levels.

Western states and political, economic, religious and other actors within the international community should refrain from any intrusive activity that could destabilise peaceful coexistence between various communities, as fragile or apparently solid as this may be, in any given country.

The peaceful coexistence between communities achieved or preserved by 'liberal democracies' or 'illiberal states' does not shield these states from criticism for their violations of civil and political rights. Even still, such criticism should not negate the

positive achievements made toward peaceful relations between their communities. No efficient constructive dialogue aiming to curb human rights violations can be envisaged if positive achievements are ignored or downplayed.