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Sarkozy and the Burqa: A New Policy or Provocation?

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French President Sarkozy's recent remarks that the burqa is not welcomed in France have spurred many negative and even defensive responses from Muslims not only in France but also across the world. Why so?

“THE BURQA is not a religious problem; it's a question of liberty and women's dignity. It's not a religious symbol, but a sign of subservience and debasement. I want to say solemnly, the burqa is not welcomed in France. In our country, we can't accept women as prisoners behind a screen, cut off from all social life, deprived of all identity. This is not our idea of freedom.”

-French President Nicolas Sarkozy's address to the Parliament, 23 June 2009

The answer to the question above seems clear; President Sarkozy's rhetoric is enough to have ruffled a few feathers. To his credit, Sarkozy subsequently declared in the same speech that the Muslim faith must be respected as much as other religions and he also tried to disassociate the burqa with religious identity. But the ongoing angst caused by these and similar remarks begs a larger question over the origins of the issue and unique context of France.

Commission on burqa?

French responses to the burqa -- or niqab -- are based on arguably justifiable concerns. Civil servants face burqa issues in daily life: to deliver and check IDs -- problems arise when women refuse to unveil for identification. In schools, teachers face the same problem when sending off their students to their mothers clad in burqa. Furthermore, an extremist imam was expelled due to his radical preaching in 2003 and in 2004 some young people were recruited in a poor area of Paris to fight in Iraq. As a result, some in France worry about a possible link between rising Islamist radicalism and the trend of women wearing the burqa.

It is also argued, quite controversially, that women wearing the burqa are forced to do so, hence

inhibiting their freedom. In an effort to defuse further problems, Andre G erin, a communist MP, called for a commission, to include Muslims, to study the burqa phenomenon. There is also an underlying issue of national integration. There is a feeling among some circles of the elite that the French ‘laicit e’ (secularism), is under threat. This still leaves open the question, why has there been such a defensive reaction from the Muslim community.

Two sides to the reaction

In part the reaction is due to the failure of President Sarkozy to qualify his remarks. Instead, his choice of words made it vulnerable to misinterpretations. While he did mention that the burqa was not a religious symbol, he did not explain what many saw as his derogatory and insensitive comments. The burqa is traditionally worn by many Muslim women across the world, mostly in the Middle East. But in places such as Afghanistan the burqa predates Islam. The President’s imprecise language clouded a potentially positive message -- the desire of the French community to understand the issue and try to see if there is a way to address legitimate concerns of all the interested parties.

The irony, if not tragedy, is that the issue involves very few women, yet it has the potential to impact a much wider society. And amongst this few, some also chose to wear the burqa on their own accord. Yet, the remarks directed at this minority can very easily provoke the Muslim community and invoke a reflexive sense of defensiveness. Also, by casting it as a women’s rights issue, the debate will more likely stigmatise and marginalise them. The worst effect is that it could produce tension between Muslims and non-Muslims in France. On the flipside, Muslim extremist groups could also exploit this opportunity to rally the Muslims against others. Clearly, this is a counter-productive effect of the president’s intention of facilitating integration in secular France.

Interestingly, the extremists who claim that the burqa is a compulsory dressing are wrong; the burqa is not prescribed in the Quran and majority of the ulama and Muslims agree that it is not obligatory for Muslim women to completely cover their face. In fact, Sheikh Mohammad Tantawi, Egypt’s Grand Imam, not only acknowledged that the burqa was not compulsory in Islam but that a head of state, including France, had the right to accept or prohibit it.

Lessons on Handling Sensitivity

In the modern world words travel in an instant, but meaning and context often never do. In this case President Sarkozy’s remarks are readily available in the English language media across the world, but the context is only available in the French language. Additionally, few outside of France understand the nation’s commitment to secularism, one that is jealously guarded. This tension between secularism and religion is now seen as a French-Muslim conflict, whereas historically the conflict was between Catholics and the state. In the early part of the last century France began to develop a legal commitment to secularism and ‘laicit e’ – the French conception of separation between church and state -- which many Catholics had difficulty adjusting to. Over time the changes brought about by the French policies came to be accepted -- and this may happen with the Muslim community as well.

The remarks are also unfortunate as they have overshadowed the efforts made by the President himself for the Muslim community in France and cast a negative light on France’s image. In fact, Sarkozy brought competing Muslim parties together under the French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM) formed in May 2003. The CFCM serves as an official interlocutor with the state in the regulation of Islamic worship and public ritual practices, and is similar to the state’s relationship with Catholic, Protestant and Jewish institutions. In a May 2003 speech to the National Assembly, Sarkozy also asserted that there cannot be two categories of citizens: those who can live their faith and the others, the Muslims.

Several lessons can be learnt from this episode. Clearly, it is necessary to substantiate any remarks,

especially with regards to sensitive issues associated with religious identity. If justifications are made public and clearly spelt, they can easily placate any potential misgivings and undo stresses within the community.

Ultimately, understanding contexts and cultures and adopting an open mindset are keys to fostering a harmonious society. At this juncture, the audience requires access to more information on the commission and developments on the matter to allay any misinterpretations of Sarkozy's remarks and also to appreciate the positive objectives of the commission.

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