Beliefs, Brains and Breaking Chains

How Education on "Living Together" can Promote Freedom of Religion or Belief in Lebanon amid rising Populist Narratives

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Introduction

Interest in the protection and promotion of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) has significantly increased during the past decade in a progressively diverse world in general, and in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in particular. Usually considered as a Western concept that does not resonate with the religious and cultural values of the area, the term has not previously been devoted much attention, is relatively under-researched, or uses frameworks from Western literature to develop claims that are – more often than not – contextually spurious.

Furthermore, the rise of exclusionary populism across countries has posed significant challenges to the principles of FoRB and "living together" through propagating speeches laden with hate and calls to violence especially against religious minorities and groups whose beliefs are different from those in power. In addition, many individuals – including the non-religious – face structural discrimination in schools, places of employment, and local communities.

However, advancements are also being recorded around the world by civil society organizations adopting a human rights approach in promoting inclusive citizenship and living together. For instance, several organizations – including Adyan Foundation for Diversity, Solidarity and Human Dignity, based in Beirut – invest considerable effort in formal and non-formal "education on living together" programs to increase awareness on the concepts of FoRB, diversity, and citizenship while supporting activists in their mission to challenge discriminatory practices, engage in policy reform, and inspire change.

Furthermore, the additional layer of opening up spaces for dialogue that allow both students and activists to share their experiences, pose their questions and discuss best practices strengthens their knowledge and provides a platform for cross-regional cooperation.

Therefore, my research project aims at exploring how "education on living together" – which includes education on FoRB – is one tool that can be used in mitigating the adverse effects of exclusionary populist narratives while fostering respect for diversity. This could manifest in the form of classes, courses, initiatives as well as peer learning and support provided through coalitions or networks. Based on the above, I argue that:

- Raising awareness of one's self and the "different" other increases understanding of diversity, pluralism and FoRB while equipping individuals with sufficient knowledge to deconstruct fear that is sometimes utilized by populist leaders and parties to create "in" and "out" groups.
- Encouraging students as well as activists to be proactive rather than reactive in the face of discrimination through supporting their initiatives for protecting FoRB and promoting "living together" increases cross-communitarian solidarity and widens the definition of who the "people" are.
- Using knowledge, influence and recorded changes in attitudes and perceptions of FoRB and diversity can help to advocate for new policies and reforms that promote inclusive citizenship and strengthen social cohesion.

By further exploring this three-layer dynamic, I would be able to develop a set of recommendations for different stakeholders on how to better target programs related to FoRB and "living together." However, this article does not claim that "education for living together" is a wand that will magically reverse the negative effects of populism, nor does it seek to present it as a "one-solution-fits-all" that works equally in all contexts. It simply seeks to further study how this method can be used as an awareness tool in societies that are prone to misinformation and hate speech.

For the purposes of this essay, I will use FoRB and religious freedom somewhat interchangeably, despite the fact that the former has a broader definition. In some instances, I will also refer to "education on diversity" in addition to "education on living together" to differentiate between the theoretical and practical aspects of learning. Finally, religious minorities will be used to refer to groups that are smaller in number, or who find themselves excluded in a society where the majority of people are from another religion.

Populism, "othering" and the construction of fear

Literature on populism is abundant. The complexity of the term at hand has led scholars – including political scientists, sociologists, historians and philosophers – to find a definition that encompasses its different layers. Despite "almost" being impossible, they succeeded in pinpointing important elements that can be used to further understand the dynamic of populism and its consequences on individuals, groups and societies. Based on the many definitions developed throughout the years, I will refer to the following components to provide a general framework for the subsequent sections:

- An inherent focus on a homogeneous definition of "the people," as the only ones able to legitimize the understanding of democracy and democratic decision-making, which is why populism incessantly calls on "the people," "the under-privileged," "the righteous" or the "other 99%";[1]
- A "Manichean" or "us vs. them" construction that pits one group against the other and causes conflicts in diverse societies, thus hindering policies that promote religious freedom and inclusive citizenship;[2]
- An anti-pluralist approach, where populism implies that only a selected group is considered as part of the "people," creating a dichotomy between "in" and "out" groups as defined by those in power.[3]

