

CAF Podcast

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Maysoun Douas

With a PhD in Physics and a Master's degree in Physics of Light and Matter, Maysoun Douas is a councilwoman in the Madrid City Council. She is the only council member of Muslim origin so far, thus representing the diversity of today's major capital cities, which is often not reflected in their governing institutions. This is one of the battles Maysoun has waged since becoming mayor: the defence of a city that is welcoming to all its residents, regardless of their origin, race or faith.

In 2022, in collaboration with CAF, she promoted a project called The New Social Contract, with which she aims to engage with other politicians, researchers, academics, entrepreneurs, and members of Spanish civil society about current democratic challenges. "Community builder" is a title that defines her both in the area of innovation and on the political level; as the New Social Contract has managed to bring together personalities from the Spanish political scene of the stature of Manuela Carmena, Fernando Mayor Zaragoza, Hanna Jalloul and José María Lassalle, among others. And it has done so around issues as thorny as they are crucial for coexistence in our current societies, such as migration.

This struggle exemplifies what Maysoun has pursued and continues to pursue with projects such as The New Social Contract: to advance towards truly inclusive societies, where public spaces are meeting places, where elected officials truly reflect the multiculturalism of our societies, and where an active citizenry can lead a necessary conversation about the future and its hopes.

The New Social Contract already has a second edition. It is a multidisciplinary space to reflect on the dynamics involved in social processes and the conventions that uphold the democratic state. Could you briefly introduce it? Where does it come from?

MD: The New Social Contract was born from some reflections that have been going on for a very long time, but which became much more persistent during the Pandemic. It made us reflect on our social fabric, the democratic framework we have right now and the capacity to face new crises. After COVID, we had the invasion of Ukraine, several adverse climatic situations that nobody foresaw coming (or that we did foresee, but we weren't prepared to face) and that also incorporated a reality that is a bit obstinate, such as the plurality of society as a whole. Migrations, new identities, both national and ethnic, religious... and many other things made us see the future with different eyes. Or at least hope that, after the forced pause of quarantine, we could be reborn with new understandings. New conventions, new ways of seeing each other, treating each other and moving forward together.

Migrants are not looking for privileged spaces, but rather to feel at home in the society they have chosen to live and survive in.

A former military cemetery of Franco's Guardia Mora is far from being a dignified space to bury our Muslim neighbours.

The main axes of the last edition are technology and citizenship, with attention to the implications that international conflicts such as the invasion of Ukraine are having on the local fabric. However, we can say that the crux that runs through them all is the situation of democratic failure in which many of the migrant communities find themselves. They are active citizens not only in terms of community participation but also through economic activities and by fulfilling their tax duties, and yet they have a minimal range of political rights. What tools do we have to address this?

MD: Indeed, one of the things we realized during the pandemic is that many of the situations that had been addressed with open borders, such as visits to the countries of origin or the mutual aid provided by the remittances sent by migrants in Spain to those countries... suddenly that started to falter. We saw the effects it had in the countries of origin, but we also saw how the migrants here suffered from the lack of social support, and the lack of a family network. If our democracy had really taken them as citizens, it could have helped them in that difficult situation in which many of them lost their jobs. Many were helpless, in situations as critical as managing the death of a loved one. These are issues that the rest of society does not pay attention to because it does not feel it has to. Democracy has been built on the basis of that common culture that we had years back, and it has not been incorporating all those innovations that the new migrants brought with them, but also the new ways of understanding life. And I am talking not only about confessions, but also about new lifestyles such as veganism, which are not only "healthy", but also help to take care of the planet and the environment. Our democracy was built on the basis of very homogeneous knowledge and realities and has not been able to incorporate this diversity gradually making its way, as the years went by (especially since the 80s until now). And a significant part of our citizens, of our residents in different cities, feel that their identities are not only taken into account when it comes to sizing budgets but also when it comes to the services that must support them. They look forward to the recognition of these needs that are different without seeking a space of privilege for it, and to feel at home in the society that they have chosen to live and survive in.

One of those civic rights that for some seem to be almost privileges is that of burial according to religious confession. In recent months you have tried to address this issue as a councilwoman in the City Council of Madrid. Can you tell us about this specific situation?

MD: Well, I think we all took for granted that our civil rights were respected and were being taken into account. But there is a very big difference between them being legally and normatively recognized, and them actually being a factual right that you can make use of when the time comes. One of these is the right of death, as you mentioned. Something that was already more than well reflected in the 1978 Constitution... we are seeing that today, in municipalities as big as Madrid, where Islam or various faiths, such as Jewish, Buddhist, Orthodox, Evangelical, etc., are a reality (because not only do we have those neighbours, but they also have their places of worship)... But when the time of passing comes we realize that we are really handicapped in that sense. And it is a clear violation of civil rights because, beyond the fact that the Constitution had it reflected, there are many other laws, such as that of 1980, that of 1985, or the Organic Law of Religious Freedom, which oblige the administration to take into account such circumstances when it comes to managing burials. Both the municipalities and the regions, as well as the State as a whole. And the regulation is there, the indications are there, and we know that the municipalities are aware of the diversity and plurality of the spaces they are managing... But we see institutions not only slowing things down, but often looking the other way. And in the case of burials, we are seeing that Madrid

When migrants demand equality, many read it as way of taking away or restricting rights from the native society.

