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## Excesses of Cultural Laicism in France

*By Acmal Zuheyr Iefan Bin Abdul Wahid*

### SYNOPSIS

*Last Ramadan, the Muslim fasting month, the French Football Federation sparked controversy by enacting a policy prohibiting Muslim footballers from fasting amid concerns that such acts violate secularism. This demonstrated how existing understandings of laïcité, or cultural laicism, crucially influenced the enactment of such a policy. Dialogue is needed to reshape understandings about secularism and make it more inclusive of religious needs.*

### COMMENTARY

A controversy that happened in France during the recent Islamic month of Ramadan is worth reflecting on: The French Football Federation's (FFF) [ban](#) on Muslim players in the national teams from fasting over concerns that it violates the federation's commitment to secularism.

During Ramadan, Muslims fast, abstaining from eating and drinking from dawn to sunset in an act of piety they consider obligatory to their faith. It was, therefore, no surprise that the fasting ban caused unhappiness among Muslim players, even prompting one to [leave](#) the national youth squad. In the past, a similar [recommendation](#) advising Muslim footballers against fasting was made over concerns about performance.

These explanations are odd given that one of France's top midfielders, N'golo [Kante](#), is known for fasting throughout Ramadan, even if it fell within the football season. And even if it is true that fasting adversely affects performance, many Muslim footballers were ready to accept lesser [roles](#) in matches that took place during their holy month.

## **Fasting as Inimical to Secularism**

This time, though, the justification given by the FFF is about upholding secularism as well as the “maintenance of neutrality” by preventing or avoiding any [display](#) that is conspicuously “political, ideological, [and] religious”. While not entirely unexpected, this discursive shift is striking because of its semblance with broader ongoing debates in French society and beyond about secularism; the best form it should take, and religion’s proper role in the public sphere.

With this in mind, the prohibition of fasting on grounds of secularism should be cause for wider probing. How does an act as simple as the abstinence from eating and drinking undermine secularism? In what ways is it so conspicuous as to warrant external intervention? Could an examination of French secularism (or laïcité) provide answers to these questions?

## **Laïcité: A Governing Principle Based on Neutrality**

Laïcité is a governing [principle](#) not unlike other forms of secularism, which is premised on a sharp distinction between the public and private spheres – by limiting religion’s presence in the former, proponents of laïcité argue that the state can achieve neutrality and avoid religious encroachments.

With these secular outcomes established, it is believed that religious liberty and equality in a society marked by religious differences can be better secured. This appreciation for state neutrality and its sharp separation from religion emerged against the backdrop of the country’s formation. Historically, [disputes between the French government and](#) the Church were commonplace. Hence, it is understandable why some advocates of laïcité seem overly protective of the principle.

Despite this, as anthropologist John Bowen pointed out, French understandings about laïcité face ongoing contestations, and a range of different positions continue to be advocated.

## **Cultural Laicism as Exclusionary Force**

Philosopher Yolande Jansen has offered an important intervention. She said, “The influence of a cultural laicism.... should not be underestimated”. [Cultural laicism](#) describes the prevailing societal notions of secularism and how it should be implemented. In the French context, it arguably takes a very rigid form; strict adherence to the separation and relegation of religion from the state is gradually elevated to self-evident status as the best way to practice secularism. Attesting to the growing normative thrust of such views, some religious studies scholars, like Paul Hedges, describe dominant understandings about laïcité as increasingly [“ideological”](#), whereas others explain it as a kind of [“fetishisation”](#).

Given these perspectives, it follows that individuals in society would, on their own accord and within their capacity, seek to enforce secularism as they see fit. For instance, Bowen observes how French teachers, principals, private employers, and intellectuals have been taking the [lead](#) in denouncing, if not preventing, the presence of visibly religious dressing in school or at work.

This form of cultural laicism often targets the immigrant Muslim community for failing to assimilate. This seemingly uneven response has led thoughtful experts and scholars alike to describe such laicisms as being inflected by, if not acting as [cover](#) for, deep-rooted [racial prejudice](#) in French society.

It should not be so mystifying, then, that the leadership at FFF has taken a hardline stance against Muslims fasting while at the national team's training camp. Nor should the discursive turn expressed by the federation in this regard be taken as entirely unprecedented. Past frictions with its Muslim athletes on similar grounds come to mind. These include a refusal, unlike in neighbouring countries, to allow match breaks for Muslim players to break their fast in time and the [hijab](#) ban for Muslim women footballers even though FIFA had already reversed such a ruling.

From these, it can be inferred that the FFF echoes the fears expressed by proponents of broader secular policies that ban religious symbols and practices in public. And while laïcité is supposed to help ensure religious liberty and to manage religious diversity, cultural laicism threatens to undo it by its exclusionary bent.

Accepted notions of laïcité in France seem less sensitive to certain religious needs. It is clear from the fasting ban that Muslim footballers' right to practise their faith freely is compromised. By asserting that fasting is incompatible with secularism, the ban reinforces existing perceptions about the Muslim community as separate and insular.

### **Towards More Inclusiveness Through Dialogue**

Philosopher Charles Taylor describes the concept of [social imaginary](#) as the background understandings of individuals, institutions, and society that collectively form the basis from which structural practices make sense. Cultural laicism fits into such a social imaginary in France, shaping the discourse about laïcité whereby conspicuous signs and practices of religiosity (e.g., the hijab) are sanctioned. As FFF's latest ban has laid bare, even simple, subtle, and corporeal ones like fasting can also become an issue.

This is a sobering reality for advocates seeking a more inclusive discourse on laïcité, especially when majoritarian sentiments dominate prevailing views. Nevertheless, one can remain hopeful through a commitment to dialogue.

While sceptics are cynical about having dialogue, it nevertheless remains a crucial endeavour for policymakers, community leaders, and activists alike. It is one of the few viable avenues available to foster mutual understanding in a diverse society.

Constructive dialogue offers the potential to reshape the social imaginary to be more inclusive and more accepting of the possibility that a society can be accommodative to religious needs without sacrificing its secular character. Just like how French Muslim footballers have been essential and [much-loved](#) on the pitch, so too can French Muslims – and their religious sensibilities – be included in a broader secular imaginary off it.

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