The aforementioned features can easily be manipulated to create an "other" that can hold the blame for the shortcomings of state and non-state institutions. However, the issue lies in our construction of "us" and "them." Therefore, one might ask: who is considered "privileged" and who is not? Are refugees really the ones less marginalized than citizens in Western communities? Do religious minorities have more privileges or rights than the majority groups in different MENA countries? The answers to these questions lie in the salient perceptions of the "people" and "enemy," whose characteristics are defined and developed by populist individuals or groups, based on their interests and gains.

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[1] Katsambekis, Giorgos: "The Populist Surge in Post-Democratic Times: Theoretical and Political Challenges," in: The Political Quarterly 88 (2016), pp. 202–210.

[2] Sengul, Kurt: "Swamped: The Populist Construction of Fear, Crisis and Dangerous others in Pauline Hanson's Senate Speeches," in: Communication Research and Practice 6 (2020), pp. 20–37.

[3] Müller, Jan-Werner: What is Populism?, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2016.

One can also consider that populism is not merely a term but rather a powerful tool for political mobilization and communication. Capitalizing on the "fear" and "ignorance" factors, exclusionary populists usually look for "scapegoats" to blame for ruining their "ideal" society because they are "different."[4] For example, this dynamic is quite evident among right-wing leaders in the West who promote Islamophobia under the pretense that Muslims have different values than their own, and that they are merely the protectors of diversity, equality, freedom and tolerance, while they are actually clearly violating some of the basic tenants of FoRB.[5] Similarly, Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities in the MENA region are also prone to discriminatory narratives and exclusion by Islamist populists who focus in their narratives on the "purity" of Islam and the refusal of "Western-imposed" values to which they believe that most non-Muslim groups adhere.

Furthermore, both religion and politics have a strong connection to "fear." It could also be said that populism and "fear" are correlated, meaning that the higher the fear, the stronger the populist narrative, and vice versa.[6] Populist leaders often refer to the overly simplistic claim that certain religions are inherently violent, and that followers of this religion are automatic perpetrators. Thus, they neglect studying the intricate interplay of political, historical and socio-psychological factors that contribute to human rights abuses in general and FoRB in particular in diverse contexts.[7] In fact, it is quite common to see that religious groups who are persecuted in one country can be perpetrators in another where they are a majority or hold power. Furthermore, the Social

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[4] Bergmann, Eiríkur: "Populism and the Politics of Misinformation," in: Safundi 21 (2020), pp. 251–265.

[5] Sengul, Kurt: "Swamped: The Populist Construction of Fear, Crisis and Dangerous others in Pauline Hanson's Senate Speeches," in: Communication Research and Practice 6 (2020), pp. 20–37.

[6] Palaver, Wolfgang: "Populism and Religion: On the Politics of Fear," in: Dialog 58 (2019), pp. 22–29.

[7] Bielefeldt, Heiner: "Freedom of Religion or Belief – A Human Right under Pressure," in: Oxford Journal of Law and Religion (1/2012), pp. 15–35.

Identity Theory[8] posits that individuals belong to different social categories and have multiple identities that might become salient based on certain cues, whether social, economic, cultural, religious or political. This is particularly true for members of minority groups, including immigrants, who often have two or more cultural identities that can be manipulated through populist narratives, which heightens feelings of fear and perceived threat and might hinder their freedom in expressing their religious beliefs.

Because contemporary populism generally rejects all forms of social and cultural pluralism while promoting the idea of "one homogeneous group,"[9] and given that most people do not feel invested in the defense of human rights, we can observe that the "ethos of solidarity"[10] is weak in some areas and stronger in others. Furthermore, people's interest in getting to know the "different other" is not always piqued especially if they live in a homogeneous community, with no access to people who believe, think or act differently that they do. The importance of diversity in the realm of FoRB is due to the fact that it extends beyond differences in belief systems and rites to encompass the intrinsic value of human dignity that should be respected by all.

