

European Muslims painting themselves into a corner?

VIEW



FARISH A NOOR

Muslim minorities world over have to understand that their problems can only be addressed and solved in the context of a broad civil society. It is in that civil space that they will find their allies and friends, who are equally concerned about the problems of racism, discrimination and violence; and equally committed to addressing them

neo-Nazis and extreme right elements in the past, Vlaams Blok leaders like Frank Vanhecke have managed to broaden the party's appeal to such an extent that it now makes many a Belgian liberal shiver.

Capitalising on popular fear and prejudice towards foreigners (to the Vlaams Blok even Belgian Francophones are outsiders and interlopers) and racism towards Arab-Muslim migrants in particular, the propagandists of the Vlaams Blok have demonstrated a keen awareness of public insecurity and exploited it. Islamophobia has taken on an increasingly vitriolic and bellicose appearance in the wake of September 11 and the hegemonisation of the so-called 'war on terror'. The harassment of Muslim minorities across Europe has thus increased.

The cherry on the cake, so to speak, has been the Vlaams Blok's success in courting a number of Belgian Jews to their cause, rallying them behind the banner of protecting the nation from the infiltration of 'Islamic militants' and 'radical Islam'. The divisions in European societies, such as Belgium's, have grown wider, due in part to the failure of the leftist parties to adequately address the issue of racial polarisation.

The support of a small section of Belgian Jews for the Vlaams Blok is a case study in how communitarian politics inevitably ends up benefiting the *status quo* and serves only to further marginalise minority groups. It can be compared with how some right-wing parties in Europe have managed to win the support of the gay/lesbian community by arguing that the radical Muslim fundamentalist is likely to support the discrimination against gays. That on account of their small numbers Muslims cannot dominate any European society is often lost in the heat of the argument. Lost too is the fact that Europe's Muslims are more often the victims than perpetrators of preju-

dice and hate crimes.

But from newspapers to pulp fiction, the stereotype of the 'violent, irrational' Muslim fanatic bent on conquering the Western world is still in the mainstream media. The image may be false, but as an instrumental fiction it serves very clear political objectives. It creates an alienated and demonised Other against which the rest of society can be rallied against. Hence the support from some Belgian Jews for the Vlaams Blok, a party whose mid-20th century founders are suspected of links with the Nazis and Fascists.

The development in Belgium also points to a distressing trend in the Muslim communities of Europe: some young Muslim groups' resort to the use of racist, communitarian and even violent rhetoric. While it is undeniable that Europe's Muslims have become the victims of routinised violence, discrimination and prejudice; it is also true that some Muslim groups have responded by adopting an equally inflammatory (and totally unjustified) rhetoric of confrontation. The tendency among some Muslim youth gangs to adopt the symbols of the Nazis and Fascists and to fall back on a discriminatory discourse of anti-Semitism when dealing, for instance, with the issue of Israel-Palestine comes to mind. In such cases the arguments against the wanton militarism and human rights abuses by the Israeli regime are lost in the thunder and fury of racist rhetoric. Likewise the homophobic rhetoric of some Muslim leaders has served only to further alienate Muslims. An irony considering their already marginalised status.

These developments underscore the need for European Muslims to understand the need for dialogue and cooperation. Europe's Muslims have been led (or represented) for some time now by leaders who have obstinately clung onto a communitarian discourse that pits the Muslims against the rest. Muslim concerns are painted as

communitarian, affecting a singular community whose internal diversity is undermined or erased in the process. Many of the self-proclaimed 'spokesmen' of the European Muslim minorities speak only for and of themselves and their immediate circle. They ignore the fact that the community they seek to represent is much more complex and diverse.

The bottom line is that unless and until Europe's Muslims learn that their problems — ranging from racism, violence and institutionalised discrimination — are the problems of the European society as a whole, they will always be presented as the 'Other' within. And as the Other, they will remain a vulnerable constituency: economically marginalised, politically weak, under-represented and doubly stigmatised for that.

Muslim minorities world over have to understand that their problems can only be addressed and solved in the context of a broad civil society. It is in that civil space that they will find their allies and friends, who are equally concerned about the problems of racism, discrimination and violence; and equally committed to addressing them. Crossing the boundary between Self and Other, and becoming part of the mainstream of European society, is therefore the first step out of the impasse that Europe's Muslim minorities now face. For this to happen, the key is an internal critique that rejects the use of racist, bigoted and communitarian discourse-politics.

Europe's Muslims have to understand that they are part of Europe. They have every right to complain about how they are being treated. But their complaints have to be articulated in an inclusive discourse that acknowledges their being European first.

Dr Farish A Noor is a Malaysian political scientist and human rights activist, based at the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), Berlin

IT WAS RECENTLY REPORTED THAT THE far-right Belgian party, Vlaams Blok, has started courting the unlikeliest of constituencies: the Jews of Belgium. Despite the fact that the Belgian Court of Appeal has declared the party a criminal organisation (the ban was endorsed by the Belgian Supreme Court), and the party's known links to both contemporary