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The New French Minority Politics

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In a series of well-publicized gestures, ministerial decrees and legislative proposals, France's center-right government has seized the initiative in recognizing the multi-ethnic nature of French society. These actions, taken as a whole, represent a major modification of the classic French model of integration, which had viewed the individual first and foremost as a *citizen*, not as the member of any ethnic, racial or religious group. Following this model, French governments have traditionally rejected American and British-style minority group politics, even after waves of North African migration following de-colonization transformed France into the home of Europe's largest Jewish and Muslim populations. Recent events, particularly hate crimes and new evidence of social and professional discrimination and unequal economic outcomes—as well as the challenge of rooting out terrorist networks—have slowly forced the French government to concede that *perceptions* of communities indeed exist and to grant them the symbolic attention long paid to their Anglo-American cousins.

This trend reflects a new French political consensus about immigrant integration: first, important religious minorities must be granted institutional representation; second, ethnic groups—especially Arabs and Jews—should be protected from discrimination and acts of racism or anti-Semitism; and third, extremists should be isolated. France has thus begun to accept the practical value of ethnic and racial categories. Despite this trend, the French government continues to emphasize that they are not opening the door to state-sanctioned multiculturalism. As Chirac put it in October, French practice can countenance “communautés” but not “communautarisme,”¹ that is to say, recognition of higher profiles for ethnic and religious communities in the public sphere should not be interpreted as approval of an American-style free-for-all among minority group lobbies.

The Road to Ethnicity

Traditional Protestant and Jewish minorities have always made France religiously diverse, while European population movements have meant that France has always been a society with many immigrants. Nonetheless, it was mass labor migration from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia beginning in the 1950's and 1960's that first created a *de facto* multicultural society. Through

¹ “en refusant le communautarisme, il ne s'agit naturellement pas d'ignorer l'existence des communautés,” Speech of Jacques Chirac, Troyes – Aube, October, 14, 2002.

family reunification and settlement, the Muslim population grew to over five million, of whom roughly half are citizens by virtue of their birth in France. More than a third of France's 500,000 Jews can also trace their roots back to Algerian, Moroccan or Tunisian communities.

The state's stubborn faith in the civic education offered by school and the army—and less officially, the church or synagogue—precluded any explicit development of integration policy.² It was expected that state institutions would mold citizens out of migrants and their kin, just as they had made Frenchmen out of peasants in the 19th century—but this did not allow for the development of Muslim religious institutions. The reluctance to encourage the spread of Islam appears to have been selective prejudice, though it also reflects a general French distrust of interest groups, lobbies in the American context, whose narrow interests and private agendas are seen contrary to the republican ideal that privileges *national* community above other communities.³

The republic relegates ethnic and religious belonging to the private sphere, at least officially. A 1978 law greatly restricts official record keeping of racial and ethnic data, and the last census indicating respondents' religion was in 1872. To track citizens by race or ethnicity would evoke the crimes of Vichy France, while excessive attention towards religious affiliation is seen to threaten the notion of "*laïcité*", that is the strict secularism of the state enshrined in the 1905 law separating church and state.

Integrating Muslims has posed a severe challenge to *laïcité*, and a number of recent events have led pragmatism to triumph over dogma. Anti-Semitic violence that spilled over from the second Palestinian *intifada* in 2000 and 2001 raised official concerns for the safety of French Jews. The fact that these anti-Semitic acts were mostly attributed to disaffected Arab youth, not religious hardliners, prompted a new resolve to address the root causes of political disenfranchisement as well as the effects of racial discrimination. The unexpected victory of an extreme anti-immigration candidate, Jean-Marie Le Pen, in the April 2002 first-round presidential election over the mainstream socialist candidate, former Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, also gave the impression that race relations in France were in a dangerously bad state. Finally, in the fall of 2002, a sharp increase in terrorism-related arrests coincided with the prospect of an allied war in Iraq, calling attention once again to the absence of legitimate Muslim community interlocutors in the French political community.

“The Left promised it ...”

It should be noted that Jospin and his Minister of Labor and Solidarity Martine Aubry had taken up many of these issues during five years of Socialist government (1997-2002). Aubry

² One exception was the creation, in 1958, of the *Fonds d'Action Social* and its subsidiary agencies, now called the *Fonds d'Action et de Soutien à l'Intégration et à la lutte contre les discriminations*. Its cultural activities were originally intended to facilitate the eventual “return” of migrant families.

