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‘Islamophobia’ or ‘Europhobia’?: Deconstructing the Contemporary Debates

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The recommendations from the French parliamentary commission on the burqa are out, reigniting much debate on Islam in Europe. It has not quite died down since the move to ban the minarets in Switzerland. But what truly lies beneath all the hype?

Making Sense of the “Incompatibilities”

RECENT DECISIONS by Swiss voters and French parliamentarians again cast the issues in stark terms of Islam’s supposed inability to co-exist with the West, and its supposed rigid interpretation of ‘Muslim Identity’. With one in four people worldwide adhering to the Islamic faith, touching all continents, this would seem to be a potentially disastrous problem. But given this geographic spread, and Muslims’ ability in many places to comfortably have both a national and religious identity, the question needs to be asked, what is causing this perception, or misperception?

Why is Islam seen to be rigid, unaccommodating and sometimes even an unwelcomed foreigner in Europe? How and why can writers and politicians use minarets, demography and veils as polemics to regularly tease and scare Europeans by speaking of an ‘Islamic colonisation’? Has Islam suddenly refused to adapt? Logically this would spell disaster for Islam if it is depriving itself the ability to exist and grow. Or is it that Europe is naturally incompatible with Islam? Considering the number of indigenous European Muslims, this seeming incompatibility is illogical. Hence, is the Swiss referendum vote on the banning of minarets, France’s contemplation of the banning of the niqab, the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, Netherland’s Geert Wilders’ *Fitna* video and the other cases, all an expression of Islamophobia and discrimination against Muslims?

Understanding the Underlying Dynamics

On one hand, observers must be aware of the political pyrotechnics. This issue is being manipulated in

order to gain votes or political support. For example, in France, some leftist MPs accuse the government of amalgamating debates on the burqa and on the national identity just before critical elections to perhaps seduce some extremist voters. In Switzerland, the referendum may not hold much water. Firstly, it is potentially contrary to conventions of which Switzerland is signatory to. Secondly, the context was favourable to the interdiction. There was no proper opposition to fight against the well-organised party which submitted the proposition. The opinion was also possibly influenced by Muammar Gaddafi's threats after the arrest of his son in Switzerland, and by ambiguity of the proposition itself.

In Europe the reaction to European-Muslim relations is disproportionate to the size of the 'problem'. Muslims represent only 3-4% of the 493 million inhabitants in the EU. Moreover, there is no social homogeneity within the Muslim community. In France official estimates place the number of burqa-clad women between 1,400 and 2,000 only out of a French Muslim population of six million (and much less before the polemic). Despite the impression minarets dominating the Swiss skyline, there are only 4 minarets in the entire country, and 10 (higher than 15 metres) in France. Despite the tensions in both countries over the issues, Muslims in neither country engaged in violent demonstrations.

More generally, the tensions within Europe stem from demographics and values. Europe's population is ageing and declining and is now facing a perceivably young and dynamic Muslim population of mainly immigrants. It is in fact the religious versus secular clash that is critical. Religion and its space in society has been a long-term issue in Europe. Even Christians have faced tensions; the Jesuits (an order of Catholic priests) were not allowed in Switzerland until the 1970s. In France, people complained about the ringing bells of a church. The EU debated the role of Christianity in the Union treaty and ultimately rejected any mention of Christian values. Thus it is not Islamophobia as much as Faithphobia that seems to be dominating Europe.

Intricacies of Managing the Debate

As the majority of Muslims in Western Europe are immigrants, there is the risk of conflating national integration issues with religious sensitivities. This is illustrated through one of the recent recommendations made by the parliamentary commission on the burqa issue in France, which included the refusal of resident cards and citizenship to those who "manifest a radical practice of their religion". While this may alleviate the problems relating to integration, abuse of this measure may lead to further stigmatisation and grievances and the challenge is to map out an objective set of indicators of 'radical practice'.

While Europeans can work to better integrate immigrants, Muslims, have to realise that Islam can be lived in a European way, without compromising Islamic principles. Islam has a record of doing just that, as the faith has spread and adapted to new areas over many centuries. Muslims must not confuse cultural expressions with religious obligations. For example the burqa is not obligatory in Islam and neither is the construction of formidable minarets in mosques. These are cultural issues that arose in a specific context. Those may have changed.

It is also necessary for Muslims to explain why certain practices, such as the segregation between sexes, exist. This will help non-Muslims understand such issues and reach appropriate compromises where faith and secularism can coexist. This is not a new idea. Islam encourages tolerance, allowing it to spread and co-exist with other faiths. This will make it easier for European governments and leaders to be aware of the fact that multiculturalism can and needs to exist without compromising the concept of secularism, especially in this era globalisation.

That's why interaction, both in 'urban ghettos' and 'rural fortresses' -- each with its own socio-religious concentrations, to know each other and to respect the local norms governed by secularism --

have to be improved. From within the European Muslim communities, leaders and groups also need to speak out as they will be able to become a credible bridge and representative for both sides of the issues and debates.

It's Not about Religion

Those affected by the debates, both Muslims and non-Muslims, must not be too caught up with justifications that conveniently play the religious card. At the end of the day, the real issue is not Islam – or religion – but political agendas such as models for national integration and socio-economic policies. In the short term for the burqa issue, it takes to anticipate discrimination, which can lead to fundamentalism, and to tolerate this practice in the private sphere if there is no gender abuse. In the long term and for upcoming debates, one ought to avoid automatically jumping on an offensive or defensive and turning an otherwise objective issue into a religious confrontation. This can be achieved by adopting a broader mindset.

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