Combining Justice with Power: How to Challenge the Narrative of Democratic Authoritarian Populism

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Israel's Nation-State Law can be seen as an expression of the kind of democratic authoritarian populism that appears to be spreading globally. As articulated by scholars like Jan-Werner Mueller (*What is Populism?*), this sort of populism constructs an exclusionary notion of the "people" in the name of which the populist leader exercises authority, increasing inter-group tensions and blaming social and other ills on "others" who find themselves within the borders of the polity but are not, ethnically or religiously or by shared historical or moral experience, "the people".

So, in the manner of democratic authoritarian populism, we have the Nation-State Law, which, as other contributions to this debate have set out, elevates the Jewish "people" as the sole group that may exercise the right of self-determination in Israel, and which establishes different classes of citizenship in light of the assignment of full peoplehood to Jews alone.

The key promise of this populism is to make the "people", defined in exclusionary terms, strong or great – or great again; this entails assuring that "others", who may be seen as getting in the way of that mission are, at best, marginalized and subject to discrimination and occasional violence – or at worst, to ethnic cleansing or genocide. The nature of this power-based ideology that elevates the exclusionary concept of the people has been articulated in full clarity by Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's own democratic authoritarian ruler: "The weak crumble, are slaughtered and are erased from history while the strong, for good or for ill, survive".

In a forthcoming article in the International Journal of Constitutional Law, I argue against scholars such as Jan-Werner Mueller (for instance), that the answer to this kind of democratic authoritarian populism (or populism of the "right") is not anti-populist liberalism or traditional elite-bargained pluralism. What is required is not simply to invoke individual rights, ideals of freedom, equality and dignity, at all of which the adherents of the democratic authoritarian populist ideology react with scorn as the instruments of the "weak", but to create new forms of solidarity, democratic engagement, and collective power, which eventually will combine justice with the *power* to challenge the narrative of the (exclusively-defined) people made strong by the leader. An argument along these lines has also been made recently by Chantal Mouffe, in *For a Left Populism*. While Mouffe comes from a strong European leftist background, I believe that alternatives to authoritarian populism can combine left and other political ideals and values, including those associated with older moral and religious traditions (I consider for example French President Emmanuelle Macron as espousing an alternative populism to that of the right and not as a conventional centrist or center-right, or center-left, politician).

The alternative visionary around which such new front might be formed in Israel is well-expressed by Karin Loevy's contribution to this debate, expressed by the term: "a state of all its citizens." As Loevy rightly points out (based on my experience of decades of teaching as a visitor rand lecturing in Israel), in many respects Israel is a socially fragmented community. This very fact gives rise to hope that an alternative unifying political narrative to that of democratic authoritarian populism could produce a winning coalition; i.e. this is not an impossible battle against some pre-given form of solidarity on which the exclusionary authoritarian populists can easily build their movement, resting with confidence.

The authoritarian democratic populists have managed to present anyone who opposes them as the "left" or "extreme left" – politically irrelevant extremists who run down the country at home and abroad. Above all in these circumstances the opposition must find ways to shed this labelling and rather than turning inward for consolation, turn outward, building coalitions as broadly as possible.

In a certain way, the exercise of the Nation-State Law may even have been helpful for this, as one saw in the common demonstrations of Israeli Arabs, Druze, and Jews opposed to the democratic authoritarian populist project. In his inspiring contribution to this debate, Hassan Jabareen quotes the words of an Israeli parliamentarian in the 1980s, concerning a common struggle to live with equality and dignity, a struggle uniting Israeli Arabs with "democratic Jewish forces".

One must, as Karin Loevy puts it, leave the Tel Aviv bubble and reach out to improbable but still possible allies, for example, Jewish religious communities. Judaism never was and is not an ideology of pure *Machtpolitik*; justice is an essential premise of Jewish belief and life. The democratic authoritarian populist distortion of Judaism as a basis for the construction of a "people" that when following a leader is made strong, and which only really cares about strength, must surely be an abomination to any seriously religious person.

As I discuss in the above-mentioned forthcoming article on populism, the progressive Bernie Sanders movement in America has shown the ways in which new forms of collective grassroots solidarity can be created in opposition to populism on the right. Inspiring young political candidates, aimed with sophisticated organizing techniques that exploit social media and build community networks across fragmented populations, can mobilize those who previously were apolitical, alienated or cynical about politics. As the star politician of this trend, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez likes to put it, "when we organize we win". Israel is a small country; Tel Aviv is a large city. It will not take a huge number of votes to accomplish a tectonic shift in the *Knesset*. Israel needs an Ocasio-Cortez. Based on my contact with young people in Israel through the universities at which I have taught and lectured, I am hopeful that an Ocasio-Cortez, and maybe more than one, will arise – perhaps soon. It is no time to give up the game to Netanyahu and his democratic authoritarian populism.

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