³ Alex Hargreaves “Half-Measures: Antidiscrimination Policy in France,” *French Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol.18, No.3, (Fall 2000).

commissioned a report on anti-discrimination and the High Council of Integration had opened debate over the creation of an authority that would monitor and punish incidents of racial discrimination. Aubry also discussed the introduction of “welcome platforms” where newly arrived migrants could receive social support and professional training.⁴ And, in 1999, a Socialist deputy drafted a law targeting the *double peine* (double penalty), an administrative practice that subjects foreign criminals to deportation even after time served, and regardless of family ties or personal history in France. Strangely, though, there was little follow-up on any of these recommendations.

As the brother of a North African appointed to be a cabinet member of the new center-right government said in May, “the Left promised it and the Right delivered it.” The Jospin government did make some progress on these fronts. Both the National Railroads and the National Police launched informal campaigns to diversify their staffs in the late 1990s—though they steered clear of any quota system. The closest any French institution has come to instituting quotas is at the *Institut d’Etudes Politiques de Paris* (Sciences Po), where roughly 30 students a year are now admitted directly from the underprivileged neighborhoods—a form of positive geographic discrimination, and a highly controversial measure.⁵ Jospin’s interior minister Jean-Pierre Chevènement also created Regional Commissions for Access to Citizenship (CODAC), which monitored racial discrimination but with very limited means, and Aubry created a Task Force on Fighting Discrimination (GELD). Most importantly, in 1999 Chevènement rekindled the government’s consultation with French Muslims to adapt a church-state framework to meet their religious needs.

“... and the Right delivered it”

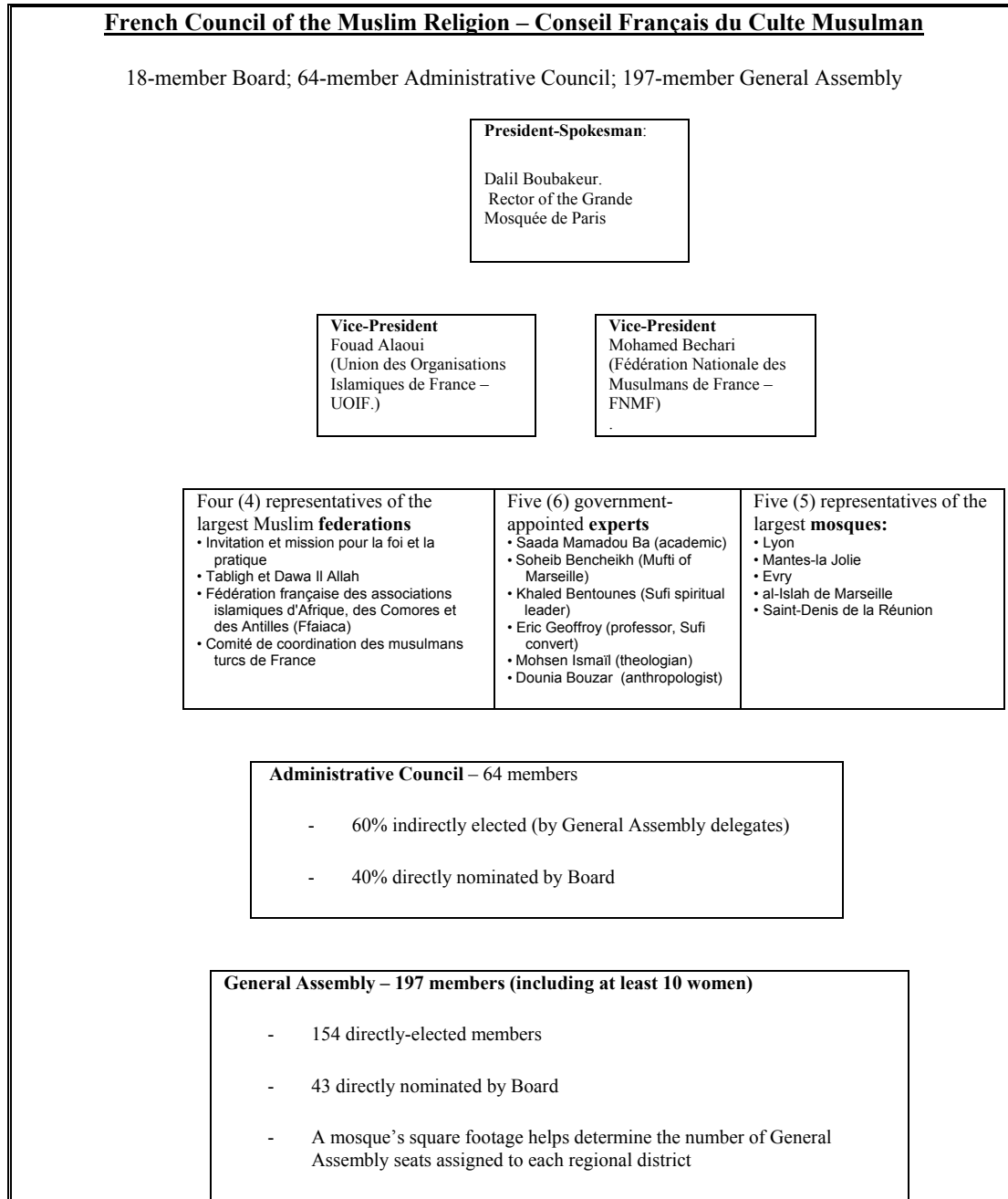
The current center-right government, however, has been much more active. First and foremost, the government is strongly promoting the formation of Muslim institutions that can represent the French Muslim community and make it resistant to foreign and fundamentalist influences. In the past, the lack of institutional recognition and the relative poverty of French Muslims have prevented the self-financing and local organization of Islamic clergy and prayer space. Foreign governments (e.g., Libya, Saudi Arabia, Algeria) have thus often sponsored the salaries of Imams and the construction of larger mosques, while non-governmental, fundamentalist groups have occasionally infiltrated smaller religious associations.

