Beyond finger-pointing the far-right extremists:
The white supremacist problem in Germany

A Commentary by Dr Sunny Omwenyeke

In November 2023, a meeting of high-ranking extreme right politicians, business people and sympathisers of the same ilk took place in a hotel near Potsdam, Germany. There, the plans of what the extreme right party would do when they assume power were clearly and meticulously laid out and discussed. Some of these plans are not far off some of the worst things in the often-referenced darkest age of this country but at the same time, they are also not dissimilar to the experiences of refugees and migrants since the last three decades in Germany. We don't need to reprise the ugly details of those plans here but suffice to say that, among other things, the plans made clear that the yearning for a dictatorial government would be realised along with its ramifications (fill in here what that may mean…) in contrast to the current democracy in Germany. Unknown to the organisers and participants, the meeting was secretly recorded by The Correctiv[1] and the contents were published earlier this year to widespread national uproar, disbelief and disenchantment. All these played against the background of the reported Reichsburger coup plot to overthrow the German government in 2022[2].

In reaction to that publication, there have been countless huge demonstrations in virtually every major city in Germany and in some cities, repeatedly. These demonstrations were organised and attended in some cases not by people who would normally organise or attend such collective action to agitate for change or otherwise, but by people who have never before attended any demonstrations in their lives let alone organise one. These demonstrations spoke to the widespread justifiable panic that the extreme right plans elicited among the populace. For many who have always held the mantra of "Never again", the increasingly looming threat of a potential extreme right government in Germany represent a direct throwback to the unenviable history of the Nazi era in Germany. What's more? High ranking politicians of all the mainstream political parties opportunistically and hypocritically joined these demonstrations to "condemn" the extreme right party and lament the "threat to democracy" that they pose. Overall, the thrust of the uproar over the secretly recorded plans of the far-right party was the potential end to "our democracy" and the re-emergence of a dictatorship reminiscent of the Nazi era. Who could

[1] https://correctiv.org/events/veranstaltungsreihe-afd-komplex/

[2] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63916809
https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-december-2022-german-reichsburger-plot-to-overthrow-the-german-government/

blame those now in panic when declarations by and the intentions of the major protagonists of the extreme right eerily mirrors those of the Nazi era?

As a human rights activist with a refugee background in Germany and years of experience in refugee self-organisation, empowerment and solidarity, the fight for refugee dignity and equality, I watched with recurring disgust as I listened to speeches after speeches in these demonstrations. Speaker after speaker bemoan the current political situation in the country, the rise of the far right and the latent threat to democracy that the looming extreme right success at the polls may precipitate. "We are a democracy" we were told, and "we have to maintain this democracy" by preventing any extreme right gains at the polls by all means. We were being urged as a matter of urgency, to mobilise our friends and relatives to vote en masse to ensure that the mainstream political parties remain in power and nothing more. Hardly at any point in these speeches would anyone go beyond the call for unity of "all democracy loving people" against the extreme right and to prevent them from assuming power at the next elections. For most of these organisers and participants, the problem begins and ends with the extreme right party. So, the solution is clear; simply "unite and stop them" and all would be well. Fabulous!

These demonstrations, more often than not, had a feel-good factor about them. Most participants felt good at the events because thousands of people turned out to oppose the extreme right plans. With great atmosphere and music, they took pride in being on the street to finally "stop the extreme right" from enacting their maniacal rule. So, there was always a feeling of a street party to it. "We are more", I often heard participants shouting! On display, however, was a clear lack of understanding of the seriousness and consequences of the issue of extreme right electoral gains for marginalised communities even when these have been quite broadly highlighted by the far-right party. Agreed that the issue of the threat to democracy may have been the overarching theme, but no one can deny that in concrete and practical terms, the marginalised groups of refugees, Blacks, People of Color, LGBTQ, people with disabilities etc remain the main targets of the extreme right plans should they ever assume power. It cannot be denied that the extreme right plan includes the intensification of the already existing aggression and violence that is resulting in fatalities in these marginalised groups but receive no help from the politicians nor is the issue highlighted by the press. Yet these serious issues could only be spoken about as an afterthought or a side issue if they were spoken about at all in these demonstrations. The outlook tended to be: Apart from the problem of the extreme right, we're all fine! We want to maintain that normality of a democracy we're used to. At no point was the brutality of this "normality" for the marginalised an issue. No one considered the violence that

this "normality" has wrecked and continue to wreck on us on a daily basis. Most people felt fine with this or careless about the experiences of discrimination and racism under this "normality".

