

Bariza KHIARI - Harvard Conference
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Let me first thank Harvard University for this invitation, to which I am very grateful. I was asked not to prepare an academic speech but to talk instead about my journey against the backdrop of an ever-changing - sometimes not in the right direction - French society. I am therefore going to focus on the process that has enabled the daughter of Algerian immigrants to become Senator, first Vice-President of the French Senate, judge at the Law Court of the Republic, national delegate for Emmanuel Macron when he was still a presidential candidate, and now a personal representative of the French President on the Board of a foundation for the protection of cultural heritage in conflict areas.

➤ ***The beginning of my journey against the backdrop of colonialism***

I was born in Algeria at the end of 1946, in a place so remote it seemed impossible, in the heart of a village in the eastern part of Algeria. My father, who had migrated to France, came to get us with my mother. I was 3 month-old when I arrived in France. I was born a French citizen, since back then, Algeria was a French territory. My birth happened a year after the Sétif events of 1945. Historian and author Mohamed Harbi wrote a book with Benjamin Stora entitled "The Algerian war, the end of amnesia", which reminds us, in an article of Le Monde Diplomatique of the dark side of World War II: ***"On May 8, 1945, while France was celebrating its victory, its army was slaughtering thousands of Algerians in Sétif and in Guelma. This trauma will irreversibly radicalize the Algerian National Movement."***

I was born on a land where blood was shed during these massacres. And those events were the starting point of my parents' involvement in what we discreetly called "The Algerian Events."

➤ ***My parent's activism as a foundation for my commitment***

While they lived in France, my parents were involved in different nationalist groups who fought for independence, until the day they were arrested and imprisoned for their ideas. Even my mother was sent to jail, which was extremely rare for women back then. My father was sent to exile in the famous Barberousse prison to server his sentence. I grew up in an

environment yearning for justice and equality, and I understood at a very young age that being committed to, and aspiring to equality has a price. **My political commitment found its roots in my parents' activism.**

In 1962, after the end of a very violent war that went on for almost a decade, Algeria became independent: it was the realization of my parents' fight. They gathered their children and told them the following: **France is your country and some of you were born here. The fights that we led were those of our generation. But most importantly, never forget we didn't fight alone. Many fellows fought with us. It wasn't a fight against the French but against the colonial system. France is your homeland, you were born here, you live here. We have fought our own fight, now it's time you fight your own.**

This narrative has allowed me to distance myself from these colonial times that strongly impacted my family; yet these words touched me very deeply and became my guiding principle. Life is not about living in the past and rehash hardships. It's about seizing the day and prepare for the future.

A few years later, another event took place before our very eyes, where students started rebelling against the traditional values of the French society: We were in May 1968. Those events didn't impact me at all. Given my background I could not understand how people who were already free could want more freedom! So, I won't spend much time talking about my studies, which were uneventful, but instead focus on my commitments, which is why I am here today.

➤ ***My commitments in the civil society***

My first commitment was with the MRAP - an organization against racism and fostering friendship between peoples, where I met incredible individuals. There, my political consciousness started burgeoning through endless debates and above all, a fraternal atmosphere.

Married and mother of three boys, I became involved in the parent-teacher association of the Janson de SAILLY secondary and high school in Paris. The public school system had been very good to me and becoming involved was an obvious thing to do.

Professionally speaking, I dedicated most of my career to public administration, and before my role in the Senate, I worked as the head of the service dedicated to tourism in the Ile-de-France area. There, I became part of a very reformist union: the CFDT.

On a local level, I also accepted to be on the municipal elections list on behalf of the civil society, for a non-eligible position.

➤ ***The Socialist Party at a local level***

Being part of all these different associations led me to join the Socialist Party, a movement that seems to meet my own values. As an activist in my own district, I was appointed at the head of the most important section of the 16th Arrondissement in Paris.

Political life went on and it was time to introduce candidates for a different type of elections: the legislative elections. Obviously, the 16th Arrondissement being a very chic district and not very favorable to the left party, it was pretty much a given that our candidate was going to lose. Yet, we had to have a candidate, but no one was interested. As the head of that section of that district, I felt I had to do it. I led a beautiful campaign and have wonderful memories of these great moments when you meet people who share their daily problems with you. What I thought would be a hassle turned out to be a delight. The number of votes I received was very honorable and allowed me to beat the candidate of the National Front. And it encouraged me to run for the upcoming legislative elections... which I would probably lose.

