

INVITATION

BÖLL LUNCH DEBATE

Israel's democracy endangered?¹

A number of political developments put Israel's democracy under stress. A series of legislative initiatives in the Knesset aim at restricting the freedom of non-governmental organizations by limiting international funding, others aim at limiting the freedom of expression. Outside of the Knesset, human rights and peace NGOs have been under pressure through accusations of delegitimizing the State of Israel and being foreign agents. Lastly, individuals have been attacked both in the Palestinian Territories as well as in Israel by radical settlers or extremists in so called 'price tag' attacks.

Is Israel's democracy under threat? What can Israel's allies do? What is the role of the European Union?

Modern Democracies live on the acceptance of opinions different from the current mainstream and the government position, on everyone's right to speak out their mind without being threatened or even persecuted for doing so. The power to rule a country is, in a democracy, only a borrowed power and it is not unusual that any politician in such a state will spend most of his career in the opposition. On the other hand, there are certainly opinions and political movements that no democratic state can allow to exist without jeopardising its own existence. To find the balance between freedom and security is one of the more delicate issues of the modern state and obviously even the best of agreements will never reach a 100% consensus.

That being said, there have recently been some serious doubts about whether or not the Israeli government still is on its way to pursue this ideal of a modern democracy. When a boost in "price tag" vandalism is combined with legislation specifically aimed at cutting of funding for left-wing NGOs, the question has to be asked what precisely democracy means to the people in power? Is it a simple matter of gaining the majority of the votes and then implementing the will of that majority, or does democracy involve more than that? What about minority rights, freedom of expression or human rights?

Of course, democracy in Israel doesn't simply cease to exist in a matter of days. But there are signs that point toward a deterioration and observers should be wary in terms of upcoming events and legislation. For one thing, the Palestinian narrative has always been somewhat underrepresented in the Israeli public media, despite the fact that Palestinians represent quite an important minority in the country. Now, however,

¹ **Guest speakers** were: **Yariv Oppenheimer**, Executive Director, Peace Now, whose Jerusalem offices have recently been vandalized by price tag activists, and whose colleague Hagit Ofra was personally threatened; **Mossi Raz**, Executive Director, "All for Peace"-Radio, a multi-lingual Israeli-Palestinian radio station, which has been closed based on the accusation of operating illegally in Israel. Mossi Raz is a former Member of Knesset; **Ms. Sawasn Zaher**, solicitor at Adalah - The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, who together with other human rights organizations in Israel advocates against laws that could fundamentally limit the freedom of expression of Israeli non-governmental organizations and minorities and thus civil society involvement overall. The meeting was moderated by **Claude Weinber**, Director Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union. The event was held under Chatham House Rule. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.

it has taken a turn for the worse, as the government is trying to close down certain channels of communication for certain NGOs. The Palestine-based "All for Peace" radio, for instance, has been closed due to alleged accusations of inciting protests against the government. New legislation will restrain NGOs from receiving funding from third states, alongside with another new law which could seriously interfere with the freedom of expression, as it is supposed to cut off financial support for NGOs that do not stick to certain government-based ideologies.

Furthermore, a continuing and reinforced effort to promote segregation of the communities and even whole townships might lead to a further alienation of the Arab minority. Basic human rights are put on hold as Palestinians are deprived of their right to family reunification – be it with West-Bank Palestinians or any other person from an Arabic country. From this perspective, every Arabic person is branded as a potential danger to the state of Israel and thus, freedom from discrimination is surrendered to the alleged gain in security. The atmosphere in Israel seems to be changing as the society and the country's democratic character are under threat.

Israel should be proud of its democratic achievements over the past decades. Although the country has been the centre of many conflicts over the years and continues to be one of the top security issues in the region, it still managed to uphold the rule of law, democracy and freedom of expression – If not perfectly well, then at least to some larger degree. The recent developments described during this HBS lunch debate are worrying but further progress down that road is far from self-evident. There still is time to change the course of action and it seems that constructive feedback is still welcome at this point of time. The European Union has to take a firm stand in this matter, as Netanyahu and his ministers are still listening to them and are open for criticism. Much emphasis is placed upon the fact that it is not the right-wing government itself that is perceived as a threat, but the continuous effort to undermine the basic democratic right to freedom of expression. Governments may change over time; the rules of the game must not.