Education on "living together": The key to counteract populist narratives and promote religious freedom

Adyan Foundation focuses on the following two layers of "education on living together":

a) Building the capacities of children and youth towards respecting the right to difference with an open mind and positivity in thought and behavior;
b) Strengthening the spirit of initiative and active participation in public life, within a framework of cross-cultural and cross-sectarian partnership in

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[8] Tajfel, Henri/Turner, John: "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior," in: Stephen Worchel/William G. Austin (eds.), Psychology of Intergroup Relation, Chicago: Hall Publishers 1986, pp. 7–24.

[9] Palaver: Populism and Religion.

[10] Alston, Philip: "The Populist Challenge to Human Rights," in: Journal of Human Rights Practice 9 (2017), pp. 1–15.

> view of collaborating towards realizing the "common good" and building an effective inclusive citizenship.[11]

One can notice that the terms used in this definition are quite general and global. The intention behind this explanation was to allow different individuals and organizations to contextualize terms in such a way that resonates with their local community. In fact, most of the corpus on diversity management has been developed in the West and might not work as efficiently – if at all – in contexts such as the Middle East, due to different cultures, values, history and language being used.[12] Therefore, the contextualization of policies and curricula in diversity management is important, although it should not be an excuse to enhance divisions and abuse differences. This is not always easy given that most stakeholders lack the know-how due to limited resources or insufficient capacity-building on diversity management or education on "living together."

A good example of this is the work that Adyan Foundation has done in its non-formal educational programme "Training of Trainers on Freedom of Religion or Belief," which is the translated Arabic version of the course also implemented in English on the FoRB learning platform. This course is presented online twice a year, once for trainers, civil society actors and policy-makers and once for a specialized group of individuals interested in learning about FoRB, such as journalists, faith-based activists and artists. Adyan Foundation not only translated the content but also contextualized it to become fit for MENA participants. It did so by focusing on the narrative of "inclusive citizenship" and how it related to FoRB rather than simply relying on Western definitions and mechanisms, added a module on understanding FoRB from a religious perspective, and alluded to declarations in the area that were developed for promoting and protecting FoRB. In addition, it changed examples to include both violations of FoRB in the region as well as advancements being made in this field.

Similar programs are considered important because they increase learners' knowledge on human rights in general and FoRB in particular, which can be empowering because it increases their agency and shifts their perceptions of themselves and others from merely "victims" and "perpetrators" as presented in the populist narrative to "active citizens" working together to build communities and achieve justice.[13] However, acknowledging that narratives related to FoRB are not the same everywhere is important to avoid unifying experiences and undermining real claims of discrimination by certain "out-groups."[14]

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[11] Adyan Foundation: "Defining Education on Living Together," in: Adyan's Annual Report 2018–2019.

[12] Hennekam, Sophie/Tahssain-Gay, Loubna/Syed, Jawad: "Contextualizing Diversity Management in the Middle East and North Africa: A Relational Perspective," in: Human Resource Management Journal 27 (2017), pp. 459–476.

Because we distinguish between education of human rights (which is mainly theoretical) and education for human rights (which includes the practical aspect of it), scholars on multicultural education agree that "learning about, through, and for diversity and plurality is at the very heart of citizenship education."[15] In order for such a type of education to work in schools and centers, it is important that the values and ideals presented resonate with the experiences of students and learners. In other words, citizenship education in general focuses on one belonging to a nation-state, a unified "group," but sometimes ignores one's multi-layered identity and commitment to their groups and local communities.[16] Therefore, education on "living together" extends beyond assimilation and seeks to help students and learners to understand that they can be part of both the general "national civic culture" and their "specific cultural communities,"[17] making them less prone to populist narratives that sometimes capitalize on the fear of losing one's identity.

