

Comparative politics

ATLE HETLAND

EN ROUTE

People do care for each other and the world, after all, and more now than in a good while. That was part of the lessons from the Norwegian local and regional elections a few days ago.

In a land with a long coastline, people used an image from the sea; they said that the foam of the conservative wave-tops is gone or, the right-wing parties have had their wings clipped. But in Norway, even the conservative parties would be considered centrist in most other countries, and in all mainstream parties there is a shift towards more solidarity and concern for those who need help, including refugees and immigrants.

In today's column, I shall report on and draw some political developments in Norway and elsewhere in Europe. Also, I would like to underline the importance of *comparative politics* and *political analysis* – for people in a little land like Norway and big Pakistan, where political parties are being shaped, and the political culture is 'en route'. Well, in all democracies, it is essential that political debates go on all the time, and that new ideas and analyses are shared.

"All Norwegian political parties would fit well into the Democratic Party", said a former American Ambassador to Norway, comparing with his own country. The Norwegian Labor Party, the two small socialist parties further to the left, and the Green Party would probably agree, yet see themselves more liberal and further to the left. The Norwegian Conservative Party and a smaller party further too the right, currently in power in Norway, would probably agree, because they are not as far to the right as the Republican Party.

Comparing them to Pakistan, the Norwegian parties would also seem centrist or leftist. But we cannot quite compare Pakistani political parties to those of Europe. Pakistani parties are more like conservative family fiefdoms or, they are built around strong personalities rather than being parties with defined ideologies. Unlike in the West, there are few other political forces in the Pakistan outside the parties, such as labour unions and strong interest and professional groups that influence politics. Religion influences politics in Pakistan, it being a Muslim state. In Norway and Europe, too, religion, mainly Christianity, is still an important force in society, but people don't always want to admit it or see it.

Local government bodies are just emerging in Pakistan; but when they get established, they will finally make the country more political and democratic. The military has an unusually prominent place even when the country has a democratically elected government. Hopefully, the generals will never again be in direct power, and the military's role in politics must be toned down further.

I started my article by saying that in Europe, people are finally becoming more caring again. In USA, the right-wing and populist forces still have high 'speaker volume' and grass root support. Just look at the Republican Party's candidates for President, not only the unlikely character Donald Trump. Sometimes, I feel that ordinary Americans never really understand politics. Few search for good solutions for all. Americans may be kindhearted and good people, but they first of all look after their own interests even if that is at the expense of others. They don't quite see the political consequences of individual and private sector choices. Not unlike Pakistanis perhaps?

Last weekend, we witnessed a surprising result of the Labour Party leadership election. Jeremy Corbyn (66), a particularly principled, left-wing politician, won with a landslide. He will try to enforce much more caring and inclusive policies than we have seen for long. But it also shocked many in the Labour Party, including many of the Members of Parliament, who would hardly talk with the new leader and discuss issues with him, declining to serve in his 'shadow cabinet'. Many Labour MPs and other Labour Members and sympathizers seem to have fastened in their former leader Tony Blair's more conservative and opportunistic policies.

Some say that Corbyn may want to take the party back to the 1960s and 70s. Others, though, do indeed distance themselves from Blair's 'New Labour' of the 1990s. It remains to be seen if the Brits and the Labour Party can indeed gain support in the people, not only within its own party, in the coming years and the next parliamentary elections to be held within five years. Some say Labour may become *unelectable*.

But, maybe the Conservative Party and Prime Minister David Cameron should worry more about the new, leftist trend in the UK, as in Norway? I think so. And I have argued since the right-wing wave in the 1990s that socialist and social-democratic thinking will in future have a revival and 'be in fashion'. A new dawn and a new era may have begun, and we may slowly again emphasize more caring, inclusive and solidarity values in politics.

Even private sector leaders, including the former conservative French politician Christine Lagarde, now head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), say that too big inequalities in a society is bad for economic development. In Pakistan, we should indeed be concerned about the negative effects of huge inequalities.

I cannot write about 'comparative politics' and the current political issues in the world without discussing the refugee and migration crisis in Europe; it is a sad state of affairs. Yet, in Germany, Sweden, Norway and some other European countries, but not all, politicians begin to realize that they have to help; people are already realizing that and the show solidarity. In Norway, for example, families advertise that they have a spare room or two that they can let out to refugees or, they donate clothes and toys. It warms my heart to see such concrete actions, and that people push their politicians to follow suit.

It is tragic that Europe was so unprepared for the situation; politicians and people had hid their heads in the sand. Development researchers, refugee specialists, humanitarian aid workers, and even just kind hearted people knew for long that a crisis was looming. But the politicians talked it away. Now it is there. I hope Europe will allow higher numbers of refugees to come – as Germany, Sweden and some other countries will – and I hope that we are not lured to believe that the numbers are all that high. Half a million refugees and immigrants arriving in Germany annually, is not really all that many in a land with eighty million.

Let us recall that Pakistan has at times housed up to seven million Afghans, and more than half of them have returned over the recent decade. Let Europe learn from Pakistan now! Pakistan managed to receive high numbers of refugees; Europe hesitates doing it. Furthermore, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and other countries in the region also do much more than Europe. Syria is burning and Europe, America and Russia need to be constructive in trying to solve the conflict, and also in providing more humanitarian aid locally.

Perhaps less advanced and poorer countries are in a better position to receive refugees than the technologically developed European countries? Perhaps people in developing countries are more caring and passionate than 'selfish Westerners'? Poor people know that there is little distance between life and death.

Let those questions and thoughts end my article today. Let me wish for more attention to comparative politics and political analysis. Because I know that countries and people can learn from each other.

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from university, diplomacy and development aid.
