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Poland

‘We’re not in politics to win’

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After Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece, Poland's Partia Razem, or Razem Party, is the newest entrant from the Left to electoral politics in Europe. Formed barely five months before Poland's parliamentary elections on October 25, 2015, it represents the culmination of various grassroots mobilisations and the coming together of social activists under a single political umbrella. With no sponsors, little media coverage, and no institutional backing whatsoever, Razem surprised mainstream political pundits by grabbing a 3.65 per cent vote share, which has made it eligible for state funding of €3 million for the next four years. Ewa Alicja Majewska, 37, is a feminist philosopher who contested the parliamentary elections as a Razem candidate. In an email interview with The Hindu, the Berlin-based scholar-politician speaks candidly about her journey so far at Razem, the parallels between Syriza and Razem, and the challenges facing the Left in the age of "neo-liberal brainwashing".

Q: How did Razem happen?

It was a long process, going back at least 10 years. Many of those who would become members of Razem were for several years involved in the non-parliamentary Left, in social organisations, or in the youth wings of Left parties. Early in 2015, there was a call from some of these entities for the Left to unite. An open letter was circulated, inviting people to join a new, genuinely Leftist entity. Hundreds of people signed up. They now constitute the core of Razem. In May this year, some 300 participants joined the first ever convention of the Razem Party, in Warsaw. The party was officially registered in July 2015.

Q: What was it like to make the jump from academia to politics?

I've been involved in politics for much longer than in academia — since I was a kid, in fact. I grew up in a family that was very active politically. My father was involved in the Solidarity movement of the 1980s in Gdansk. I went to my first demonstration when I was three, carried by my dad. I participated in the earliest protests against neo-liberal politics when I was 14. You could actually say that I jumped from politics to academia.

Q: How was your experience in campaigning, asking people to vote for you?

Being a bit reserved and modest, I could never ask anyone to vote for me. I mostly maintained an active social media profile, counting on the fact that people might remember me from my publications, political activism, and television and radio appearances in the early 2000s. My activist background helped some people to understand that even as a political party, Razem could represent the typically excluded — the poor as well as the queers, the trans, the gays, the lesbians, the artists, and the cultural producers.

Q: What was your politics before you joined Razem?

I come from a section of the radical Left where the power of the state is as much criticised as the phallogocentric powers of capital. This radical, anti-authoritarian, queer-feminist position is, I think, necessary for any left wing party today if it is not to surrender to authoritarian tendencies. This also brings on board a human rights orientation and a sharp feminist optic. I have been active in the alter-globalist movement, and in grassroots queer and feminist networks.

Q: How would you rate your party’s performance in the recent parliamentary elections?

I think that for a party that was born in May and registered in July, crossing the 3 per cent vote share mark (5,50,000 votes approximately) in October and qualifying for the state subsidy of ₹3 million is a tremendous achievement. Whenever I have doubts about party politics, I always repeat to myself that we need this money — while all kinds of right wing parties have used these funds to strengthen their conservative politics, progressive politics could also do with this support.

Q: What do you think is the reason for the failure of the Left parties in Poland?

I do not think we have had Left parties in Poland since the collapse of the Polish Socialist Party, which was forcibly dissolved in 1948. We’ve had great socialists in the anti-communist opposition (I know how paradoxical this sounds), in the liberal Social Democrat party, and above all, in the social movements, workers unions, and academia. Now all these people have come together within Razem, and hopefully we will overcome the last 25 years of neo-liberal brainwashing and institutionalised neglect of human rights.

Q: How do you see the future role of Razem? Is there a realistic chance of it forming a government, as the Syriza did in Greece?

The Law and Justice Party that won the elections had showcased its moderate leaders during the campaign. But after winning, it appointed hardliners to the prime ministership and other key posts. This could alienate their voters and fuel conflict, which could destabilise the government. It may be somewhat impolite, but for the sake of my compatriots, our country and myself, I sincerely hope this scenario comes to pass. If we manage to continue the current growth in popularity, we could end up rallying a great number of people behind us.

Q: I understand that Razem does not have a leader as such. How then is the party structured? The media feels a need to identify every party with a personality. How do you address this requirement?

The Razem Party’s ‘management’ consists of 30 people — a 10-member Board and a 20-member Council. This is the largest leadership team for any party Poland has seen, and also the most egalitarian. There is no chief or president of the party. During the electoral campaign, there were press conferences practically every day in many Polish cities, precisely to showcase the many different ‘leaders’ to the public. There are also many brilliant people in the party who did not become candidates in the parliamentary election. But they are great activists and workers.

Q: Razem’s candidate selection policies have also attracted a lot of attention.

Yes, apart from our consciously egalitarian approach, I am also proud of the fact that our electoral list had as many women candidates as men, and they were from every social stratum. There were single mums running small businesses, teachers, computer programmers, workers, academics, local activists. We had no ‘professional politicians’ — people whose only domain of expertise is institutional politics — for we believe that this kind of professionalisation has a destructive impact on the quality of political life.

Q: With the Left in India proving ineffectual, there is no real parliamentary alternative at the national level to neo-liberal politics. How is the scenario in Poland?

Frankly, my knowledge of contemporary Indian politics is limited. Therefore, all I can offer is a historical perspective. While Poland and India have little in common, the various systems of what Immanuel Wallerstein aptly called

'European universalism' apply to both countries. Many aspects of the Western ideologies embraced by these two countries can be identified as forms of this 'universality', which structurally maintain the economic and political hegemony of the West.

The West's use of resources and labour from Poland and India is actually similar. But there are important differences: Poland has never been a regular colony, and colonial prejudice has not been unleashed on such a brutal scale here as in India, or the other countries colonised by the West. As much as both countries could be seen as semi-peripheral, they also differ in scale, social divisions, and forms of political exclusions.