After fifteen years of half-hearted efforts, the current Interior Ministry has finally made some real progress in embedding Muslim community leaders within “state-church” relations on a par with the other major religions. In December 2002, the three principal Muslim federations signed an Agreement Protocol with the Interior Ministry that established the 17-member board (representing slightly over 70% of mosques and prayer rooms) and scheduled elections for two

⁴ A new “integration contract,” announced by Chirac in October, mandates French courses and tutoring on civic rights and obligations for the 100,000 (net) legal immigrants who arrive annually.

⁵ Daniel Sabbagh, “Affirmative Action at Sciences Po,” *French Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol.20, No. 3, pp.52-65.

elected complementary representative bodies for April 2003. (See Chart) Immediately on the agenda of the French Council of the Muslim Religion (CFCM) are issues of mosque construction, the organization of religious holidays (ritual slaughter, fasting times, trips to Mecca, etc.) and, eventually, the training of religious clergy in France.



This general change in approach to minority is also affecting the composition of the government itself. In May 2002, newly appointed Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin took a page from Clinton's first term and named a cabinet that reflects the diversity of contemporary France. This

included appointing two cabinet members of North African origin: Tokia Saïfi, Deputy Minister for sustainable development—the first *Beur*, as second-generation Arab migrants are called in French slang; and Hamlaoui Mékachera, the first deputy minister for veteran affairs of Algerian origin. Raffarin’s personal staff also expands on the usual pool of candidates. Hakim El Karoui, a 31-year old Normal Supérieur graduate, is one of the prime minister’s speechwriters and collaborated on his book released before last spring’s elections, while Raffarin’s adviser on matters of integration is Richard Senghor, a grandnephew of former Senegalese President Leopold Sédar Senghor. This diversification represents not simply the natural culmination of second- and third-generation immigrant integration, it is also part of a specific effort by Raffarin, as he has emphasized in radio addresses and stump speeches to dispel “the impression among many Muslims that there are different classes of French nationality.”⁶

Along similar lines, in October, President Jacques Chirac announced the creation of a national agency to monitor discrimination. In December, the National Assembly passed a new hate crimes law offering increased legal protection against anti-Semitic and racist “hate” crimes (*loi Lellouche*).

