



It has rained in Paris but it has not drizzled in Brussels

Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers (Brussels)

"When it rains in Paris, it drizzles in Brussels," a Belgian proverb says. This has however not been the case this time with the massive riots that have been ravaging French suburbs for about a month.

On October 27, two immigrant teenagers of Muslim tradition who thought they were chased by police were electrocuted when they tried to hide in a power substation in the Paris suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois. The incident triggered mass-scale nightly riots by poor and unemployed French youth of Muslim tradition and foreign descent. Rioters armed with bricks, baseball bats and Molotov cocktails have clashed with police in Paris and many other cities. Thousands of cars have been torched. A number of businesses, shops, schools, bus stations and police stations, and other official buildings were engulfed in flames within a few weeks. Curfews were put in place in a number of cities. No less than a thousand people have been arrested. A number of them have been jailed or deported. Discrimination in housing and employment, poverty, an inefficient education system, identity crisis, an unhealthy economy, social inequalities, misconceived city planning, and exclusion from the political arena are all now pointed at as primary explanations for such dramatic events.

Belgium, whose culture is usually very much influenced by France and which habitually experiences the same social problems, has this time not been confronted with such social explosions. Just a few isolated cases of torched cars were reported. Could it have been different? To what extent do the same problems that the riots revealed in France exist in Belgium as well, or have they been more successfully avoided? Over time, the country has developed a different political approach than that of France, and a different policy towards immigrants who have settled on its territory.

This short report will analyse the integration policies put in place by the Belgian authorities in the political, social and religious spheres.

Political integration

There are currently about 350,000 – 400,000 Muslims in Belgium¹. The first immigrants – just a few thousands - arrived in the 1920s to work in the coal mines but the phenomenon got an impetus in the aftermath of immigration conventions signed with Morocco and Turkey (1964), Tunisia (1969), Algeria and Yugoslavia (1970). As Belgium needed cheap and docile labour as well as some increase in and rejuvenation of its demography, it allowed for family reunification.

In Belgium, voting is compulsory for those eligible. The system of proportional representation of the political parties in all elected assemblies (federal, regional and community parliaments, provincial and municipal councils) favours diversity, as parties are more prone to place candidates from the various segments of society on their electoral lists and to adjust their programmes to their needs in order to attract their votes. As a result, children of Italian or Moroccan immigrants who have adopted the Belgian nationality have managed to make their way into the federal parliament and even government². Members of the second generation of Turkish, Tunisian or Congolese immigrants are now present in all elected bodies below the level of the federal parliament. A concrete example in the regional parliament of Brussels-Capital City: more than half of the Socialist members come from immigrant families.

The right to vote at all levels has been extended to all EU citizens living in Belgium. The political debate on whether to grant this right to non-EU citizens who have been living in Belgium for a number of years remains undecided. The evolution on this question is however slowed down by the weight of the extreme-right party Vlaams Belang (VB). In mid-June 2004, the Vlaams Belang gained a quarter of the vote during regional and European elections in Flanders and became almost the largest party in that region.

The issue of the total access to the right to vote is on the agenda of the socialist, social-christian and green parties. Immigrants therefore nourish the hope that one day they will be allowed to vote and will be eligible to run for elections. First-generation and second-generation Muslim immigrants are fully concerned by any future development in this area in Belgium.

Social integration

For many years, efforts have been deployed to make society more inclusive. Positive discrimination programmes in the school education sector have entailed increased public funding in "difficult areas". Nevertheless, too many youths from the immigrant communities still end up in vocational schools with few employment prospects. Values of tolerance and respect for other cultures and religions are integrated in the school curriculum and are conveyed by the media, but surveys indicate that racism is on the rise. Cultural diversity has been encouraged in the recruitment in public services and since 1995, specific programs have been initiated to strengthen the hiring of people of foreign origin in the police.

Few efforts have however been deployed to combat discrimination in housing and employment. There still exist ghettos in the big cities and social inequalities persist. Muslims often resort to hiding their identity and changing their names on their CV or on the phone when they look for a job. Many Belgian human rights organizations agree that discrimination has a face: an Arab face or a black face. Some argue that by prohibiting any ethnic census, the Belgian authorities refuse to acknowledge some social realities and mask a number of problems that are more ethnic than social. The non-recognition of ethnic minorities blocks the way to effective solutions to the discrimination of several categories of Muslim and black immigrants and their descendants. The difficult social integration of Muslims is therefore inseparable from the global issues of discrimination and racism.