Fast forward to 2000 and the preparation of the municipal elections. When I applied to be on the candidate list, it came with a surprise: Someone very kindly told me: “With a name like yours, you’re going to ruin the list”. This left me completely flabbergasted! I had never faced racism or discrimination and now, my own party sends me back to my origins. What a shock!

Anyone can be sued for uttering such words. My colleagues didn’t realize how damaging this statement was. To them, belonging to the Socialist Party was like being shielded against racism. Such statement and discrimination were clearly out of line with the party’s values. **That same day, I was left with no fear and decided to no longer accept the unacceptable.** I sued before the Conflict Commission colleagues I had been campaigning with for many years.

Thanks to the support of my party and of Laurent Fabius’ friends, and after due process, I won the vote of the Conseil National (Party’s parliament). My

rights were reinstated, and I was again in second place on the list for the municipal elections. After many years of political activism, I was finally elected in 2001 for the first time as advisor at the City hall of the 16th Arrondissement. **Even though this conflict was scarring, a couple of positive things came out of it: I understood how hard political life could be and I figured out what my fight was going to be: The fight against all shapes and forms of discrimination.**

➤ ***The socialist Party at the national level.***

This painful experience forced me to look closely at the way the Socialist Party was dealing with these issues, and I came to the sad realization that they didn't deal with them at all! In fact, the party was actually "sub-contracting" its issues, so to speak: the ecology was in the hands of the Verts (Green party), the working-class neighborhoods of the Communist party, and all matters related to equality of the anti-racism organization « ***Touche pas à mon pote*** » [Don't touch my pal], which back then organized many large concerts against racism.

That said, no real structure has ever been put into place to fight against discrimination and to foster equality, because it's an endeavor that goes beyond a five-year presidential term and that needs time and effort. **In other words, the fight against racism has always has been used by the Socialist Party to feel good about itself.** All these good intentions and great concerts didn't help our socialist candidate Lionel Jospin win the first round of the presidential elections against the far-right candidate Jean Marie Le Pen. Our strategy had failed, and for the first time in our history, the far-right candidate made it to the second round of the presidential elections: It was a political tsunami.

After Lionel Jospin was out of the presidential race we held a symposium in Dijon in 2003. I introduced a text called « ***Let's fight against discrimination within the Socialist Party*** », which was signed by many people in charge. Since the conclusions of this political debacle had started threatening the cohesion of the party, I was asked to come on stage and give a summary of my text. It was celebrated by the standing ovation of over 5,000 participants. **Since the party leaders disagreed on about everything, my resolution was adopted and since then, the Socialist Party guarantees some type of diversity - gender and race - within its candidates to represent France as it really is: diverse. This was my first victory.**

The speech I made during the Dijon symposium - supported by Laurent Fabius - was my entry ticket to the Party National Bureau, where I became its national secretary in charge of public services and relationship with the media. Being the only person within the Socialist Party to not have national appointment, Laurent Fabius asked me to run for a seat in the Senate in 2004. Thanks to his support, I campaigned to get the votes of France's departmental and municipal elected officials and ended up in second place on the list in Paris. It was my first national appointment.

➤ ***My beginnings in the Senate in October 2004***

What a surprise when I arrived at the Senate on my first day: The President of the Senate gave me Seat #1, which belonged to **Victor Shoelcher**, the politician who put an end to slavery in France through an abolition decree on April 18, 1848. Victor Shoelcher dedicated his entire life to the cause. In the introduction of his book "Slavery and Colonialism", Aimé Césaire wrote about him: "***He is now with all men of revolutionary tradition: those who live in the real life and push History towards its end***".

That seat was then passed on to Gaston Monnerville, **grandson of slaves and first and only man of color to ever become President of the Senate**. Gaston Monnerville was an amazing orator, and a man impossible to categorize. He was the Republican who challenged General de Gaulle by accusing him of "Abuse of authority" during the constitutional reform debate of 1962.

In 2004, the daughter of Algerian immigrants and a Muslim woman to top it off, was going to perform her political duties sitting on this seat. With tears in my eyes, I thought to myself that it had to be a sign of destiny, that there was no chance, and that this seat gave me the responsibility to continue their fight.

