

Blacks in Europe and political participation Joe Frans

Chairperson,

Politics counts. Representation matters. And Policymakers makes all the difference.

Chairperson,

The participation of people of African descent in political organizations and their representation is a prerequisite for equal rights for all in Europe.

Quite clearly, racism is the most relevant underlying explanation in trying to understand the role of political parties in the integration of people of African descent in political life and in decision-making processes in Europe.

Without an understanding of how racism permeates the very social fabric of Western societies and how its cancerous cells affect both its perpetrators and the strategies victims are constantly devising to survive, one can never really understand the mechanisms needed to redress this entrenched form of moral and ethical injustice.

“Racism is not just a topic for ethics and political philosophy. The existence of systemic racism—its consequences for the structures of the societies—has deep implications”.

It is fair to say that Racist and populist parties with xenophobic views are gaining ground in Europe.

It is also fair to say that these extremists parties have had an impact on mainstream political parties and therefore on policy.

There is an ongoing triangular shift in policy in order to minimize the political space for populist parties and extremist parties. This often leads to policies that negatively impact on minorities in Europe.

“Since 1984, the political expression of this social disease has been the growth of neo-fascist and far-right parties; the two have fed off each other.

I hold the view that Politicians and political parties play a role. Whether it was slavery, Apartheid or the Holocaust, political parties and politicians played a decisive role.

The extreme right has a real impact on mainstream politics in Europe. This leads to the denial of equal rights and opportunity for people of African descent in Western Europe and to the inability of political parties to successfully integrate Afro-descendants in their societies.

The decision politicians take or fail to take has an impact on the daily lives of people of African descent living in Europe.

There is an embarrassing lack of statistics in the public domain to support arguments of racial violence in Western Europe. It is apparent that without official statistics, effective responses cannot be devised.

A good example of the impact of discrimination due to direct or indirect political decisions, or the lack of them, is the situation of illegal African migrants in Europe. “The new racism against asylum seekers, marries up the worst racist practices throughout the western world: It is quite clear that thousands of people of African descent live in miserable conditions. Those without legal documents have no access to the welfare state, are exploited as cheap labour and have no rights.

The apprehension and psychological despair that this causes cannot be described.

Obviously, there is abundant evidence to show that inadequate or inexistent political decisions affect people of African descent in an adverse manner in areas such as education, career development, political participation and cultural representation and in many others. People of African descent are often represented by others in the decision-making processes in Europe.

It is safe to conclude that the impact of racist and extreme right-wing parties on the ability of mainstream Western European political parties and politicians to integrate people of African descent in political life and in decision-making processes is negative.

An interesting observation however is that participation and representation have a rather limited scope. Minority representatives plainly have the potential to enter the mainstream but so far, they have generally not done so.

Chairperson,

It is often within the extreme right-wing spectrum that we see racism manifest itself in political platforms, and yet, it is within the mainstream parliamentary parties that we need to focus our attention in combating racism.

We know that right-wing extremism is dangerous, but we should not focus only on that. It exists alongside other, more subtle but still acutely harmful, expressions of intolerance.

In a study of black political participation Lawrence Bobo and Franklin D. Gillian, Jr., found that “where blacks hold positions of political power, they are more active and participate at higher rates than whites of comparable socioeconomic status” and that “black empowerment is a contextual cue of likely policy responsiveness and encourages blacks to feel that participation has intrusive value. . . Empowerment leads to higher levels of political knowledge and . . . it leads to a more engaged [i.e., trusting and efficacious] orientation to politics.”

This is why we must fight those superficial and simplistic ideas with a focus on real participation and representation rather than lip service and tokenism.

This is why we must fight that evil ideology wherever it rears its ugly head. The challenge of organising and mobilising people of African descent in Western Europe is obvious. The need to engage in dialogue and to network with the Diaspora of people of African descent globally to exchange experiences and ideas and to share strategies and to support each other is clear.

We must also have a vision for the future. We must contribute to the representation of people of African descent in various political decision-making processes. We must encourage diversity. We must express visions and carry out policies aimed at creating a society that is inclusive; a society that does not leave people behind, a society that puts the problems of discrimination and prejudice high on the political agenda.

We must offer a vision that extends beyond mere categories of humans as the basis of life. We have to maintain the oneness of humanity and constantly demand equal rights and opportunities for all. No one has the right to reduce a person to a mere group identity. No one has the right to deprive people of their unique human dignity. No one has the right to oppress and exploit their fellow human beings. This is why we need to do more to ensure that the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action stay alive and are implemented.

It is against this background that the first ever “Black European Summit and transatlantic dialogue on political inclusion” was held in Brussels, Belgium at the European Parliament on April 15th and 16th of this year. The historic 2-day seminar brought together political and intellectual minority leaders from the United States and Europe to exchange information on the role of minority policymakers in developing and supporting policies and initiatives to address racism, discrimination and inequality. Participants included parliamentarians, congressional representatives, local and nationally elected officials, academics, civil society, private sector and the media.

The summit was co-hosted by among others Congressman Hastings, MEP Halem Desir and I. It was co-organised by MEPS like Claude Moraes and Glyn Ford.

We noted the need for concrete strategies to increase the representation and influence of racial and ethnic minority

policymakers. One of the things that we will be doing will be to jointly seek solutions to racial and ethnic minorities increased participation in decision –making in the development and implementation of policy initiatives to address discrimination and inequality. We also want to support the exchange of ideas and share perspectives and best practice through the continuance of the transatlantic dialogue.

We will seek to organise a second Trans-Atlantic dialogue and Black European Summit sometime next year. We will develop some common goals over the next months and promote participation of Blacks in Europe in various decision making bodies. We will create a network to support elected officials and we will seek to cooperate with various institutions and civil society. We would welcome your support in pursuing these objectives.

Madam chair,

Let me make a few recommendations:

I recommend that

States take active measures to encourage Political parties in Europe to adopt a code of conduct with regards to the issue of discrimination and racism but also Policy guidelines should be adopted in dealing with extreme right-wing organizations.

The EU commission organises consultations and seminars on representation and participation of people of African descent in the political and decision-making processes. The Black European Summit will be happy to cooperate and facilitate such a process if resources are made available.