Position of Islam & Muslims in France: Three French Contradictions

By Romain Quivooij

Synopsis

Islam and Muslims in France have become the point of convergence of intense political, legal and intercommunity tensions. These growing divisions threaten a capital of social resilience that is being severely put to the test by a succession of terrorist attacks.

Commentary

THE RECENT decision of more than 30 French coastal towns to ban women from wearing the Islamic swimsuit known as burkini appears to be the latest iteration of a decades-old debate. A similar bone of contention emerged in 1989 when three teenage girls wearing Islamic headscarves were expelled from their middle school as their dress code was seen to be in contradiction with French secularist rules.

In 2004 a law banning the wearing of "conspicuous" religious symbols in French public schools such as Islamic veils, the kippa and "an excessively large cross" was adopted. Six years later the French authorities reignited the controversy by banning the wearing of face-covering clothes and headgears in the public space. The context of the burkini ban is nonetheless different as the rise of the self-styled Islamic State (IS) has placed Islam and Muslims in France in the spotlight.

Three French Contradictions

Three fundamental contradictions impede France's ability to move towards a more peaceful relationship with Islam, the second largest faith of the country in terms of numbers of adherents, with four to five million French people of Muslim religion and/or culture.

The first contradiction is related to the weak association of Islam in France with violent radicalisation.

French Muslims are confronted with numerous difficulties in the practice of their religion. The most pressing issues include a limited number of mosques and prayer halls (around 2500) as well as the need for a well-functioning organisation that could represent the highly diverse French Muslim population at the national level. Several initiatives were announced by the French government such as the forthcoming establishment of a Foundation for Islam in France.

Some of these efforts nevertheless rely on the questionable idea that a reformed structure of Islam will be an effective antidote against violent radicalisation. For example, the French authorities strongly encourage French imams preaching in mosques to undergo civic trainings delivered by some universities, both as a way to counter radicalisation and to familiarise themselves with various issues such as French law and the history of religions in France. Trained imams are thus expected to become active agents of integration by spreading knowledge on subjects such as the French system of secularism known as *laïcité*.

However, the positive impact of this measure on the fight against violent radicalisation is doubtful. This approach fails to address the key role of social networking websites and applications as a major communication and ideological tool used by groups such as IS. More importantly, it could achieve the opposite effect by feeding the perception that radicalisation is considered by the French authorities to be inherently linked to a single, broadly defined and allegedly uneducated population group that would need to be urgently enlightened.

Speaking Out or Staying in the Shadows?

The second contradiction pertains to the place of French Muslims in the public space.

In what appears to be a paradoxical reaction, they are both pressured by French society to distance themselves from violent extremism and terrorism while being asked to keep a low profile to avoid behaviors that could be interpreted by mainstream society as an excessive claim of their religious identity.

French centrist Senator Nathalie Goulet assessed in August 2016 that "there is a total divorce between France and Islam…the 10% of French people of Islamic faith has to apologise every day". By contrast, Jean-Pierre Chevènement, former Defence Minister and head of the future Foundation for Islam in France, recommended French Muslims to be "discreet" in the context of the burkini ban. He upheld his advice on the basis that all citizens should be guided by "common sense" in the public space, especially in a period of increased security threats.

Chevènement's argument ignores people who deliberately decide to practice their religion in private, including models of successful integration, and fosters the misleading impression that a majority of French Muslims would systematically attempt to publicly display their religious practices.

In addition, the dual tendency to request some people to justify themselves on the basis of their faith or cultural background and to scrutinise their religious practices is likely to generate a pervasive climate of suspicion. The latter is all the more damaging as terrorist activities and highly-publicised "scandals" like the burkini entail security and social challenges that should be clearly distinguished.

Paradox of *laïcité*

The third contradiction is associated with a growing discrepancy between the practice of *laïcité* adopted by the French authorities and the interpretation of *laïcité* in the public discourse.

Laïcité is a core principle of the French Republican system and a near-universal consensus in France. It relies on the separation between the state and religious organisations as well as the strict neutrality of the state towards all religious beliefs. Religion is not banned from the public domain as it would be a flagrant violation of individuals' right to religious freedom but case-by-case rules and guidelines related to religious convictions, religious symbols and proselytising are expected to be obeyed by all in communal spaces such as public transport and public schools.

On the one hand, the French authorities have gradually overcome their deeply ingrained reluctance to deal with matters pertaining to religion in the name of *laïcité*. This evolution is notably reflected by the stronger involvement of the French government in the organisation of Islam in France.

On the other hand, *laïcité* is increasingly used by French officials of different political affiliations as a central but contested argument to justify controversial decisions related to the treatment of Islam in the public sphere such as the burkini ban. The major consequence of this second approach is to fuel misunderstandings on the nature and purpose of *laïcité*, as the latter is more likely to be considered by critical observers (both in France and other countries) as a tool of religious intolerance rather than an instrument of inter-faith harmony.

A key priority for the French authorities and society should be to reduce and eliminate these different gaps. If not, national unity and cohesion will be inexorably eroded. This would jeopardise France's ability to tackle the societal challenges posed by past terrorist attacks and those that are bound to take place in the near future.

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