If any validation of this frustratingly depressing and disheartening view was needed, it was handily provided by the experience some of us had at one of these demonstrations. In that demonstration, a group of refugee supporters set out to collect signatures in support of the campaign against the obviously discriminating "Bezahlkarte"[3] (Payment Card) that was being introduced exclusively for refugees in various states in Germany. In a demonstration where people have come out to the street in their thousands to purportedly protest against racism, discrimination, far right extremism and potential dictatorship and its consequences, many participants did not only refuse to support the campaign against this state sanctioned discriminatory "Bezahlkarte" but actually expressed support and agreement that it was fine for refugees to be discriminated against. "It's no problem, it's fine, it is in order", we were repeatedly told.

I narrated the above example to underscore my core points in this commentary. In doing so, I would argue that first, it is cheap and very easy to point to the extreme right as "The Problem" in this country as most people are currently acting out in these demonstrations and reactions. The result of this finger pointing largely allows a perfect state of self-denial by most people. This is so because, only pointing the finger at the extreme right allows one to conveniently ignore or overlook one's own part, role and involvement – from one's socialisation to personal attitudes, prejudices and privileges, in the very same problem. This is true on the individual level and on the level of those with political positions and responsibilities. This convenience of self-denial robs everyone – both on the collective and individual levels - of the necessary room for critical self-reflection, which is absolutely vital for a white dominant society with its socio-cultural, educational, political and economic institutions with a foundation in white supremacist ideology.

Take, for example, the issue of immigration – refugees and asylum seekers to be specific – a topic that is top of the list for the extreme right party. As I mentioned above, politicians from the mainstream political parties – right and left - have joined the chorus of condemning the extreme right plans since the content of the secret meeting was made public. However, it is worth remembering that the extreme right parties have not been in government since the Nazi era and therefore could not be responsible, for example, for the destruction of asylum rights and

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[3] https://weact.campact.de/petitions/nein-zur-bezahlkarte-in-bremen-2

international protection in Germany. So, when it comes to the issue of immigration, refugees or asylum (hot potatoes for German political parties), it is the mainstream political parties, again from the right and the left, that have not only propagated but fully implemented some of the most obnoxious policies of camps and deportation along with its concomitant violence and dehumanisation for the last several decades.

The racist demonisation of refugees and asylum seekers as a means to garner anti-immigrant votes has been a regular and open strategy by the parties that have been in government since the time of Helmut Kohl. So, while the quest for mass and unending deportation remains a dream of the extreme right party, the fact is, this has been a staple reality of the mainstream governing parties in the last 30 years. This is in spite of Germany's international commitments that accrues from her signatory to international protection conventions. Yes, spare me the headlines about how many refugees Germany takes! Therefore, if these mainstream parties and politicians are now content with only condemning the extreme right for proposals which, in fact, the mainstream parties have themselves been implementing for decades, it means they are neither looking at their own records nor reflecting on the fruit of the seed they sowed and fully nurtured in the last decades. This is precisely why their condemnation is hypocritical.

In my view, therefore, the message from the politicians' involvement in the demonstrations against the potential of the far right assuming power is: "We can and we are already doing the things the far right is proposing. We will do more of it, and as you can see, we are increasing deportations already. Sure, we can notch it up a bit without turbo-charging it like the extreme right plans. So, let's keep them out and let us continue in office for the sake of democracy" as we know it. While this may be factually right, overall, it is outright dishonesty to say the least because they are not being transparent with respect to their role in creating the very fertile conditions for the rise of the extreme right. They are manipulating the public to obscure and "whitewash" their role in the whole saga and all the while, seeking to maintain power and continue with their inhumane and horrible asylum-refugee policies. They are fully implicated and culpable for the rise of the far right. Besides, the problem is deeper and it is far beyond finger pointing the extreme right as I attempt to show below.

Second, and more importantly, the fundamental problem is one of white supremacist ideology and mentality with a socialisation that breeds a false sense of superiority in most of the white German populace and hence, the inferiority of the "Other". As soon as a group of people are regarded as "inferior", wrong as that may be, those who falsely assume - consciously or subconsciously - that position of superiority are hard pressed to see why discrimination against the "Other" is wrong. This is a serious and dangerous problem and it is more general and far

more entrenched than is usually acknowledged. As I have argued elsewhere[4], once equipped with this false sense of superiority, majority of white people in this country easily accept and even justify the violence, inhumanity and brutality that Blacks, People of Color, LGBTQ, people with disabilities etc suffer on a daily basis in this country – from individuals, state institutions and society in general.

