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Religion and National Identity: Islamophobia as a valid electoral option?

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This policy brief continues the discussion in “Veiled Women: Open Threats?”³ on this website. It will consider other aspects of the interactions of religion and national identity, including the reasons for not proceeding with the proposed burka ban in Spain. In including also recent anti-Islam statements by politicians in Germany and Austria, it will draw attention to the contrast in political outcomes between those countries and Spain. Additionally, in all three cases, it will examine links between national identity and religion, indicating in the process the central role these factors are being made to play in the current situation of increasing religious pluralism in Europe.

While, as outlined in the policy brief “Veiled Women: Open Threats?”, the strong social and political factors urging a legislated ban on face veils in Spain remain valid, other factors have intervened to

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³ Canada-Europe Transatlantic Dialogue, 12 December 2014, <http://labs.carleton.ca/canadaeurope/2014/policy-brief-veiled-women-open-threats-robot-gould/>.

prevent any action being taken. It was very noticeable, for example, that the proposed ban remained unimportant in the campaign preceding the elections for the Catalan Parliament held on 27 September 2015, following its early dissolution on 4 August 2015. Similarly, in the campaign leading up to the national elections on 20 December 2015, no mention was made of this issue, even by the conservative and Catholic Church-friendly Partido Popular then in power at the national level.

Why would this be the case? Why would governments back off from positions they had so forcefully presented? Above all, three reasons suggest themselves. The first is political: Catalan separatism. The Catalan elections became inevitable after the conclusion on 14 January 2015 of an alliance between the two major separatist parties, Esquerra Republicana (Republican Left) and *Convergència i Unió* (Convergence and Union), based on an accord they had reached concerning the steps to be taken to achieve independence.⁴ Part of the agreement was that elections to the Catalan Parliament should be brought forward to September 27th of that year. In the campaign itself, the major (and for many, the sole) issue was separation from Spain. For separatists, there could be no distraction from the goal of independence, while for centralists, the very real and open threat to the territorial integrity of the country overwhelmed any previously-proclaimed remedy to counter the alleged threat to hard-won rights and gender equality. The outcome of the election was that separatist forces were eventually able to form a government and begin preparations for independence.

The second reason is both social and religious. Although the state is defined as non-confessional, and religious observance by Spaniards is dropping, a very important part of Spanish national identity is still related to the Catholic Church. One very public manifestation of this is the Easter processions of penitents and devotees in a wide range of cities and towns throughout the country. These processions take place on one, some, or all of the days of Easter Week (sometimes several times each day, and in the case of Seville, beginning even before Easter Week). They also have an acknowledged economic and touristic function classified and recognised by the Secretary of State for Tourism.⁵ In very many of these processions, the penitents' faces are covered and they wear garments that hide the contours of the body. Consequently, passing legislation that would ban face-coverings in public would mean altering the long-standing, traditional, and photogenic nature of these Spanish Christian processions, now bound up also with the promotion of significant economic activity.

⁴ El País, 14 January 2015, http://ccaa.elpais.com/ccaa/2015/01/14/catalunya/1421241562_100506.html.

⁵ Boletín Oficial del Estado No. 41, 16 February 1980, pp. 3783-3784.

Thirdly, any legislation proposing to preserve Christian face-coverings and prohibit only Muslim garments that hide the face and contours of the body would be clearly discriminatory and immediately open to successful contestation in the courts. In addition, it would provide ammunition to groups and parties urging the abolition of administrative and fiscal advantages still enjoyed by the Catholic Church, including its very real presence in education. And given the established peaceable nature of the Easter processions, in their case, the possible legal defence of avoiding a potential threat to public safety (see “Veiled Women: Open Threats?”) would be hard, but not impossible, to maintain.

Thus, one can argue that, paradoxically and ironically, the considerable weight of Spanish Christian identity and social traditions also acts in favour of maintaining the Moslem face veil.

