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Toulouse Shootings and French Presidential Campaign: 'Flogging a Dead Horse'

By Vinay Kumar Pathak

Synopsis

The Toulouse shootings have reaffirmed the prejudices of the French presidential candidates and allowed them to build a campaign around xenophobia. Immigrants in France may continue to be vilified.

Commentary

FRANCE'S PRESIDENTIAL election campaign has been energised, albeit negatively, by the recent shootings in Toulouse. Two of the main candidates seek to portray themselves as guardians of French republicanism values.

Incumbent President Nicolas Sarkozy and National Front leader Marine Le Pen have seized on the Muslim affiliation of the gunman, Mohamed Merah, to revive their flagging campaigns. They have appropriated the moral and national duty to protect all things French while lacing their rhetoric with Republicanism and laicite – the role of the state to protect its citizens from religion.

Indeed as in all previous election campaigns they had continued to “flog a dead horse” by sacrificing the rights of immigrant communities on the altar of laicite. Critical observers noted a conscious effort to create a state of xenophobia at the expense of France's immigrant communities that would help propel either Sarkozy or Le Pen to victory.

Impact of shootings

In an environment heated by the language of hate used by politicians of the centre and right, some advocates of French multiculturalism see hope in the Socialist Party candidate Francois Hollande who has condemned Sarkozy's populist xenophobic posture. Reports suggested that until recently Hollande was leading the opinion polls with Sarkozy trailing behind. For sure France's migrant minorities would not vote for the candidates who were against them.

The murder of three soldiers, one of whom was confirmed to be a Muslim, and a Jewish family including three children, by a French Muslim of Algerian origin over three days in mid-March, electrified France. There was initial speculation that the killer was a Fascist right wing extremist with an agenda to purge France of Muslims and Jews and protect French values and laicite. When it became known that the gunman was a Muslim who sought to avenge Palestinian children killed by Israelis and to retaliate against French military involvement in

Afghanistan, rightwing politicians pounced on him as the epitome of a 'Muslim migrant' as projected by the rightwing and centrist guardians of laicite.

Sarkozy and Le Pen returned to campaigning with renewed vigour. Sarkozy positioned himself as father of the nation and, invoking the security dilemma, directed his campaign to providing security to French people with a series of anti-terrorism measures to prevent another self-radicalised Merah from emerging. The measures include barring "radical Imams" from entering France and proposed legislation aimed at punishing French residents going abroad for indoctrination or viewing radical websites. Opinion polls now suggest that Sarkozy's extremist threat rhetoric has given him a lead over Hollande, whose campaign focused mainly on issues affecting the daily lives of the French, such as unemployment and income disparities.

Stark reminder

The discovery of Merah's ethnicity has also rejuvenated Le Pen. The National Front's sagging political fortunes have been rising since the Toulouse killings. Le Pen has warned against more Mohamed Merahs arriving in France and opined that "green (Islamic) fascism" was rapidly advancing in the country. She claimed she is the ideal candidate to stop this epidemic through her plans to monitor all mosques in France and all those who undertake suspicious trips to "terror hotspots" like Afghanistan, as was the case with Merah.

The French presidential campaigns are a stark reminder that immigrants in France, despite their French nationality and birth, may continue to be vilified by the opportunistic political elite "flogging a dead horse". Far better if the candidates came forward with candles in their hands in combined Jewish-Muslim-Christian vigils or marches as the nation grieves for those who were killed in Toulouse.

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