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Europe's Islamic Tightrope

By Arabinda Acharya

SYNOPSIS

Targeted police actions against certain groups in Austria and proposed legislation to regulate Islamic religious and cultural practices in France suggest that some parts of Europe seem to be resetting their relations with Muslim societies. For better or for worse, Europe's relations with Muslim communities may be evolving.

COMMENTARY

EUROPE SEEMS to be resetting its relations with Muslims and Muslim societies in parts of the continent. Despite denials, targeted police actions against certain groups like Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and Hamas in Austria and proposed legislations to regulate religious and cultural practices of Muslims in France, for example, betray attempts to avenge terrorist attacks in many European cities.

Riding on an increasing wave of Islamophobia in Europe characterised by the emergence of anti-Islam groups and anti-Islamic narratives, official assertions that investigations and raids were "not targeted at Muslims or Islam as a religious community" but rather to protect them, do not instil confidence among the targeted community. The government rhetoric has all the appearance of conflating identities and what Umit Vural, the president of the Islamic Religious Community in Austria said, blending violent extremism with "religious orthodoxy".

Response or Over-Reaction?

To be sure, Europeans have reasons to be wary of increasing violence by disparate extremists, particularly at the behest of ISIS. The group is lashing out to retain its credibility after the collapse of its caliphate project in Syria and Iraq.

However, reacting to attacks by a small group of ISIS loyalists with extreme punitive

measures and social and cultural segregation can surely be counterproductive. Ultimately, these would give rise to right-wing extremism and result in the emergence of divided and dangerous societies.

On 2 November 2020 a lone gunman of Albanian ethnicity and a suspected ISIS sympathiser went on a shooting spree in Vienna, Austria that left four dead and 30 injured.

Following the attack, Austrian authorities conducted large-scale operations against more than 70 individuals and several organisations linked to MB and Hamas in the country, targeting the bulk of their infrastructure including their finances and logistical support networks.

Using the public angst against the attack, the Chancellor Sebastian Kurz declared that he would criminalise “political Islam”. The July 2021 anti-terror law mandated regulation of all religious activities in the country. This advanced Chancellor Kurz’s 2018 crusade against “*Islamgesetz*”, a Habsburg-era law regulating relations between the state and its Muslim citizens including rights and freedoms of Muslims in the Habsburg empire.

At the same time Austrian police launched operation “Luxor” against alleged terrorist networks raiding homes, businesses and associations and arresting dozens of people.

Brotherhood in Europe

Despite its contested past, MB rose to power after the Arab Spring. Its leader Muhammad Mursi, who was elected as head of the government in Egypt, became a darling of many Western countries, including the United States, even though they had adored the autocratic Hosni Mubarak before him.

Mursi’s mediations in the Palestine issue at the time were welcome, even as Hamas was running part of the show. When Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi came to power in Egypt on the back of a counter-coup against the Arab Spring, MB again became a pariah for the same Western actors. Now it is an organisation that is banned in its own country.

The group is selective in its membership in Europe and have been quite successful in influencing sections of the Muslim communities in some countries. Its alliances with Hamas and Hezbollah have reinforced its militant side.

Even with the ban in Egypt and despite immense pressure from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, MB has not been designated a terrorist organisation by all countries, including the United Kingdom. Lobbying against the organisation in the US also did not succeed.

In Europe, Austria and France have been at the forefront of targeting the MB. Emmanuel Macron introduced the “Law Reinforcing Respect of the Principles of the Republic” to empower the government to permanently close houses of worship and dissolve religious organisations, without court order, if it finds that any of their members are provoking violence or inciting hatred.

Far-right Islamophobic organisations like EDL (English Defence League) and Stop Islamisation of Europe have embraced Austria's strong-arm tactics to prevent Europe turning into a "New Mecca". Many others see this as an opportunity to take further steps to gag Islamic practices and even, highly controversially, ban the Quran.

All Not the Same

Mainstream Muslims are discomfited by the move of the Austrian government despite them not supporting extremist organisations. Many believe that the Austrian or French measures are affronts to the Muslim culture and religion, not purely security imperatives as claimed.

The Austrian and French measures have led to existential anxieties in the Muslim communities across Europe. Earlier, Austria, Hungary and the Czech Republic were criticised by European Muslims for publicly voicing support for Israel's operations against Hamas in Gaza during May 2021 Sheikh Jarrar tensions in Jerusalem. There are allegations that the US Jewish Lobby is indirectly funding and backing these governments to counter the spread of Islam in Europe.

Others like Spain, Belgium, Sweden and Denmark are increasingly wary of the presence of a significant number of refugees and ex-fighters from Syria and other war-torn countries in Africa.

Tensions between secular Europe and a growing radical Muslim milieu allegedly under the influence of the "inflammatory rhetoric" of foreign-born imams is driving a small number to launch attacks across Europe. It is in this context that Charles Michel, President of the European Council, called for establishing an "institute to train imams in Europe" to regulate the Internet.

While the targets of Austrian and French actions are, arguably, the terrorists, their governments' public narratives have made these look anti-community. While MB and its backers – Turkey and Qatar – wonder if other European countries would follow suit, it appears that, for better or for worse, Europe's relations with Muslims may be evolving.

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