Nicolas Sarkozy, the charismatic interior minister, has been particularly active in recent policy initiatives intended to better integrate migrants and minorities. A second-generation immigrant of Hungarian origin, Sarkozy has managed to be tough on illegal immigrants and crime without appearing racist or extreme. In a televised debate with Jean-Marie Le Pen in December, he rejected the FN leader’s vision of an ethnically pure French citizenry: “with *jus sanguinis* I wouldn’t be French today” – he told Le Pen – “admit that this would be a pity!”⁷ He called Le Pen’s proposals to seal off French borders “crazy and ineffective,” and has been overseeing a large-scale naturalization of France’s tens of thousands of undocumented migrants (*sans-papiers*). Sarkozy has also joined a *cause célèbre* of many artists and intellectuals and promised to reform the “*double-peine*.”

However, the Minister of the Interior has not in any sense forgotten his job description. He ordered the arrest of groups of *sans-papiers* who occupied two churches in Pas-de-Calais and in the 11th arrondissement of Paris. His new security law, passed in 2002, provides for the arrest of Romanian gypsies who form illegal encampments and cracks down on loitering youths and even “professional networks” of beggars. The inclusion of these “quality of life” measures earned a rebuke from the National Human Rights Commission in the fall.

It is against this more repressive face of the government and its heavy reliance in the 2002 Presidential and Legislative campaigns on “security” themes, i.e. enhanced protection from immigrants and Arab youth, that the French Left is still able to offer some criticism of

⁶ “pour un certain nombre de musulmans dans notre pays, qui ont quelquefois le sentiment qu’il y a des nationalités à plusieurs vitesses,” M. Jean-Pierre Raffarin, Interview with Radio Orient on the occasion of the Aid el-Fitr, December 5, 2002, http://www.radioorient.com/audio.html?open=raffarin_20021206.

⁷ *Jus sanguinis*, law of blood, is a legal principle that grants citizenship solely on the basis of the citizenship of one’s parents, as opposed to *jus soli*, law of land, which grants citizenship on the basis of place of one’s birth. Both the U.S. and France grant citizenship according to either principle.

government integration policy. However, they are making little political headway. To his credit, Sarkozy has managed to reclaim the law and order mantle from the extreme Right: in opinion polls, 53% of Front National voters and 60% of the French population as a whole approve of his performance. It is hard to label Sarkozy as all stick and no carrot when he supports the enfranchisement of foreign residents at the municipal level. The National Assembly ultimately rejected this proposal, in part because city council members indirectly elect 95% of the national Senate. Thus, enfranchisement of foreigners at the local level would have effectively granted them a say in the makeup of national government—a step that not even the most progressive societies have taken.

Conclusion

The paralysis of republican integration policies long meant the absence of direct discussion of difference; that era seems to have come to an end. There is some irony in Sciences Po's introduction of affirmative action policy, for example, just as these admission policies are coming under fire in the U.S. However, no political force openly supports quota systems (though some do support gender parity in political elections). Most of these changes simply reflect the fact that the French immigration society is maturing and growing into its *de facto* multicultural status—today, all French television stations employ at least some anchors and personalities of immigrant origin. There were more candidates of African and North African origin in the spring 2002 National Assembly elections than ever before (though they still only totaled 123 out of a field of 8,000). Last spring's elections also saw the first black woman run for the presidency. In the last few months, the government has announced the creation of an immigration memorial and an Islamic art wing at the *Louvre*, inaugurated the *Place Mohammed V* in front of the Arab World Institute and is busy preparing the Year of Algeria. President Chirac and Interior Minister Sarkozy even argued over who would visit Algiers first.

In November, Chirac decreed that the remains of Alexandre Dumas—the beloved 19th century author of *The Three Musketeers*—be transferred to the *Panthéon*, the republican temple dedicated to France's "great men." He called attention to Dumas' black heritage, saying that Dumas "embodies the France of the 19th Century and even of the 21st Century, in all of its most intimate contradictions."⁸ In his eulogy Chirac spoke romantically of the author's "brown skin, frizzy hair and mixed blood."⁹ Government ministers and literati huddled in the cold during the ceremony, while a black woman dressed as Marianne on white horseback—a multicultural variation on the French Republic's Uncle Sam—bowed before the writer's casket. As all this activity suggests, there is a new political consciousness of France's diverse population—and its multicultural electorate.

⁸ Interview of Jacques Chirac at the Association des Amis d'Alexandre Dumas, 10 April 2002

⁹"Discours de M.Jacques Chirac à l'occasion du Transfert des Cendres d'Alexandre Dumas au Panthéon," Paris, November 30.,2002," <http://www.elysee.fr/documents/discours/2002/021130DU.html>.