Culture and Society | **Cultural Dialogue**

Islam and Elections in Europe

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Islam in the Electoral Debate

Islam has become a major electoral issue in Europe with the rise of the so-called "populist" parties over the past few years. In the Netherlands, the Party for Freedom (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV), led by right-wing populist MP Geert Wilders, won 17% of votes in the 2009 European elections and 20.5% in the legislative elections in June 2010, putting it in third place behind the two major traditional parties (the liberal and labour parties). In October 2010, the Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitlichen Partei Österreichs*, FPÖ), founded by Jörg Haider and currently led by Heinz-Christian Strache, gained 27% of votes in the Vienna municipal elections, where it ranked as the second party. In Denmark, the Danish People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*, DF), led by Pia Merete Kjærsgaard, also ranked third in the 2007 parliamentary elections, with 13.9% of the votes. In Finland, the April 2011 elections put the new nationalist party, True Finns (*Perussuomalaiset*, PS), in third position as well, with 19% of the votes. In France, the National Front (*Front national*, FN), now led by Marine Le Pen (since 2011), attains ratings comparable to the other two major parties (UDF and PS), according to surveys. In Sweden, the new extreme right-wing party, the Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*, SD) appeared in parliament in September 2010, with 5.7% of votes. Finally, the Swiss referendum of November 2009 banning the construction of minarets should also be mentioned. In addition, two parliaments (in Belgium and France) passed a law banning the use of the Islamic burqa in public.

We can thus see that in many European countries, a "populist" party focussing its campaign on the Islamic "threat" in Europe is neck and neck with the two traditional major parties (usually the conservative right and the social-democrat left). Yet in other countries where populism has not formed a new political party (Britain, Spain, Germany), or where it is developing on the basis of other issues (ethnic nationalism, separatism) as in Belgium or Italy, the debate on Islam still plays an important role in political controversies, as shown by the success of the book, *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (*Germany Does Away with Itself*), by Thilo Sarrazin, member of the Social Democrat Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, SPD), which was a best-seller in the autumn of 2010, or the role played by the controversy over the construction of a mosque in the municipal elections of Milan in June 2011.

Yet such a rise of populism raises the question of the movement's nature. It was in the 1980s that immigration became the favourite war horse of the European extreme right (the *Front national* in France, the British National Party in Britain), but there are two new developments today. First of all, the debate is less about immigration than about Islam, as if even the opponents of immigration had come to recognize that immigrants are in Europe to stay and that the fundamental issue is that of their integration into the European landscape. Hence the fact that debate focuses above all on the presence of religious symbols in the public space: veils, burqas, minarets and halal meat (in 2011, the Dutch parliament banned both halal and kosher ritual slaughter), but also the presence of crucifixes in Italian schools (which means there is no symmetry or equality between Christianity and Islam). The issue of Islam predominates in the immigration debate. The second ele-

ment that explains the breakthrough of populist parties is their transformation from the fascist extreme right emerging in the 1930s to a new category integrating values that were hitherto left-wing.

The Transformation of Populist Parties

Parties that make their hostility to Islam the focal point of their campaigns are often classified as far right when, in fact, things are more complicated. Some certainly have historical roots in the far right, as the National Front in France or the FPÖ in Austria, but others, such as the Dutch PVV or the Danish People's Party, have recently formed through a coalition of nationalists and secularists, the latter often coming from the left, and united by their common hostility to Islam; they are often associated with a "sovereignist," eurosceptic position. In economics, they are not necessarily liberal like the traditional right: the Danish PP endorses the Social-Democratic concept of the "welfare state." On the issue of morals and values, many endorse the sexual liberation of the 1960s and defend feminism and gay rights, as is the case with the Dutch PVV, thus attracting traditionally left-wing voters. Moreover, this secular and liberal positioning on the issue of values allows them to reject Islam as contrary to freedom of individual choice. But of course, this is not without contradiction, because the Catholic Church opposes the sexual liberation of the 1960s. Populist parties thus defend a Christian identity of a "secularised" Europe unrelated to the current teachings of the Church. It is even more complicated when a party moves from a traditional extreme right position to modern populism. In France, for example, since the election of Marine Le Pen as president of the party, the National Front strives to tone down traditional extreme-right references (latent anti-Semitism, defence of family values, economic liberalism) and emphasizes the defence of secularism.

The debate on Islam has upset the traditional division between left and right in the majority of European countries, which were thus far characterized by right-wing endorsement of traditional Christian values, its economic liberalism and its hostility to immigration, while the left was liberal regarding the values of society, in favour of greater state control regarding the economy and more open to immigration.

Absence of a Muslim Vote

Whereas populists see Muslims as a community united around their faith, the political behaviour of Muslims in Europe shows, on the contrary, their low level of politicization and their high level of diversity. In the absence of statistics, it is difficult to gain an overview of the electoral behaviour of European Muslims. The first point to consider is, of course, the issue of citizenship. For Muslims to be able to vote, they have to be citizens, and most likely only in France and Britain is there a sufficient mass of Muslim voters to have some weight, in theory, in elections. But two other factors also play a role: voter registration (as well as abstention) and the election method.