The violence and deaths that Blacks and People of Color experience in the hands of the police coupled with incessant racial profiling are obvious reasons why most people from marginalised communities are not fond of the police as an institution. This police violence happens daily before the very eyes of white German populace; who are acutely aware that the police is there to "serve and protect" the populace, a populace that supposedly includes the minorities and marginalised communities of all shades. Yet, most of them accept the violent treatment of these communities by the police and provide justification for it. Majority of white Germans see and love what the police does to these communities, that is why instead of outcry about it there is wholesale acceptance and silence by the majority. When the victims publicly protest this treatment, they are further rebuked, mocked and chided for not appreciating "the good work" of the police. This is why the police as an institution remain one of the most popular institutions for most white Germans, because the police can fulfil and make real their violent wishes; a wish that comes from the depraved sense of superiority vis-à-vis the "Other" and which is deeply rooted in white supremacist ideology, socialisation and the enduring mentality.

This white supremacist foundation is the reason why the general public have been comfortable with how the successive governments of the last several decades in Germany have villainised and demonised refugees in this country. It is the root of the hue and cry of anti-immigrants in this country. It is also why, at every election cycle, the mainstream political parties tone up the negativity and nastiness on refugees – with deportation as their ultimate goal, in the bid to secure most of the anti-immigrant votes. Often, electoral competition looks like "who can be nastier to the refugees"? On the back of refugees, it has always been a race to the bottom; the rotten bottom of nastiness one might say. The result of this approach and practise is what we are now seeing with the plans of the extreme right. It did not fall from the sky. The seeds were sown and well nurtured by virtually all the power brokers for a long time, and negotiated by the silence of and acceptance by the public. The fruits, almost ripe, are only just appearing now.

Besides the Payment Card example above, one could discuss various other examples of state discrimination on the basis of the above argument but I would briefly mention two examples

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[4] https://thevoiceforum.org/node/4867

here. First, there is the discrimination against African refugees from Ukraine. These African refugees from Ukraine were so blatantly denied the opportunities offered to white Ukrainian refugees, even when both groups of people fled the same war and bombs. This is instructive because much as we would like to be proven wrong about the above argument, the government – by the mainstream political parties - continues to provide us with incontrovertible evidence to validate it[5]. The same applies to the treatment of refugees in various camps during the corona crisis in Germany. While members of the general public were being fined for not keeping social distance, around 700 refugees were crammed into a single building and about 40 were made to eat together in one Hall at the same time. They had to sleep in rooms without windows that could be opened and drinking water was only available via the basin in the toilet[6]. There was no chance to observe social distancing and therefore, it was not a surprise that the number of infections hiked in this camp in Bremen compared to the general public. And this was by no means peculiar to Bremen.

The point here is not to recount all these horrible examples that validate the argument of white supremacy, socialisation and mentality. It is to show that beyond finger pointing the extreme right and the fear of imminent dictatorship, there is a bigger and fundamental problem which the reactions to the extreme right meeting have so far failed to capture let alone address. In my view, the organisers and participants of these various demonstrations are either deliberately overlooking this serious issue or are simply displaying wilful ignorance by not highlighting this aspect at these events. Therefore, the aim here is to draw attention to this and call on everyone to look at this issue and question themselves honestly and critically because finger pointing the extreme right alone will definitely not be enough if we are really serious about dealing with the problem that the extreme right is fronting right now.

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[5] https://innn.it/RefugeeEquality

Babalola, Jimoh Jamiu: Europeans came to Africa without visa. They looted and destroyed.
https://voicesofresistance.de
https://www.dw.com/en/africans-fleeing-ukraine-accuse-germany-of-double-standards/a-61879479

[6] https://togetherwearebremen.org/report-lindenstrasse-corona/
https://togetherwearebremen.org/updates-from-shut-down-lindenstrase-aktuelle-entwicklungen-wahrend-der-corona-krise/
Böhme, Claudia and Schmitz, Anett (2022): Refugee's agency and coping strategies in refugee camps during the coronavirus pandemic: ethnographic perspectives: Pp.6-9 in Comparative Migration Studies (https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-022-00302-3)
https://www.interfacejournal.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Interface-12-1-Perolini.pdf
https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/germany/reception-conditions/housing/conditions-reception-facilities/
https://www.theafricancourier.de/germany/living-in-germany/coronavirus-half-of-refugees-at-german-camp-test-positive/

