The Illusions of Illiberal Opportunism

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Illiberal opportunism is a major threat to democracy. The case of France is a good illustration of this phenomenon. For electoral reasons, mainline political parties and their leaders might be tempted to endorse illiberal values and narratives when their country is confronted to what are perceived as major security threats. Liberal politicians might not necessarily believe what they are led to say, they want to maintain themselves in power. There is a certain degree of hypocrisy, although it is easy at some point to believe in what one has first proclaimed for opportunistic reasons.

This phenomenon obscures the liberal mind. Over the last two years, the temptation for illiberal opportunism has been too high to resist. The successive attacks led by jihadists in 2014 and 2015 in Paris and the following year in Nice have led several politicians in the socialist government to embrace a war discourse that goes very much against the essence of liberalism. Laws of exception were set in place, which included some very problematic rules. President Hollande declared that “France was at war” and that it was going to be “mercy less”, whereas his Prime Minister spoke of “wars of civilizations”. The approval ratings of the government were dramatically low and the pressure from the right, especially the extreme right, was high. A move toward some dose of illiberalism was thought to be the antidote to those electoral problems.

Democracies are confronted to an old dilemma: the balancing between rights and security. Indeed, the laws of exception enforced since the November 2015 attacks have led to the infringement of some rights as the police, the army and security services have been given new powers. Rights matter when there is no security threat, security trumps rights when there is a security threat.

The infringement of rights violates a basic liberal principle. What about the efficacy of these measures? In an outburst of illiberal opportunism, the government launched an initiative, the stripping of French nationality of those criminals who were guilty of terrorist acts who would carry another passport. It would seem very unlikely that this would create a deterrent for those willing to commit suicide attacks. Yet, although eventually the initiative was dropped, this idea carried a lot of support. At the local level, some mayors also wanted to enforce a rule that would ban Islamic bathing suits (the so-called “burkinis”) because those dresses that cover the entire body from head to toes (like a scuba diver suit) would go against the rule of “laïcité” and constitute some kind of a threat in the actual context. As we see here, ridicule (the law not the dress) is not an obstacle for opportunist strategies.

Illiberal opportunism is the product of fear, media exposure and political tensions. France will become a standard case, of course the Brexit phenomenon and the Trump election, point at the same direction. As politicians believe that there will be an electoral payoff if they flex the muscles, they will all the more do so when they see their adversaries calling for a tougher stance in the face of danger. This crescendo movement is the landmark of illiberal bubbles and the media, by the climate of fear they perpetuate when covering in a sensationalistic mode terrorist attacks also bear a responsibility. Terrorist attacks have benefited two categories of professionals who saw their audience rise: politicians and journalists. Luckily, the tone adopted by the media is now less emphatic and pictures of terrorists that tended to glorify them have partially disappear. Eventually war prone
discourses might wane, yet the effects they leave on people remain. Illiberal opportunism has longstanding effects on social tensions between different communities or ethnic groups.

There is just one reason to rejoice: in the end, illiberal opportunism does not necessarily include a payoff. Although some populist leaders might be elected, as in the case of Trump, for liberal mainline politicians the illiberal stance is not rewarding. Former President Sarkozy lost the primaries. Neither President Hollande nor his former Prime Minister are in the race for the May election. Political opportunism does not work: it is not an antidote against the vacuum of a liberal political project which clearly need to be thought anew.