In her article "The Role of Peace-Education as a Coexistence, Reconciliation and Peace-Building Device in Ethiopia," Abdi defined education not only as a place to acquire knowledge but also as a place to develop one's attitudes, values and behavior.[18] This definition brought me back to the term "community of inquiry," where individuals consider themselves "one among the others" and where seeking knowledge is an intersection of their own ideas, belief and values with those of others.[19] In other words, the questions of "who am I?" and "what do I think and why?" are insufficient as they should also be asked reciprocally with other members of one's community. This notion is particularly interesting when relating it to populism, as members of communities can be different, and it posits that in order to understand one's self it is necessary to understand all surrounding people. This can increase awareness, reduce fear, build solidarity and strengthen social cohesion.

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[13] Osler, Audrey H.: "Higher Education, Human Rights and Inclusive Citizenship," in: Tehmina N. Basit/Sally Tomlinson (eds.), Social Inclusion and Higher Education, Bristol: Bristol University Press 2012, pp. 295–312.

[14] Osler: Higher Education.

[15] Veugelers, Wiel/De Groot, Isolde: "Theory and Practice of Citizenship Education," in: Wiel Veugelers/Fritz Oser (eds.), Education for Democratic Intercultural Citizenship (= Moral Development and Citizenship Education 15), Leiden/Boston: Brill 2019, pp. 14–41, p. 14.

[16] Banks, James A.: "Human Rights, Diversity, and Citizenship Education," in: The Education Forum 73 (2009), pp. 100–110.

[17] Banks: Human Rights.

[18] Abdi, Megersa Tolera: "The Role of Peace-Education as a Coexistence, Reconciliation and Peace-Building Device in Ethiopia," in: The Electronic Research Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities 2/2019, pp. 61–74.

Because schools are also considered communities and places of contact, they play a significant role in embedding values and norms.[20] In our definition of education on "living together," the second component focused on strengthening the spirit of initiative and active participation. Similarly, Westheimer identifies three versions of "good citizens" that I will apply to frame Adyan Foundation's educational "Alwan" programme:

- Personally-responsible citizens are the ones who respect the law, volunteer, are honest, respectful and self-confident.
- Participatory citizens do not merely volunteer, but participate in the organization of events, meaning that they are active in civic affairs and social life.
- Social justice-oriented citizens are the ones who are always seeking to find ways to improve their societies. They volunteer and organize, but they also ask the difficult questions to try to find the root causes of problems.

Therefore, developing educational programs that create active social justice-oriented citizens is extremely important to change attitudes and behavior towards diversity, increase the scope of who "the people" are and eventually de-legitimize discriminatory and divisive populist narratives.

"Alwan" (meaning colors) is a non-formal educational programme run by Adyan Foundation since 2007 in both public and private schools all over Lebanon. It provides young people between the ages of 15 and 17 with lessons aimed at promoting "living together" through active and inclusive citizenship, developing resilience to face extremist and sectarian narratives, and spreading awareness on the importance of participating in public life to promote human dignity and inclusive sustainable development. In particular, the programme is centered around three key concepts: religious diversity, partnership, and community service. The programme curriculum is delivered in the form of extracurricular clubs of 15 to 20 members and includes a blended learning approach between structured classroom and experimental sessions. It also includes debates, an inter-club excursion to discover the Lebanese heritage and a cross-communitarian social project. As is evident, the programme works on two layers, namely knowledge and action.

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[19] Splitter, Laurence J.: "Enriching the Narratives we Tell about Ourselves and our Identities: An Educational Response to Populism and Extremism," in: Educational Philosophy and Theory 54 (2020), pp. 21–36.

[20] Westheimer, Joel: "Civic Education and the Rise of Populist Nationalism," in: Peabody Journal of Education 94 (2019), pp. 4–16.

