Solving Ethnic Conflicts through Models of Autonomy: Representation, Self-determination and the Limits of Liberal Democracy

written by DEMOS ARAŞTIRMA | 17 Haziran 2015

Interview with Dr. Ephraim Nimni, Reader in the Department of School of Politics at Queen's University, Belfast, UK. He has done considerable research in the field of ethnic conflicts and conflict resolution, among them the Israeli Palestinian conflict. His current work circles around self-determination and models of national cultural autonomy which do not aim at establishing separate nation-states.

Together with Dr. Elçin Aktoprak from Ankara University, he organized the workshop on "New Modalities of Democratic Autonomy", which was held in Ankara, 15-18 May 2015, and funded by the British Council.

This is the first time that this kind of workshop on autonomy models has been organized in Turkey. Can you tell us a little more about what was the idea behind the idea of bringing scholars together from many different countries to discuss this topic here in Ankara?

I visited Turkey before and the idea behind it is that – not only in Turkey – but many other places there exist many nationalist demands to constitute independent states. The problem, however, is that in the world that we live in there is not enough space for every national minority to constitute a national state. So, we have to think about ways and manners of creating fulfillment for the national minorities so they receive a sense of self-governance and self-determination, but in a way that doesn't dismember exiting states and creates havoc. Particularly, this is the problem when the population of the territory is mixed and you cannot for certain isolate one from the other. This is one of the main recipes for ethnic-cleansing. So, we want to think of models and ways of avoiding this.

The topic is now becoming very fashionable in Europe because of the situation in the United Kingdom and in Spain. The Scottish National Party just won an overwhelming victory and have voiced demands for independence. Also in Spain, the Catalan are very strongly demanding independence. So, there has to be some kind of rearrangement these people to have some satisfaction in terms of identity and self-determination and self-governance in a way that is not dismembering for the existing state. Because every time there is a secession, it is a like a Russian Matryoshka doll, you know, you pull one out and there is another one inside and so on.

The is a problem also in the way nation-states are organized, particularly, liberal nation-states, which give self-determination to individuals, but not to communities. So, people vote – one person one vote, but the voice of the community is drowned, particularly one they are a numerical minority. This is what brought us to discuss the issue here and it was a very very successful workshop in that we discussed the Kurdish issue, but also went beyond the Kurdish issue and we talked about this issue in general. And we can see that the very rich experience which is developing in the Kurdish area is very useful for other parts of the world. So, we are now moving to creating a research group in which we all will be participating and permanent link between our universities here in Ankara and Belfast.

Would this also include more international collaboration in this respect?

Yes, this is the idea. There is a lot of dissatisfaction with the present structure of nation-states. So, we want to bring resources from different areas to try to come up with more original ideas about how we can get people who live in mixed areas to feel represented and do not seek to dismember the states because of that. We want to find new modalities of representation of minorities.

Provocatively, we could argue that liberal states already have some kind of regulations for minority representation. What do especially non-territorial models of autonomy enable what these other forms of liberal representation cannot?

The simply problem is that the principle one person one vote creates individuals that are sovereign, but at the same time it does not see that those individuals are between themselves different. It does not recognize the difference between individuals and because there is no intermediate connections between the individuals and the whole state, those people you belong to minority communities feel that because they are numerical minorities they cannot have their voice heard, because this system is based on the idea that those who get the most votes win and govern. So, by definition there is a problem here in that the system of representation cannot ensure the representation of minorities because it is based on this kind of individual representation and it is based on the idea of majority individual representation and therefore we say there is a democratic deficit in liberal democratic system in that it cannot achieve the representation of national minorities. This is at the heart at all this discontent and at the heart of the demands for secession and self-determination.
If this is not resolved, it expands to a situation where it cannot be managed and develops an antagonism.

This then triggers another question. Many minorities argue that the only way to secure their rights is through secession and that real self-determination can only be achieved in a separate state or at least territorial autonomy. What can non-territorial or cultural autonomy promise that a separate state does not?

By and large minorities live in mixed territories. When you create a secessionist – and the experience in this part of the world is very strong about that – you have massive movements of population to the area. So, even in liberal democracies there is always a propensity for ethnic-cleansing when there are groups of minorities that do not fit into the identity of the nation-state. So, we would like to see two things: find a way that the nation-state allows for the representation of others and secondly, find a way in which it is possible to enjoy the advantages of being a very big state, while at the same time allowing the people who are different communities to feel part of that state because they are represented in the government. In other words, what we are thinking about is expanding the idea of democracy to allow more representation and participation. This is something that is very limited in liberal democracy.

So, actually what you are saying is that the idea of non-territorial autonomy is fundamentally linked with the expansion of democracy.

Yes, absolutely, without that it cannot work. You see, in the way that the liberal state is organized because it is based on the idea of liberal representation, you can have a situation in which minorities are discriminated without infringing on the rights of the individuals. For example, the state can unilaterally decide how the electoral constituencies are drawn in a way that sidelines the minorities, and still the minorities have the rights to self-expression, they can petition and argue, but the point is that because of the numbers – because they are a minority – because you count people – they are always going to lose in this kind of situation. That is the point were liberal democracy has a representational deficit. What we are working on is to expand democracy, not to reduce it, by

allowing the representation of individuals and communities.