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The presence of people of Muslim origin in national parliaments does not, in fact, reflect their demographic weight in the country, and paradoxically, does not reflect their degree of integration either. The reason is the electoral system. In France, for instance, a country that has the largest Muslim community in Europe and where integration (particularly linguistic) is progressing, there is not a single Muslim member of parliament in Metropolitan France (with the exception, therefore, of the overseas departments). On the other hand, Germany (7 MPs of Muslim origin from a total of 640), the Netherlands (7 "practicing" Muslim MPs and 7 non-practicing ones from a total of 150), Great Britain (8 Muslim MPs from a total of 650), Belgium (4 MPs elected in 2005) and Greece (2 MPs) show greater diversity, although in most of the cases mentioned, integration is far from being considered a success by either the authorities or public opinion. The reason for the discrepancies between integration and representation are electoral laws. Muslim representation can emerge in two cases: 1) in a list system (Germany, Holland, Belgium), which allows parties to get candidates of immigrant origin into eligible positions; and 2) in a first-past-the-post system if the

Believing that no dialogue project can be successful if it is not based on the scientific understanding of the deep transformations affecting the societies to which it is addressed, in 2008, the Anna Lindh Foundation embarked on the development of the *Anna Lindh Report on Euromed Intercultural Trends*. Conceived as a tool for knowledge and action on cross-cultural relations in the Mediterranean region, the Report is a scientific publication issued every three years that presents an analysis of the evolution of the values, mutual perceptions and intercultural behaviour of people around the Mediterranean. It is a pioneering and "democratic" study, since it gathers the opinions and aspirations of a sample of 13,000 people from the Euromed region through a public opinion poll conducted by Gallup Europe.[1] An international pool of intercultural experts interprets the results of the poll and provides qualitative analyses on issues of major concern for the promotion of intercultural dialogue. In the 2010 Report, the topics analysed by the experts include, among others: differences and similarities in value systems; the religious factor in intercultural relations; media treatment of cultural diversity (the focus of the Report's thematic dossier); the role of culture in Mediterranean relations; intercultural citizenship; human mobility; Islam, the West and modernity; and regional cooperation and the Union for the Mediterranean. The analysis is enriched with good practice and case studies on intercultural dialogue recommended by the Anna Lindh Foundation's network of civil society organisations.

The Report itself can be considered a product of intercultural cooperation among more than 40 experts from 20 different countries committed to the promotion of a new narrative of Euro-Mediterranean relations that goes beyond the traditional North/South or Islam/West dichotomies. In fact, the poll results show that the Mediterranean exists as a space for social interaction in which at least one in every four people had the chance to meet or talk with a person from the opposite shore of the Mediterranean during the previous year. In this regard, social media are the main tool for intercultural interaction for Arab youth (24%). In terms of values, it is interesting to note that, even though religion is the main value for the Southern Mediterranean (62%), and respect for other cultures is a central priority for Europeans (58%), there is a certain convergence between Europeans (56%) and Southern Mediterraneans (41%) on the recognition of the importance of family solidarity, and they also share a vision of the region as a space with a common heritage, a sense of hospitality and a specific lifestyle (80%). The people interviewed showed a high level of mutual interest. In particular, 68% showed interest in cultural life, 58% in economic conditions and 51% in religious practices. They also believed that a future common Mediterranean project could lead to more innovation and entrepreneurship, youthful dynamism and respect for cultural diversity. We can therefore state that if any clash exists between the people on the two sides of the Mediterranean, it is a clash of misperceptions related to a lack of deep knowledge of the *other*. Based on these findings, the Report presents a range of proposals for intercultural dialogue policies and guidelines for intercultural action at the local and international level addressed to policymakers, opinion leaders and civil society. Furthermore, the contents of the Report were used as the basis for a series of debates carried out in collaboration with the Anna Lindh Networks and academic partners and involving media practitioners and social leaders.

The Anna Lindh Report can be downloaded in English, French and Arabic at www.annalindhreport.org.

Eleonora Insalaco
Coordinator of the Anna Lindh Report

[1] The following 13 countries were surveyed in the opinion poll conducted by Gallup Europe for the 2010 edition of the Anna Lindh Report: Bosnia and Herzegovina, France, Egypt, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Lebanon, Morocco, Spain, Sweden, Syria, Turkey and the UK.

population of Muslim origin is highly concentrated, which would allow a Muslim candidate to win with a simple majority in districts with a high immigrant concentration, although the existence of such "electoral ghettoes" goes against the principle of integration (Great Britain). Another, isolated case is when seats are reserved for a Muslim minority (Greece).

Muslims are entering politics only through the traditional political parties. Nowhere has there been any attempt to create an "ethnic" or "Muslim" party with chances of getting a candidate elected. Candidates of Muslim origin in the 1990s were primarily running for left-wing and green parties, but they are now appearing on traditional right-wing party lists (for instance, of the 8 British MPs of Muslim origin elected in 2011, 6 were Labour and 2 Conservative Party candidates), even if it is the green party lists that are most open (in Germany it is the *Grünen* who have the most seats of Muslim origin).

In France, the absence of MPs of Muslim origin should not obscure the fact that the March 2008 municipal elections showed a rising number of candidates with Muslim names on the lists in cities of over 30,000 inhabitants. Abstention remains high in neighbourhoods with large immigrant populations, however.

In any case, the increasing participation of Muslim voters in elections has not (or not yet) compensated for the shift towards populist parties among a popular electorate. For this to happen, we will most likely have to wait for the rise of a middle class of Muslim origin.