

PARIS ATTACK AND THE RISE OF EUROPE'S FAR RIGHT

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A large number of prominent people, around the world, recently took up the "Je Suis Charlie" rallying cry in support of the massacred cartoonists and staff of the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo. As a show of solidarity, it is well meaning, well intended and utterly useless. It reaffirms that the people of the democratic world support free speech, but there is nothing new there except the sympathy directed at Hebdo and to some extent France. It is also clear that they are frightened and befuddled by the incomprehensible violence being unleashed by people who oppose, in the name of Islam, anything they consider offensive to their faith.

What does anyone who believes in the principles underlying democracy and human rights do about a group of people who are willing to kill you if you offend their religious and/or cultural sensibilities (which are often intertwined)? Reading through the commentaries, and watching the debates, that are now commonplace – it is evident that there is no real answer, other than to publicly restate belief in the democratic principles (Je Suis Charlie), and to take police action against those directly involved in such violence.

There is no straight answer because governments cannot tackle this issue effectively without first acknowledging that the faith system on whose behalf (or in whose name) these attacks are carried out explicitly permits, even demands, such actions. Without first acknowledging this reality, and then rejecting such exhortations with clarity, there can be no true forward movement on this issue. No democratic government is prepared to make that acknowledgement for at least two reasons: (1) it will bring into question the secular environment that democratic states swear by, and the principles they uphold; and (2) it will embolden the far right elements in their societies to take a more aggressive stance, which could result in violence between adherents of different faiths.

Both reasons flow, ultimately, from political considerations. Elected politicians want nothing more than social and economic stability while they prepare for the next electoral cycle. They do not have the inclination (and rarely the time) to address other issues unless those directly and powerfully impact on their electoral prospects. They also have a distinct disinterest in dealing with ideologies that question the status quo, because such impulses tend to vector unpredictably. Leaders, therefore, often opt to pretend that these ideologies simply do not exist.

As a result, the party at the helm inevitably pays a political price. Now, the European Union is poised on a political precipice where this is about to happen to the mainstream parties that have been in power or close to it for decade. Far right groups are gathering strength in France (the National Front), in Britain (UKIP), and potentially even in Germany (PEGIDA, though it appears temporarily disabled). This time, as in the past, change is being driven by voter sentiment.

A shift towards the extreme right in the EU has been developing for over a decade, but now it is clearly visible, and it is strengthening. Mainstream politicians seem at a loss about how to handle this drift to the far right. They should not be. The solution is simple and staring them in the face. They may wish to look to the Indian example, where a rational right of centre party has succeeded beyond all expectations by expressing basic truths and promising stability, order and adherence to reason.

The EU today is faced with deep strategic foreboding, growing economic uncertainty, increasing political fragility and a general lack of confidence in its competitive abilities. In this situation, mainstream political leaders in the member states should not take the easy way out. They must stop repeating the same tired old clichés in response to the questions that arise out of Charlie Hebdo and other similar incidents. If they have to shift a little to the right to speak the truth, so be it. Or else, terror events will increase in frequency and public opinion will shift much farther to the right. And that has never been good for Europe.