So, how does this practically work? What kinds of regulations or mechanisms can actually be written into law to provide precisely what you are saying here, that an ethnic, cultural or minority group can receive not only the right to proper representation, but also competences in the sense of self-determination?

The important point is representation, so that they can participate in the central debate of how the state is organized. The most successful example of that is Northern Ireland, where the majority is not individual, but it has to be the majority of the two communities. In that way, the two communities feel they have a say. It is not a numerical question. Because if it was a numerical question, the people who are the largest ethnic community will always win and the community which is the smaller one, will continuously feel discriminated. So, it is a way of changing the manners of representation. We expand democracy by allowing not only individual, but also community representation.

But, if we talk about the area of finance. The distribution economic resources is a very important question in this. What this question be solved by what you are saying?

If the communities have the representation and the ability say in the way things operate, it will require more consultation between communities. This system is a system that works when people are prepared to compromise and to agree with each other to share resources, because the system provides a lot of advantages if you are prepared to comprise. It entirely changes the situation to one where different groups agree to a fair distribution between communities. Also, the management of economic resources should not only benefit one group, but also others.

So, this is not a one time resolution for all problems. It still means you still have to negotiate. Is that right?

Yes, it is a continuous situation. By the definition of what is a minority, these groups continuously change and shift. So, in many ways it requires revision where there are groups which have demands to try to elaborate mechanisms of incorporation. The important part here is that people who are members of different communities feel that the state represents them, and that the decisions that are made there are not made arbitrarily, but are made through this representation.

In the models that you have looked at or the different ways in which this has been implemented, are there any fundamental challenges that have to be tackled?

Yes, it goes the logic of the nation-state. The model of the nation-state was invented in western Europe at a very specific historical moment. And this model is obviously suitable for other parts of the world, like e.g. the Balkans. All the wars that have taken place in the Balkans result from the fact that the people of the communities want to have exclusive control over territory. When you have that situation, it becomes a kind of: my success is your defeat, because you cannot compromise. The territory is either yours or mine. So, if we can build a situation in which we can have a form of representation and that the territory can be shared, this also alights the fears of the communities, because they feel that by having a voice in the government, having representation, they can also be ensured that they will not be discriminated, because there own people are in the government. This is how it works in Northern Ireland.

What is exactly the difference territorial and non-territorial autonomy, especially if we think about the Kurds?

The Kurds in Turkey, for example, are concentrated in certain areas, where they form the majority of the population. So, if there is a territorial autonomy, there is no problem, because they are the majority of the population. But, in other parts, they form the minority of population. If I understood correctly, there are two million Kurds in Istanbul. Now, you cannot have a territorial autonomy for the Kurds in Istanbul, because this is a city. You cannot do that. You cannot divide it and say this part is Kurdish and this part is Turkish. So, the only way is to change the manner of representation. Instead of making representation by sections and areas, you represent by communities. You have an electoral role of a community and that community elects their representatives and these become those who govern.

This is an old model. It comes from the time of the Austrian socialists in the turn of the century, which they wanted to apply to the Austrian Imperial Empire. They developed a very elaborate model. I was very surprised to find that in the works of the contemporary Kurdish writers the ideas of this particular model are being expanded and developed, which an interesting situation because there is very little knowledge that those ideas existed before.

Do you think the model of Democratic Autonomy which is currently suggested by the Kurdish Movement is promising?

Very promising, not only for Turkey, but also for other countries. If it works in Turkey, it would become a model for other communities in different parts of the world. It would be a model which could alleviate many conflicts. If we look at examples around the world, the most protracted and vicious wars are between communities which inhabit one single territory, because the success of one is the loss of the other one, and there is very little compromise that takes place when there is this very antagonistic war.

And do you think that this model of Democratic Autonomy is just a solution for the Kurds or also for the other minorities in the country?

It is a solution to the democratic deficit that the liberal nation-state has created. We say that the democratic base has to be expanded, not only to representing individuals but also communities.

As you said, there are a lot of Kurds which are concentrated in one area, but on the other hand there are many Kurds who live in another area in the West of Turkey, for example, can a model of territorial and non-territorial autonomy be thought together?

Yes, this was the idea of the Austrian socialists. As I find it very surprising that this is used in the ideas of the Kurdish thinkers. What they said is that, in the areas where there is a homogeneous population the territorial governance and the national-community governance would be the same, but in the areas where there is a divided population, there should be a two-tier system of democratic government: one territorial and non-national and another one national and non-territorial.

So, both can actually work together.

They have to work together! According to this model.

If we return to the workshop, were these different types of models discussed there?

Yes, they were very successfully discussed and we had a very rich experience of many people, who also work in the Kurdish area. So, they brought their experience. We had people from different parts of the world, from Spain, from Northern Ireland also expressing their experiences. And the joint experience is created there, the feeling that there are similar problems in parts of the world and how we can find models which provide a possibility of bringing some hope for those people who are

involved in fighting against each other in order to gain control over a piece of territory.

Thank you very much, Ephraim, for this interview.