To summarize: Abolishing slavery has allowed the grandson of slaves to become first a parliamentarian and then the President of that institution, and the daughter of Algerian immigrants, the parents of whom fought for decolonization, to become a Senator and lead debates. I recognize that I am talking about events over a long period of time, but this is a beautiful progress in a country which, unfortunately, has been witnessing the rise of the far-right and racist narratives.

Because of this heritage I now have obligations. Beyond my many responsibilities within the different commissions of the Senate, I made a point to track down all possible discriminatory elements in all available documents, made numerous amendments on the anonymous resume, and on diversity in the media. I also worked on a text to open jobs that are currently closed to foreigners - remnants of the Vichy era - and another one on physicians with foreign degrees, currently exploited in our hospitals; these physicians becoming the variable on the budget equation of our hospitals. And of course, I have worked on many other texts...

➤ ***Breaking up with the Government Left.***

The most difficult moment of my parliamentary life was when I had to go against my own people. Yes, my very own people, those who belong to my own party dared to propose an amendment on forfeiture of nationality - an amendment in total opposition with our values. How difficult it is to go against your own people! Some members of my party at the National Assembly had just voted on this piece of legislation and it was going to be examined by the Senate... not a good time to stop fighting. This indignant piece of legislation could not go any further.

The guiding principle of my fight has always been to honor my predecessors, and that only the battles that are not fought are the ones that are already lost. I therefore organized my retaliation by trying to find support. Thankfully, there are true Republicans in all political groups of our beautiful institution. My defense speech, which focused on rejecting the text on forfeiture of nationality in the Constitution, with the support of some of the members of my political party ended working: The Government, gauging the different challenges, decided to put to death that amendment. François Hollande, who was still the President of the country, said a few months later: ***“I regret I tried to add the forfeiture of nationality to the Constitution; I understand the trouble this amendment may have triggered...”***. But for me it was too late, the harm was done.

I could no longer identify with the Left Party. The rise of the far right, the colonial undertones still at play, and the underlying Islamophobia got the better of the humanistic and internationalist values of the Left.

➤ ***The trust of my peers***

Despite the rise of populisms, progress is still possible since after all, I had been appointed by my peers as First Vice-President of the Senate, which debates I presided over for three years. My colleagues had had the time to get to know me and there comes a time when meritocracy is still a time-tested value: **Expertise trumps origins. When your expertise is acknowledged, people forget you are a woman, and they even forget where you come from. But sometimes, showing off your skills and expertise is not always possible.**

I was also called on by some of my opposite party colleagues to apply to the Law Court of the Republic. When I asked why I should apply, a former minister who became senator, told me: « ***Because you're going to judge the same way you preside, you will judge the facts, not the players. This is important for all of us*** ». The Law Court of the Republic is a special French court established to try cases of ministerial misconduct. I won most of the votes and dedicated myself to this new position, while being a Senator for six years, during which I served in two trials: one involving Minister Charles Pasqua and more recently Mrs. Christine Lagarde, former Minister of Economy and finance, currently head of the IMF.

It was a fascinating experience where one had to listen, constantly question, doubt often but always try to understand. But more importantly, trying to make the distinction between errors, lies and sincerity. This experience was about discovering new facets, sometimes surprising, of human nature. I forged strong friendships with colleagues, who just like me, were able to live this unique experience.

➤ ***Meeting Emmanuel Macron***

I met him for the first time in 2014 when he was minister of the Economy, Industry and Digital sector as he was presenting a text before the Senate called the “Macron Law” on economic growth and purchasing power. **I was struck by his energy, his airtight reasoning and mostly the strength of his convictions.** I also appreciated the fact that he almost resigned because of the issue of forfeiture of nationality. He remains one of the few ministers in that government who openly criticized that proposal and said that “***it made him philosophically uncomfortable***”. I had finally found a minister who was vocal about something that tore me apart.

From then on, I started following his speeches with great attention. Back then already, he had the foresight to understand that “***Conventional***

society as it exists, where everything is planned, will inexorably disappear". He understood before many, that life-changing events often remain unnoticed by our contemporaries, while a new world was being created in Palo Alto in California. I also noticed that he had a very sound approach to secularity, that he fought for the liberation and responsibility of our citizens.

My opinion with regards to work in our society started shifting and had to acknowledge that the advent of Uber did more for the youth in poor neighborhoods than thirty years of public policies. Those who finally found a job, even in difficult conditions, found a new dignity. Because of underlying discriminations, it was easier for them to find clients than a boss.