In 2021, Adyan Foundation commissioned Ecorys – a research and consultancy company – to undertake a two-year-long evaluation of the Alwan programme. Based on the initial – and not yet published – draft of the mid-line report, this impact evaluation is being developed using qualitative interviews with a variety of programme stakeholders, combined with a quantitative survey to be completed by participants and non-participants of the programme. The main objective is to evaluate the actual impact of the programme twelve years after its start in 2019 to ascertain whether it fulfilled its objectives of developing knowledgeable, inclusive and active citizens.

Based on the initial results, it became clear to us that the programme remained relevant to the Lebanese context throughout, especially through its focus on teachings and practices of other religions and its promotion of interreligious understanding and FoRB. In addition, it performed extremely well in bringing people together, especially through excursions and community service initiatives that broke "barriers," which are – more often than not – used to ignite dormant or new conflicts. There were also strong stories of change that have been gathered by students and teachers showing clear improvements in Alwan participants' attitudes, behavior, and knowledge regarding diversity and "living together." Naturally, there are some areas that also need improvement, including – but not limited to – updating the curriculum to become more reflective of new changes, finding better strategies to record change, increasing the element of contact, and better engaging other stakeholders such as parents to ensure that the educational process does not end in school.

Despite these discrepancies, "Alwan" remains an important example on how education on "living together" – which includes the promotion of concepts such as diversity (natural differences present in society), pluralism (the mechanism by which diversity is managed), personal and collective freedoms (including FoRB) – can develop a well-informed, active and inclusive citizen.

Such a modality will reduce the effect of populist narratives of individuals because it broadens one's definition of the "people," deconstructs the "us" versus "them" binary through promoting solidarity, and builds a "plural" society where individual identities and differences are celebrated.

What is the way forward?

In conclusion, we have seen that both diversity training and diversity education can play an important role in fostering an inclusive society and mitigating the negative effects of populism through developing knowledge, challenging stereotypes and transforming attitudes.

In order to effectively counteract negative populist narratives, I propose the series of recommendations below:

- Build the capacities of teachers, school administrators and trainers through courses on diversity, FoRB, and inclusive citizenship to help students to think critically, question, understand their environment, care about public issues and become empathetic.
- Involve parents in formal and non-formal educational programs to ensure that what students learn extends beyond the realm of the school (for those programs implemented in schools).
- Include the notions of diversity, FoRB and inclusive citizenship in existing history, social studies and religious education curricula, while taking into consideration religious, ethnic, and linguistic differences as well as the multiple understandings of citizenship and diversity.
- Create safe and respectful learning environment where students from different backgrounds can interact and listen to different perspectives through developing dialogue guidelines or "social contract."
- Work on the macro level through developing comprehensive educational policies that address the root causes of populism and promote inclusive citizenship and FoRB at all levels. This includes incorporating multicultural perspectives in textbooks, encouraging cross-cultural exchanges, and developing community service initiatives. General educational policies and guidelines such as the Toledo Guidelines and the Human Dignity Educational Program can be used as starting points.

- Integrate the content of declarations and promote FoRB and education on "living together" in a practical manner in schools, training and learning centers, places of worship, businesses and local communities.
- Increase cross-collaboration between schools and other agents of change to provide additional programs, workshops and extracurricular activities that promote FoRB and inclusive citizenship. By leveraging their expertise and resources, these organizations can contribute to well-rounded programs that refute divisive narratives and promote social cohesion.

By working together, teachers, schools, trainers, government agencies, civil society organizations and other stakeholders can collectively harness the power of formal and non-formal education to foster critical thinking, empathy and solidarity, which can become powerful weapons against exclusionary populism. However, it does not end here, as education is only one step in the development of inclusive citizenship. It would be quite simplistic for us to say that this would be sufficient to "eliminate" populism. Scholars and practitioners should be aware that there are a multitude of social, economic, religious and political factors at hand, all of which should be addressed for developing just and inclusive societies.