

France Envisions a Citizenry of Model Muslims

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PARIS, May 6 - The French interior minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, was booed and whistled at when he said at the annual conference of one of this country's most important Muslim groups last month that Muslim women would have to go bareheaded when posing for pictures for their identity cards.

He did not seem to notice - or perhaps chose to ignore - that a vast majority of the women in the audience were wearing head scarves. A few of them had even swathed their faces in black and hidden their hands under black gloves.

And perhaps the law-and-order interior minister can be forgiven for overlooking the shopping bags on sale at a score of kiosks, the ones with the silhouette of a woman wearing a veil and the phrase "I love my veil" in English and Arabic.

In a largely secular continent still trying to come to grips with Islam, France, with its large Muslim population and long colonial history with Algeria, is something of a bellwether. But even here, it is unclear how - or even whether - the tensions between secularism and Muslim piety will be resolved.

In a sense, France's center-right government is trying to create a model Muslim citizenry. President Jacques Chirac has spoken about his vision of a "tolerant" Islam. Mr. Sarkozy said recently, "There is no room for fundamentalism at the Republic's table."

For them, model Muslims would be French-speaking and law-abiding. They would celebrate the 1905 French law that requires total separation between church and state. They would attend mosques presided over by clerics who are French-trained and avoid politics in their sermons.

Model Muslim women would not try to wear head scarves in the workplace; model Muslim girls would not try to wear

head scarves to school. Most important, model Muslims would call themselves French first and Muslim second.

The thinking goes something like this: Muslims must be integrated into French society to avoid a culture clash that could contribute to terrorism. So the French government has embarked on a two-pronged strategy that will give Muslims what French leaders call "a place at the table," but monitor and regulate their activities at the same time.

This strategy lay behind Mr. Sarkozy's campaign to put together an official Islamic council led by a "moderate," suit-and-tie-wearing mosque rector to interact with the French state. It also underlies Mr. Sarkozy's belief that the only way France can stop radical foreign clerics from preaching on French soil is to create a home-grown variety that identifies more with French culture and tradition. It is the reason French intelligence has assigned operatives to monitor sermons in mosques and prayer centers every Friday.

The idea of the French state regulating a religious community is rooted in Napoleon's bold concordat concluded with the papacy in 1802. While the concordat recognized Catholicism as the "preferred religion" of France, it also forced the pope to accept nationalization of church property in France, gave the state the right to appoint bishops, police all public worship and make the clergy "moral prefects" of the state.

A few years later, the French state sought to transform the Jewish population into better French citizens by controlling their behavior, going so far as to propose briefly that every two marriages between Jews be matched by a marriage between a Jew and a non-Jew.

But in an era in which the French state enjoys less and less direct control over its citizenry, transforming a Muslim population into an ideal citizenry may be too much of a stretch.

"It is very difficult to say it openly but this is a very troubling situation, a crossroads," said Pierre Birnbaum, professor of politics and philosophy at the Sorbonne and author of "The Idea of France."

"The state, which is no longer the center of the nation, may not be in a position to rule on religion from above," he said. "It may not have the power to integrate."

France is home to about five million Muslims, about 7 percent of the population. But that figure is hopelessly unreliable because under French law, people are not officially counted, polled or classified according to religion.

Officials say they do not know whether there are any Muslims among France's 577 members of the National Assembly, although a Muslim cultural organization affiliated with the Paris Mosque says there are none. There are no Muslim ministers, although there are two Muslim state secretaries, one for long-term development, another for veterans affairs.

The driving force behind France's campaign to make its Muslim citizens more French is to curb political radicalism and terrorism, both inside and outside the country. The problem is that mainstreaming Muslims into European society does not necessarily translate into an embrace of European ideals.

France - like the rest of Europe - was stunned when the perpetrator of a suicide bombing in Israel late last month was identified as Asif Hanif, a 21-year-old middle-class Briton of South Asian origin. Another Briton, Omar Khan Sharif, the 27-year-old son of a successful businessman originally from Kashmir, reportedly fled the scene. Both came from comfortable, Westernized suburban neighborhoods.

The French are aware as well of the power of a protest leader like Dyab Abou Jahjah, the Lebanese-born son of university teachers, who speaks five languages and founded an Arab pride movement for immigrants in Belgium. He demands affirmative action in schools, the workplace and housing, and calls assimilation "cultural rape."

So even as France struggles to "integrate," as French officials call it, its Muslim population, the nightmare is that the strategy may fail. Radicalism and terrorism sometimes may have less to do with religion and more to do with an overwhelming sense of alienation and rage linked to

economic and political realities, like discrimination,
joblessness and the open-ended war between Israel and the
Palestinians.