One thing leading to another, I ended up speaking with him for a long time in his office and thought to myself **"He has the charisma of a leader, he is sharp, structured, checks a lot of boxes...he's the succession. He deserves to be supported"**. The rest is history: Disagreement with President Hollande, resignation from his Prime minister position, first meeting, creation of the *En Marche* movement with a handful of people. Our campaigning year was indescribable, and we won the presidential elections. I woke up the next day after the victory with the feeling that I "had been hit by a truck".

I pride myself to have been a « **Minuteman** » as Emmanuel Macron calls his inner circle and national delegate during the electoral campaign. Once the legislative elections were over, I ran the movement ***La République En Marche*** with two close colleagues until the democratic promise was fulfilled. The movement's national delegate was elected at the end of 2017 and I've been working since for the executive Bureau to build a solid foundation of trust and to keep an eye on the DNA that enabled the success of the movement.

In spite of friendly pressure, I refused to run for the third time for a seat at the Senate, thinking that politics is not a job and new blood is necessary. I also decided not to seek plurality of offices and refused a ministerial seat, trusting that the President should be surrounded by the younger generation. It was time for me to turn a page and to focus on a subject dear to me: bringing visibility to the cultures of Islam.

➤ ***Institut des cultures d'Islam [ICI or Institut of Islam Cultures]***

As you know, I profess belief in Islam and **define myself as a fierce republican and a confident Muslim. This is a difficult statement coming from a Parliamentarian in a country experiencing a complex relationship with religion due to its history.** Islam had become such a significant political subject that I couldn't deny an aspect that was so self-defining and decided I couldn't leave free reign to the players of radical Islam.

Unfortunately, obscurantists on the one hand and Islamophobic individuals on the other have these days a strong mediatic presence and they efficiently bring legitimacy to one another. The French form of secularity has become the number one public debate subject and one of our society's main challenges. It is true that how Islam is perceived in the public space, through the headscarf for example, is an issue for a secularized society. This type of visibility through appearances and clothing has completely depleted Islam of its religious and spiritual dimension.

All surveys have been showing a growing mistrust towards the Muslim population since 9/11, and even more since these horrendous terrorist attacks took place in our country. These studies show that "polarization against Islam is the most constant, the one that has the strongest roots". They also mention a "growing intolerance toward Muslims". The Chief Rabbi of France Gilles Bernheim, who is saddened that ***"it is more and more difficult to be a Muslim in France"***, ***states that our diseased society is looking for scapegoats.***

In its 2013 report, the National Commission on Human Rights reassessed the concept of "islamophobia" and recognizes its validity. It also noted that ***"racism has been through a significant paradigm shift in the postcolonial years, shifting from a biological racism to a cultural racism"***. Of course, we can take this analysis with a grain of salt and recognize the fact they highlight the anxiety of a society going through a deep economic, social and moral crisis, and that this consternation is fodder for populists. In reality, the debate is not to know if we are for or against Islam or the Muslims, but rather to urgently reinstate normal living conditions in a soothed republic.

I've always had the strong belief that culture could be a soothing element as I am using as my own a quote from a great Sufi master: ***"Men are the***

enemies of what they ignore". Culture has always been for me the best weapon against prejudice and obscurantism. And that's why I have accepted to be the president of the Institute of Islam Cultures. This cultural institute in the city of Paris was created by former mayor Bertrand Delanoé. Its goal is to bring knowledge about the cultures of Islam, to show their diversity throughout the world, to reconnect with their legacy, traditions and emblematic figures, while showing how dynamic its contemporary creations have been.

For the last three years, I have been dedicating myself to:

- Introducing to our fellow citizens the diversity of cultures of Islam and educating young Muslims who often come to the institute, and for whom the transmission of Islamic values hasn't been done properly, if at all;
- Bringing "communities" closer through work with artists from the Jewish community for instance, since the rise of antisemitism is a sad reality in France;
- Showing the existing commonalities between these communities through concerts - such as Arab-Judeo-Andalusian music - cooking, and other common traditions;
- Organizing different conferences where debates are often brutal but needed;
- Fostering a space of creativity called « IslamLab », allowing young artists to come and express their creativity;
- Reminding that Islam hasn't broken away from Judaism or Christianity, but it is instead their continuum through all the prophets, from Abraham, Moses and Mohammed to Jesus, that Muslims have been mentioning in their prayers since the beginning of times.