We have a moral duty to think about how all our neighbours can enjoy the city, including those of diverse religions.

continues to lag behind other cities such as Valencia, Barcelona, Cordoba, Bilbao, Malaga, Seville... that already recognize this reality and have prepared parcels for a proper burial for people of other religions. In Madrid we are still waiting. We have been waiting over 17 years during which the conditions, protocols and every detail of the service to be provided by the City Council were clear. And different governments have followed and none of them has been able to take a firm step and guarantee this service. Until October 2022, what was being used was a military cemetery converted to civilian, of the Guardia Mora. A space that Franco arranged for those soldiers is far from the dignified space that we should keep for citizens who nowadays share with us absolutely everything. Not only the economy, not only social services, but also the ambition of prosperity and of working together towards a freer society, more representative of the whole world.

In this climate of political polarization in which we are immersed, there is also a sense that a part of society is becoming radicalized against migrant communities and does not approve of this normalization. In the face of narratives like that of the great replacement, that stir up fear and racism and with which the far-right is gaining an institutional foothold in Europe.... What should the counter-narrative be? In such a polarized society, can we combat anti-democratic discourses with more democracy?

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MD: I think the starting point has always been "let's give them new rights". And this is already wrong, because we are not talking about new rights: we are talking about making sure the rights we all have can be lived by each of us according to our own realities. That is to say, that we can all have access to what the Constitution and European policies provide for us, but in a way that is closer to our experiences and to what really identifies us or makes us live better. This starting point has been the great slogan of many political parties and movements that believed themselves to be progressive, but in reality did nothing more than deepen the difficulty of recognizing new neighbours as equals. Be those migrants, or people that found new faiths. What we are experiencing now are the consequences of a narrative that was bad from the beginning. We have to re-balance the situation and look for that comfort margin that works for everyone. Many times this is often interpreted as if the diverse population were taking away or limiting the rights of a homogeneous native society. Understanding others is not about recognizing "new rights", but about realizing that we all want to live well and under the same rules, but each one from our own perspective. And I believe that the right-wing is effectively exploiting this narrative of supposed new rights to show that there is a difference, that there is a privilege of some over others, or a tradition that we want to undermine with disruptive ideas. They try and force this ideas through a framework of societal division, instead of cohesion. But we are in time to change that narrative and understand that rights remain the same, but that we can live them differently, enjoy them differently. And that, above all, we all want to contribute to the ultimate goal of a Welfare State that welcomes us, embraces us and allows us to continue growing towards the future.

In this electoral campaign, there is a lot of talk about the inclusion in electoral lists of migrants or people of different ethnic groups. The argument from the right is that, while they allude to a supposed



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meritocracy and focus on the profile, the left includes these candidates in their lists to comply with quotas, frequently in positions with little chance of being elected.

MD: I believe that, in either case, the left or the right, we are not thinking about how this person can contribute from his or her vision or experience. In the end, that is why we are talking about the New Social Contract, i.e., how can we renew trust in each other? Not starting from scratch, but identifying the things that unite us and the things that make us different. To understand citizens as citizens, with their complexities. This is one of the most important challenges we are facing today as a society, not only in Europe or in Spain, but globally. Our challenge today is to understand ourselves as people, beyond those identities that we often assume and sometimes impose on ourselves. Being a migrant today in Spain is understood as something vulnerable, that destines you to live in sensitive conditions. Many times people think of "saving" migrants. The stigma is so well embedded that it doesn't matter what status you end up holding: you will always carry that notion that has not even come out of your mouth (probably not even out of your actions), but that is assigned to you as a person who has arrived in Spain. And the same thing happens with the rest of the minority faiths: that they are not taken into account when it comes to managing what is public or even private. But one thing leads to another. Not only with the local and regional elections, which are just around the corner, but with all the electoral processes to come, we have the moral duty to think of our neighbors as neighbors: How they live, how they don't live, how they enjoy the city, how the city responds to their needs. And also when cities, for example, become a drag on their personal and family growth. And I say the cities because it they are the place where citizen participation is most grounded today, but the same happens with regions and at the national level. The moment we stop seeing people through distorted lenses, such as difference, migration, and vulnerability... we will begin to understand that politics, representation, is not about quotas and not only about differences, but it is about building from what is shared. And that is what we are lacking today.