

Reflections on Right Wing Extremism¹

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Right wing extremism is alarmingly on the rise. Finding right wing extremism unacceptable, the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination has stated that: ‘there should be no place in the world for racist white supremacist ideas or any similar ideologies that reject the core human rights principles of human dignity and equality.’

The UN Human Rights Council found it so important to examine critically the issue of right wing extremism that it included it in the language of the renewal of the mandate of the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent in 2017. The Council tasked the Working Group as follows:

Also requests the Working Group to pay special attention in its annual report to the rising tide of racism and racial hatred, as evidenced by the resurgence of white supremacist ideologies, and extremist nationalist and populist ideologies, and to make specific recommendations in this regard;

The Working Group had the opportunity to observe up close the effects of right wing extremism on the lives of people of African descent during the Working Group’s country visits. In Italy, a member of parliament of African descent was referred to disparagingly as an orangutan by a fellow member of parliament. In the same country as well as in the United States, Canada, Germany, and Spain, being on the receiving end of unkind words, judgmental stares, and thoughtless gestures and acts, in schools, at work and on the streets, was the daily reality of people of African descent.

The wave of migration has contributed to the lack of understanding and fear of the person of African descent. In the countries we visited, people of African descent were immediately dismissed as being outsiders of society on account of the color of their skin. It did not matter if they were citizens or even second generation citizens and beyond. They were thought not to belong simply because they did not look the part. The perceived stress on national economies and social welfare systems was blamed on

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migrants including people of African descent without regard for their contributions for generations. If I may be so bold, it is wrong to see people as a burden. I humbly offer the view that people should be seen as an integral part of the solution in the way forward. Each person, by his or her efforts or by simply being, has the unique capacity to make a meaningful contribution to society.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants has stated together with other experts:

States can play a significant role in promoting positive perceptions about migrants in the general public, by using and promoting a positive discourse, and by presenting facts and studies, including about the contribution of migrants to societies. These steps will help combat the negative populist perception of migrants.

It is important to change the narrative and the approach by which migration is viewed. States must stop perpetuating the myth to stop irregular migration, and criminalizing irregular entry and stay, and move from a zero-tolerance attitude to a human rights-based approach to migration, fostering inclusiveness and integration.

If I may, the specter of terrorism has fanned the flames of right wing extremism. Its effect is to push the person of African descent farther away, making the possibility of inclusion and full respect for their rights dimmer. The security state has increased the risk of violations of their rights. People of African descent are perceived to be dangers to society. They are wrongly associated with terrorist groups. Their different physical characteristics make them especially susceptible to being singled out and falsely accused of crimes including terrorism. When people of African descent take to the streets to exercise their rights such as freedom of expression and peaceful assembly in their effort to achieve change for the betterment of society, they place themselves in an even greater risk of being branded as activist and later on as terrorist.

The rhetoric of right wing extremism is wholly incompatible with international and domestic human rights law. Equality and non-discrimination in concrete terms forbid any kind of superiority based on ethnicity. On the contrary, respect for human dignity demands full recognition of the infinite worth that every person possesses wherever the person may be and wherever the person may have come from. States are especially placed to affect the direction of the global and national discourse so as to proceed using the language of human rights and not the language of hate.

In the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, several recommendations have been advanced. Among them are:

51. For their survival, violent extremists require the tacit support of a wider circle of sympathizers. If violent extremists can be deprived of this support, their capacity to cause harm and evade justice will be greatly reduced. While engagement with communities marked by a long history of distrust of the government can pose a challenge, there are a number of community engagement strategies that hold promise. I therefore recommend that Member States:

(a) Develop joint and participatory strategies, including with civil society and local communities, to prevent the emergence of violent extremism, protect communities from recruitment and the threat of violent extremism, and support confidence-building measures at the community level by providing appropriate platforms for dialogue and the early identification of grievances;

We in the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent offer the Durban Declaration Program of Action and International Decade for People of African Descent Program of Activities as instruments that will provide guidance in this connection. The Working Group urges States to transform them into living instruments. The Working Group recommends the adoption of domestic measures that will adapt the standards in these instruments in a way appropriate to the unique situation of States.

Thank you very much.