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'I do worry about democracy's future'

Our societes are becoming increasingly polarised. To tackle this we need a systemic approach, argues Thomas Carothers

In your recent book 'Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization' you looked at nine different countries with a high degree of political polarisation for common features. Right now, we see a wave of protests in many countries, from Chile to Lebanon. Are those protests driven by social polarisation or do they have other drivers of conflict?

I think, they have other drivers. I think the protests that we see around the world are mostly because of three different factors. First, anger over systemic corruption. Secondly, anger with respect to rising inequality and a sense of injustice. And then, thirdly, frustration about political overreach or, in some cases, presidents who extend their term beyond the limit and regimes that refuse to allow any political space.

Combinations of those three factors is at work in most of the protests that we see, whether it's Lebanon, Chile, Algeria, Russia or elsewhere. And that's different from the problem in democracies of polarisation, where you have really sharply conflicting narratives between two opposing political sides.

What does populism have to do with societal polarisation?

Populism is often a very polarising political project. A populist party or leader tends to polarise a country because the political project that they're pursuing is cast in terms of us versus them, bad versus good, dark versus light.

And so, they inject a polarising message into what we hope would be a more consensus-based political system. Yet, at the same time, not all polarised countries are polarised because of populism. The United States, for example, has been polarised for 20, 30, even 40 years. And it's not because of populism. It's because there are two profoundly different visions of the country. A conservative vision and a

progressive vision that simply don't get along. So populism is often polarising. But polarisation doesn't always come from populism.

How is this linked with trust and engagement?

Polarisation sometimes reflects a society in which you have two sides that are highly motivated and highly engaged, but they're often somewhat extreme. And that often leaves many people in the centre feeling politically homeless because they don't feel connected to the conflict between the two sides.

These people often wish there was greater consensus and greater common purpose in the society and less fighting over the different visions. In effect, political polarisation can increase engagement by those activists who are most attached to one side or the other, but it can decrease trust and engagement in a large set of people who feel left out.

That's why you make a difference between ideological and political polarisation?

Ideological polarisation is when you have two very different ideological visions of a country. If we think of Venezuela there's a vision of Hugo Chavez and his followers, who have a vision of the Bolivarian revolution. A left-oriented revolution of redistribution and greater equality. On the other side, we have a liberal-democratic view of typical market-based economic practices.

It has been a very sharp ideological polarisation over these two visions. Ideological polarisation can then translate into the political polarisation, which is the polarisation of political parties, political life, the legislature and the electoral processes. Ideological polarisation is a larger phenomenon, which then translates into specific political features.

Do you see common patterns of polarisation across countries?

One similar pattern is the powerful role of polarising leaders. Polarisation is often driven by a leader who embodies and pursues a political project that is very challenging to the system. If we think of President Erdogan in Turkey, if we think of Prime Minister Modi in India or, as I mentioned earlier, Hugo Chavez in Venezuela.

These are leaders who push a vision of a country, which challenges the standard vision or the standard system and insists on something very different. And this role of the polarising leader is quite common. It's rare to find a highly polarised country where you don't see the effects of a polarising leader.

So what can be done to overcome political divisions in polarised countries?

Citizens often dream in a polarised society of a leader who would bring the country back together. And we hope there will be somebody who could change the tone and content of politics to make it more consensual again. Unfortunately, that's actually rather unusual. Instead, we have to see that polarisation is overcome ideally through a whole series of measures. There might be bridge-building among the political parties, more dialogue if possible or more agreement on certain boundaries.

There might be reforms of the political system, like decentralising power, potentially changing the voting system to encourage the decline of the extremes and the rise of more centrist actors. We might see institutional reforms to strengthen independent institutions like the judiciary that need to resist powerful polarisation. We might see civic activities that would bridge citizens and create social capital in a country that resists the polarising narrative.

We might see media reforms that try to regulate some of the patterns of polarisation in social media or other forms of media that encourage extreme views. So, unfortunately, there's no simple response to polarisation. Instead, there have to be a series of measures all across society, from the political system down to the citizenry.

What are the chances to overcome the political division in the near future? Are you optimistic about the countries you investigated or are you rather pessimistic?

I'm sobered because I see the power and the seriousness of polarisation in these many places and I do worry about democracy's future. But I also see that citizens in democracies are searching for meaning. They're searching for a sense of belonging.

And in some cases, that's being manipulated by polarising figures or parties or leaders, who are pushing extreme identities or extreme views. But I also see many citizens looking for meaning in consensus and in peaceful political behaviour. They're fatigued by polarisation. So, democracy's future is up for grabs, but I'm not entirely pessimistic.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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