There are specific anti-racism laws that prohibit and penalize the incitement of discrimination, hate or violence based on race, ethnicity or nationality, but the equality of opportunities for people of African and Arab origin remains undermined by a relatively high degree of racial and ethnic intolerance in society. The Vlaams Belang, which has an anti-immigration and anti-Muslim agenda, fosters such feelings. In Antwerp, a teacher of Muslim religious classes in a public school was assassinated in 2002. Despite recent court rulings against the xenophobic Vlaams Belang, this party continues to maintain considerable support in Flanders, the region where it is based. In the Walloon region, extreme-right political parties were traditionally insignificant, but in the 2004 regional elections the Front National received 8,1% of the vote.

Belgium has ratified the ICCPR and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. A new Anti-Discrimination Law was adopted in January, and it provides legal protection not only against racial discrimination. The law defines discrimination in broad terms and introduces a new civil procedure aimed at enabling claimants to have their damages redressed and compensated in the fastest possible manner. However, despite the progress achieved with the adoption of the new law, it remains necessary to revise and reinforce certain parts of it, including those related to protection against discrimination in the areas of access to housing and employment.

The bumpy road of religious integration

The relationship between the state and religions in Belgium is rooted in the constitutional principle of the recognition and financing of religions by the state. Islam was recognized in 1974, after the previous recognition of Catholicism (1802), Protestantism (1802), Judaism (1808), Anglicanism (1870), and before Orthodoxy (1985).

The process of granting Islam the same status and the same advantages as the other religions has however been very slow. One of the reasons was the difficulty for the state to find an interlocutor that was representative of the diversity of the Muslim population. After several unsuccessful attempts, a specific form of representation was adopted by law: internal elections under the supervision of the state. The first Executive of the Muslims of Belgium was recognised by the state after the elections of December 1998. The “political” screening of elected candidates led to the rejection of some of them by the state as they were suspected of being close to radical Islamic circles. This issue created some tensions between the Muslim community and the state. For various controversial reasons, the state multiplied acts of interference in the internal affairs of the Muslim Executive. This culminated in the forceful renewal of the democratically elected representative organs of the Muslim community imposed in 2005 by the state four years before the end of their mandate.

Parallel to these tumultuous relations, the federalization of the state along with the difficult transfer of a number of powers from the federal parliament to the regional parliaments dramatically slowed down and complicated the management of Islam. The process of recognition of mosques and imams which is necessary for the state-funding has thereby been delayed until now and progresses at a different pace according to the regions.

Despite all these political and institutional upheavals, which have led to an unequal treatment of Islam in comparison with other religions, a number of concrete objectives have been achieved. Islam has been taught in public schools since 1975, the teachers of religious classes and their inspectors have been selected by the Executive. Provisions have been adopted to regulate the burial of Muslims in public cemeteries. No federal law has been adopted to ban the veil in school, courts and other public places due to the lack of consensus inside each political party, but some schools have taken restrictive measures which are now challenged in courts.

Conclusions

Despite political goodwill and persistent efforts to create an inclusive society, Belgian authorities are still unable to modify deeply-rooted negative societal attitudes and to achieve satisfactory results in the fields of equality of citizens, non-discrimination, tolerance, and respect for ethnic, cultural or religious diversity. The fractures that run across Belgian society remain potentially dangerous and might also lead one day to social explosions if they persist and if the populations concerned lose their last hopes.

¹ This demographic evaluation is usually mentioned in reports on Islam in Belgium but accurate and reliable statistics don't exist and will never exist, as long as ethnic, linguistic and religious censuses remain forbidden in Belgium and as long as a clear definition of “Muslim” is lacking.

² Two examples: Elio Di Rupo (who is of Italian descent), president of the francophone Socialist Party, was until a few months ago deputy Prime Minister. Fadila Laanan (Moroccan descent) is now the Minister of Culture.