To be clear, I fully subscribe to the view that the extreme right poses a threat to democracy as we know it. However, there is much more than a threat to democracy that predates that threat and is far more malevolent and concurrently going on. But so far, it is neither acknowledged nor addressed in any way in these reactions to the far-right plans. This is why as I followed and watched these demonstrations all over the country, I sigh with exasperation and inwardly agonise over what is unfolding before me. For three decades, refugees and migrant groups have been sounding this warning but not even our supporters - from the nice liberal fellas to the so-called radical left got it, and took us seriously. Those who did, thought we were "crying Wolf". Now, here we are, and even in these protests, have they learnt their lessons? Only time will tell.

Perhaps it is fitting to share a brief thought here on the theme of "democracy" as a way to round up. As indicated above, the "fight for democracy" has obviously, and for a good reason, become the rallying cry of these reactions and demonstrations and that is not by accident because the threat to democracy is real and present. However, a critical reflection on the issue would also advance our understanding that we have a problem that is beyond the extreme right and democracy for that matter. For a start, it is common knowledge that democracy is understood as a "one person, one vote" process and ultimately, depending on the national dynamics and agreements, the party with the majority or a coalition built to assume the majority would go on to rule by forming a government etc.

Looking back at history, it is evident that Germany has already practised a democracy that produced dictatorship. What lesson are we to draw from that experience and what does that history tells us in relation to the current threat to democracy? There are many lessons that could be drawn from it and there are brighter minds that could better dissect this. I would only comment that if a democracy (as in the 1930s example of Germany) ultimately produced dictatorship, it becomes clear that the issue or problem is not one of democracy – because, democracy only simply accounted for and reflected the wish of the majority of the people and the result was a dictatorship. This of course is premised on the assumption that the people willingly or voluntarily carried out that civic duty and were not coerced to vote as such.

The problem therefore has to be something else other than "democracy" and that is what the central and crucial question should reflect: What is it that makes more and more people want to have a dictatorship via democracy? There may be various postulations as to what the underlying reasons may be but if one considers the core aspects of the democracy of 1930s Germany (and the period that preceded it) to the core pillars of the current extreme right party in this "normal" democracy, the parallels and similarities are quite obvious. Both are highly driven by the tenets and ideology of white supremacy and the violent extras that come with it, and to a

large extent, the intensified patriarchal-male violence that is reflected daily with increased femicide, attacks on LGBTQ (most recently CSD) and the "Others" etc. It is the recognition of the similarities between then and now on various levels, and the knowledge of what the consequences would be that elicits the widespread panic that greeted The Correctiv publication.

Yet, it must be recognised that the people who chose through democracy to bring in the dictatorship of the Nazi era did so in the knowledge of what was planned and promised (because the plan was well documented) before they went to the polls to cast their votes for them. Just like the extreme right today, the people willing to give them the reins of power are not doing so out of ignorance because, the extreme right like their forebears in the early 1930s have not been shy about publicly stating and documenting their plans too. Here, it is important to note that right now, a central argument of the far-right voters is that the vote for the far right is a "protest vote" against the mainstream parties. However, from the perspective of the marginalised, the "Others", this raises the question of where exactly are those casting the protest votes taking the marginalised to with their democratic votes other than expulsion from this country or even extinction? Looking at this question, it is precisely why the current situation with the surge of the extreme right conjures up recollections and images that mirrors the Nazi regime norms and hence the widespread panic. What is clear though is that such democratic/protest votes do not guarantee the protection and security of the marginalised just as the votes for the mainstream parties till now have not been able to do. Under the current circumstance, this democratic/protest votes would readily aid, abet and exacerbate the further marginalisation of the "Others".

So, democracy for what is worth may very well be in danger, but democracy obviously plays a part in a problem that is far bigger and indeed more fundamental in the form of white supremacist ideology and practices, socialisation and mentality. This is why the struggle against the extreme right must necessarily go beyond the "rescue of democracy" as we know it if the far-right issue is to be properly addressed. The rise of the extreme right and its attendant problems cannot be sorted by simply ignoring its white supremacist roots and fighting to maintain a democracy that allows and perpetuates the horrible border deaths and in the Sahara Desert, the drowning of refugees in the Mediterranean Sea, not to mention police brutality and the inhumane life conditions in refugee camps in Germany and the violence against the LGBTQ and people with disability communities.

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