Because of all ongoing contradictory and antagonistic ideas floating around, my goal is to bring awareness to alterity and civic rights. Radical Islam tells us that exercising civic duties is a "Western perversion". Our duty is to show that there is no contradiction between spirituality and civic duty, quite the opposite: true citizen values have roots in the depths of our Being et true spirituality takes shape in daily civic actions.

I must stop now on the subject because there would be so much more to say. I am sure we will have the opportunity to come back to it during the debate and through your questions.

Finally, I have accepted to be represent our French President and become the Vice-President of ALIPH - an international NGO for the protection of heritage in conflict areas. By destroying the heritage of humanity, ISIS has tried to deny collective history and erase the possibility to remember. It's the reason why France, in collaboration with other countries, has decided to create a common structure to repair the damage that was done to our common heritage. In this coming year we have decided to start working on the restoration of the Mosul Museum, tombstones of Sufi saints in Mali and a Christian monastery in Northern Iraq. There will definitely be more projects.

➤ **General conclusion**

Progress, stagnation, and even decline. That's often the course of things for all human societies in the themes we have been focusing on today:

- The decline could be expressed by the fact that it would be difficult for a man of color to hold the second most important position in France although it was possible fifty years ago. The resurgence of xenophobic ideas invites to remember what François Mitterrand once said: ***"Equality is a constant fight"***.
- Progress is visible through the emergence of a middle class coming from immigration and different diasporas, and a true elite. The elite has now an individual structure but hasn't yet been able to organize itself collectively.

The horrible terrorist attacks that happened in our country showed the resilience of the French society, because we are collectively aware that amongst the victims were many Muslims and that throughout the world they are the first victims of ISIS deadly madness.

During the last presidential elections, the French people showed clearly that it desired to keep populism at bay, but also that it would be irresponsible to underestimate its influence. The emergence of Emmanuel Macron on the political scene may represent the last surge of a society tired of the typical right/left changes of power but who also knows how to come back to what is really fundamental: The Republic. **Let's not forget that in Italy, Renzi has preceded Salvini, the same way Obama has preceded Trump.**

Against the backdrop of the rise of populism in Europe, France, in spite of its problems, could almost be considered as an exception; and President Macron is “condemned to succeed” and federate around him those who share the same world vision. Together, they must find the ways to give a more human aspect to a globalization that scares so many of our fellow citizens. This fear has created the populists now organized in movements throughout Europe. And this time in European history accurately reminds us of the famous quote from Gramsci “***The old world is dying, the new one is late to emerge and from this in-between chiaroscuro come out the monsters***”.

The upcoming European elections will be critical. Will there be enough progressive humanists to stop populist movements that plague Europe? Will they say for example, that welcoming migrants and asylum seekers is not negotiable, that discrimination based on religion or ethnicity has no place in Europe, and that diversity is a source of wealth?

Will these progressive humanists be able to reject Brussel’s excessive bureaucracy to redefine a new European policy that focuses on peoples? It would be fulfilling the promise of sharing, not just resources but possibilities, those which enable each individual to feel that they matter, and that progress is possible. I do not have the answer to this fear of mine and that can be summed up in General de Gaulle’s quote: “***Nothing gets built outside of reality***”.

➤ ***A more personal conclusion:***

When I look back, I would say that **the turning point for me was the moment all fear disappeared because I had tried everything**. My actions in the High Assembly were not nearly as spectacular as those of my famous predecessors but I am proud because I made progress. Step by step: through parliamentary work, speeches, conferences, motions, contributions, books, I worked with others to bring awareness on the fact that discriminations - regardless of their nature - mean a social death for their victims, and ultimately they are what hinders national cohesion.

If I had to sum up my career in a few words, I would say that I am a “**statistical anomaly**”. President Macron could almost say the same; he even admitted “that his term was the consequence of history’s brutality, of something taken by force”.

Finally, I met people that had far more intelligence or merit than I did, but who didn't have the opportunity to meet the same people I did. Sometimes I must humbly admit that fate leads our lives and the world's events, and that have had a benevolent guide. But some other times I have a hard time being a fatalist, and I make mine this beautiful quote from Sophocles: "He who does not attempt anything, who gives up at the first hurdle, fate will not help".

Thank you very much.