Q: So what are the options for the working classes and minorities when the only electoral alternatives on offer are varying shades of neo-liberal politics?

There has always been one option for the working class and the excluded anywhere in the world: to organise; to work across artificially built ethnic, religious and gender differences; to fight for their rights, and build new forms of production and redistribution, so that capital is tamed in its anti-social effects.

Q: A recent Left political formation in Europe that raised a lot of expectations, only to disappoint its supporters, is Syriza. How can Razem ensure it avoids the same pitfall?

I must say I am quite concerned about the all-too-easy satisfaction that some on the Left take in Syriza's failure to embrace the political responsibility for Grexit. I think this satisfaction is a perverse symptom of some Leftist frustration, wherein the biggest celebrations are always in the moments of failure. Syriza has shown that another election is possible, that another politics is possible, that a non-corrupt government is possible in Greece, which really is a caste society for European standards.

I can't help smiling when I think of Yanis Varoufakis' first statements in the EU negotiations, when I remember the moment when Syriza first entered the Greek parliament, and I was there interviewing their shadow education minister, the great academic and architect, Theano Fotiou. I was so proud to see that someone from a similar socio-political background as mine was actually capable of doing state politics in another European nation. I would rather cherish these aspects of Syriza's political presence than seek to compensate my frustrations with the easy pleasures of looking at the failures of others.

Coming back to Razem, we are currently in this comfortable position where we do not have to worry about the country's budget deficit. We have another problem: people living in austerity that's far worse than in Greece or Portugal, and practically since 1989. While Poland does not have a sovereign debt crisis like Greece does, the price paid for it was to adopt the kind of sharp neo-liberal policies that south-western Europe hasn't seen until now. In this context, it needs to be stressed that the poverty, instability, and precarisation in Eastern Europe surpasses anything known in Western Europe in the last 40 years.

It should be said over and over again: we are not in politics to win. People who only want to win should take up some sport, join the army, or participate in beauty contests. For us, politics is a domain in which equality is at stake in a highly mediated world of conflicting value systems, and diverse traditions. In these conditions, politics should be perceived not as a popularity contest but as a field of work, one in which the perspective is always in plural.

After years of neo-liberal brainwashing that has sent all centralised forms of state management to the dustbin of history, we embrace anew the vision of the state as a way of mediating differences in order to bring about equal rights and access for everyone. This is a revolutionary change in itself, but to also see people mobilising around such ideas, especially in Poland, where state communism was rejected as totalitarian, and where the media, universities,

and churches smashed any remnant of socialism, is a revolutionary moment.

Q: In a world where national sovereignty is increasingly undercut by global capital — via international trade agreements and entities such as the WTO — is there much scope for a party like Razem to make a difference?

Our party has not yet worked out the details of our international policy. However, we are against these so-called "international trade agreements", which in fact constitute an official acceptance of the hegemony of corporate capital, and should be confronted with democratic resistance and harsh critique from legal, political and environmental standpoints. We are in favour of taxation of 'big capital', especially in Poland, where several multinational companies operate without paying their due taxes in our country. We are for a responsible and egalitarian wage system, and protection of workers' rights, which contradicts practically everything the WTO has opted for.

Q: Some critics have argued that the age of Keynesian reformism is over and there is no going back to it for Europe. But Razem's political programme is broadly social democratic — will it work?

Our supposedly moderate agenda is the most radically egalitarian political option ever realised — I am thinking of the short period of 30, perhaps 50 years, when the West was able to protect workers' rights, offer reasonable pay, and social and health insurance. My choice to join this party does not exclude my firm belief in a much more radically egalitarian political program. However, unlike my many colleagues on the Left, I do not believe in eternal life. I believe I only have a few decades to try and change the world, not just by ideas, but also by actual political practice. And if this modest agenda can be achieved, and with Razem I do believe that some things can be changed, I want to participate and put some of my work in it.

Q: Do you think the Left can sustain itself as a political movement within a nationalist framework or does it need to be necessarily international?

I think this is a very artificial way of speaking about the Left, and we should find more complex tools for analysis. Any Left, even if it tries to be the most international in the world, has participants embedded in local contexts. The nationalist framework is not a leftist framework. It is a fascist one, and I think this notion should be taken out of Left politics for good.

However, we live in nation states. We speak different languages. Our states differ in economic position, in access to power, in stability, in institutional tools for upholding human rights. We have to aim at an international formula without forgetting where we come from. We have to unlearn our privilege while at the same time being capable of putting pressure on our local governments, not just on some far away government somewhere else. We need to retain a very strong sense of responsibility for the abuses done by our own state institutions against the citizens of other states, where such abuses have occurred. Of course, we should hold accountable any power that exploits or attacks us. But none of it should take place under a nationalist paradigm.

This is particularly important, for supporting gay rights in Ukraine is not enough; one must at the same time address the centuries of Polish abuse of Ukrainian people and resources. We need to be local and international at the same time, trying to undermine nationalism and yet allowing people from oppressed ethnic groups to enjoy autonomy. This is not a simple matter altogether.

Q: Would you recommend that more writers and artists and academics should get into politics?

I want single mothers to get more involved, and also the unemployed, and retired people. And writers, too, and anyone who wants to contribute toward a more egalitarian world. I see no point in promoting artificial solidarity with particular professions or groups.

Q: Any final words for readers back in India?

Well, I would like to thank them for their interest in the politics of a minoritarian leftwing party in a country as distant from India as Poland. I am excited by the possibility of sharing some of our experiences and hopefully trying to make a similar connection with the Left in your country in the future. This is one of the many ways of practicing solidarity, and I really appreciate this opportunity.

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