The political fallout of any attempt to legislate a ban would be considerable and a distraction from the increasingly urgent question of the territorial and constitutional integrity of Spain. For all these reasons, the very clear statements of intent by government spokespersons, politically valuable in the short term while the issue was still in the public mind in the summer of 2014, came to nothing. Nor was the matter raised in the negotiations to form a coalition government following the problematic outcome of the national elections of 20 December 2015, in which no party had obtained a clear majority. In the face of the continuing push for independence by the Catalan Government and by other political forces in Catalonia, and given also the likelihood of further difficulties in forming a stable governing alliance at the national level after the renewed elections to be held on 26 June 2016, it now appears most unlikely that this issue, which would affect only a tiny number of women directly, will continue to be prominent in electoral and political discourses in the near future. In Spain, at least, political events have thus distracted from seeking a legislated answer to the initial and fundamental question asked in the earlier policy brief and which, in the face of the increasing numbers of Muslim residents and citizens, turns around questions of religion, national identity, social values, and constitutional imperatives.

This policy brief will now compare the Spanish case to two other EU countries, Germany and Austria, where there is no separatist threat. It will suggest that, in the absence of separatist movements threatening national identity or territory in those countries, Islam and its real or alleged values is useful in political discourse for the creation of a values-related social and political crisis in order to advantage a party or persons prepared to speak out strongly and openly against the shifting religious composition of European populations.

To be considered are recent political events in Germany and Austria. In these countries, there is no separatist movement to distract from what the earlier policy brief called “traditions, views of national identity, values and practices profoundly influenced by Christianity.” On 13 March 2016, elections were held in three German states – coincidentally against the background of the massive inward movement of refugee claimants from the Middle East. In the manifesto in Baden-Wurtemberg of the right-wing and openly xenophobic party Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany: AfD), a burka ban was urged.⁶ The same party’s manifesto for Saxony-Anhalt stated bluntly “Der Islam gehört . . . nicht zu unserer Identität” (Islam is not part of our identity);⁷ and in Rhineland-Palatinate, non-Christian religions and values were presented as being in fundamental opposition to German (and local) ones.⁸ The party won between 13% and 24% of the popular vote, depending on the state (their best results ever in any state elections). This translates into an equivalent number of seats in these state parliaments, where previously they had had no representation.

More generally, the draft programme submitted for ratification to the AfD national party congress on 30 April and 1 May 2016 directly contradicted President Wulff’s statement on 3 October 2010 mentioned in the earlier brief. The programme states bluntly, “Der Islam gehört nicht zu Deutschland” (Islam is not a part of Germany (II.8)). It also contains a long section (XVI), “Der Islam im Spannungsverhältnis zu unserer freiheitlich-demokratischen Werteordnung” (Islam in Conflict with our Free and Democratic System of Values). This includes a proposed prohibition of a number of Muslim practices, including the wearing of the burka / face veil in all public places, and the proposal that girls not be permitted to wear a headscarf at school. Thus, just as the Spanish politicians had done earlier, it urges actions contrary to judicial decisions.⁹ For the AfD membership, the statements on Islam were clearly insufficient: the *Vorläufige Antragsbücher zum Bundesparteitag in Stuttgart* (Preliminary Compendia of Amendments for the National Party Congress in Stuttgart) contained approximately 400 mentions of Islam, including numerous proposals for amplifications of the

⁶ Für unser Land, für unsere Werte. Landtagswahlprogramm 2016 der AfD Baden-Württemberg http://www.alternativefuer-bw.de/wp-content/uploads/Landtagswahlprogramm_AfD_2016.pdf , p. 24.

⁷http://www.sachsen-anhalt-waehlt.de/fileadmin/LTW2016/Wahlprogramme/wahlprogramm_afd.pdf

⁸ <http://www.alternative-rlp.de/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/wahlprogramm-ausfuhrlich.pdf>.

