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FORUM ON MINORITIES

National Practices and Real Experiences: Existing Mechanisms providing for Political Participation of Minorities

In the case of Greece we must first consider that Greece does not recognize Minorities in the manner expressed for our purposes due to sensitive geopolitical issues in the Northern part of Greece Thrace & Macedonia.

For our discussion I will use the term immigrant as understood in the context of Greek law.

Political participation in Greece is contingent on citizenship.

Immigrants are unable to participate effectively from governmental positions as a result of this.

A cohesive national plan detailing said participation does not exist at the moment and any political discussion is done solely as lobbying groups consisting of immigrant communities, NGO's and Civil Society organizations.

The ability of immigrants to join political parties with active and effective participation is limited. The first parties to accept immigrant participation were Leftist parties like the Communist Party of Greece and the central Left Synaspismos. These parties however do not make up a majority and have little or no success at gaining that majority so as to effect legislation nationally setting policy etc.

In 2005, the president of the Socialist party PASOK, Mr. George Papandreou, today's newly elected Prime Minister set precedent by formally opening up the party to immigrant memberships.

In a daring move for one of the 2majority parties he invited them to participate in the party's National Secretariat.

Having the sensitivity of having been an immigrant he realized that this would not be possible without appropriate intervention.

He mandated a quota for immigrants that stated all delegates must cast a vote for at least 1 immigrant thus assuring immigrant participation in planning the party's political agenda.

I am honored to say I was one of the six elected and was appointed to head up the committee on Immigrant Affairs. Historically six immigrants would now have the ability to effectively influence the party's political agenda.

The process was not an easy one nor was the general constituency to receptive of this historic precedent and the road was most definitely rocky.

In hindsight it was a great decision but unfortunately there was no infrastructure in place to facilitate the immigrants' acclamation to major party politics and its machinery.

Often immigrants were used as conduits to rally immigrants to the party as cheering squads rather than actually having a place at the table of policy making.

The more viable organizations were able to communicate effectively their positions on policy, actions and offer best practice solutions.

I truly believe that these measure although admirable are half measures and that there must be provisions for immigrants to participate in elections local or national either through long term status or the acquisition of citizenship.

There must be adequate infrastructure in place to receive, educate and mentor the immigrant as well as programs to educate sensitize the local voting population.

The process in Greece lacks this infrastructure and there was resistance to the idea that immigrants one day would and should have the right to vote.

The reason is simple the political map of the country may dramatically be affected by immigrant participation. For example there are islands and small villages where the immigrant population is equal to or more than that of the local population. In such cases it could be highly likely that the Mayor of a town be an immigrant!

Many countries in Europe and the EU have solved this problem by mandating laws that stipulate long term residence status equals the

right to vote in local elections however most countries citizenship is still required to vote nationally.

In any case language continues to be a barrier for effective participation in the political landscape in any sense in Greece. Proper training and sensitization of the civil society is necessary for the effective participation of immigrants in politics.

My case was extraordinary and in no way the average, I acquired citizenship through sports and marriage followed by fame and a general acceptance of the society. I am honored to say that I am the first and the only black person to be elected to the City Council of the Municipality of Athens.

In spite of fame and general acceptance I heard while campaigning “PASOK couldn’t find a Greek candidate. They needed a black?” or “Oh yeah that’s what we need the Blacks to run our government”

**In the best case scenario \much work is needed in the society at large and for the immigrants themselves to learn their host countries language, laws and regulations, to obtain finances and so much more than of course 5 minutes doesn’t allow for me to state. I look forward to a healthy and productive discussion.
Thank You**