⁹ Grundsatzprogramm der Alternative für Deutschland: Leitantrag der Bundesprogrammkommission und des Bundesvorstandes, <https://www.alternativefuer.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2016/03/Leitantrag-Grundsatzprogramm-AfD.pdf> .

proposed programme text, consistently placing Islam in opposition to the established Christian-oriented social and political order.¹⁰

More recently (May 2016), Alice Weidel, a member of the National Executive Council of AfD, and Beatrix von Storch, one of three national vice-presidents, have gone on the record with specific public statements accusing the Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland (Central Council of Muslims in Germany), one of the representative bodies of German Islam, of non-acceptance in their public documents of fundamental constitutional principles, including the equality of women.¹¹ Comparisons of the utterances with the documents in question show their statements to be completely false.¹² In its statements, the Zentralrat in fact emphasises its acceptance of constitutional principles and the rule of German law. Despite that, the two influential members of the party at the national level clearly deemed it politically advantageous to spread hostile and erroneous information about Islam.

In the two rounds of the presidential elections in Austria on 24 April and 22 May 2016, Norbert Hofer, the candidate for the equally right-wing and xenophobic Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Freedom Party of Austria: FPÖ, already well known for its anti-Islam stance), made the question of national identity and particularly the presence, position, and influence of foreigners a central issue in his campaign. In an interview with the newspaper *Der Standard* and on his party's website, he described the refugees entering the country in 2015 and 2016 as "invaders,"¹³ and on his personal site, he presented himself as "the only person defending our population, its culture, values, traditions and security against the new mass migrations [Völkerwanderung]," adding, "We Austrians have a right to our home [Heimat]."¹⁴ It is to be noted that the middle-eastern origin of the refugees, and therefore their religion, are known to everyone. In this connection, it is important to point out that the key German terms he used are much more emotionally charged than the English ones: *Völkerwanderung* refers to the barbarian tribes that overwhelmed the late Roman Empire (of which the territory of

¹⁰ https://www.alternativefuer.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2016/04/AB-Teil1_gesamt-20160415_final.pdf and https://www.alternativefuer.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2016/04/AB-Teil2_gesamt-20160415_final.pdf.

¹¹ Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 23 May 2016, http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/afd-bricht-gespraech-mit-zentralrat-der-muslime-ab-14248905.html?printPageArticle=true#pageIndex_2 and <http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article155380977/Von-Storch-fordert-Distanz-der-Islam-Verbaende-zur-Scharia.html>

¹² Islamische Charta des ZMD <http://zentralrat.de/3035.php> (available in English at <http://zentralrat.de/3037.php>), and Articles of Association (Satzung) of the Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland, <http://islam.de/files/pdf/u/SatzungdesZMDvom13.03.2016.pdf>, see particularly Article 2(5).

¹³ <https://www.fpoe.at/artikel/fpoe-praesidentschaftskandidat-norbert-hofer-ams-leistungen-nur-fuer-oesterreichische-buerger/>.

¹⁴ www.norberthofer.at, viewed 23 May 2016.

modern Austria formed a part), while *Heimat* emphasises the continuation of local tradition, security, and the comfortably familiar. Thus, the two terms very strongly place alien values in opposition to native values. In the first round of the election, Hofer was 586,753 votes (13.71%) ahead of his nearest rival, and in the final round, he lost by only 31,026 votes (0.7%).¹⁵

In both Austria and Germany, then, in the absence of secessionist threats, hostility to Muslims is considered by important segments of the voting population to be a valid political option, just as it had been stated to be in the earlier and slightly different circumstances in Spain. The objections that are voiced turn around the reduction of democratic freedoms largely conflated with national identity, in the face of an alien religion-based value system represented as patriarchal, monolithic, restrictive, and utterly outdated. These are powerful and popular arguments and, like the threat of secession, they go to the heart of group identity. When, as with the AfD in Germany and the FPÖ in Austria, they are combined with a repeatedly-voiced conviction that the traditional parties are incapable of dealing with such challenges, they have even greater resonance. And resonance is important here. The subtleties and individual liberties inherent in the “free and democratic system of values” defended and defined by the courts of all three countries can be ignored by parties anxious to create a social crisis and threat for their own advantage. Only the very real threat of Catalan secession has moved Spanish parties away from this position.

¹⁵ <http://wahl16.bmi.gv.at>.