■ Reflections about the European debate on integration policies: the case of the Swiss ban on minarets
Reflexões sobre o debate europeu sobre políticas de integração: o caso da proibição de minaretes na Suíça
Marisa Caroço Amaro

Introduction

The recent Swiss referendum to ban the building of further minarets, an integral architectural element in Muslim temples, has reopened the debate about the growing phobia against Islam, and in a broader sense immigration and integration, in Europe. This debate must be analyzed in the context of broader European views on immigration, in order to fully understand the complexity of the issue and to begin to question the authentic meaning of integration in European countries.

During the past two decades, national governments, regional and local authorities have established, with varying success, mechanisms, instruments and measures to facilitate the integration of immigrants into European societies. However, since the beginning of the 21st century, immigration and integration have become highly controversial topics. Ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity and equality have occupied a place of prominence in the debates on European integration. Different European countries, such as the Netherlands, once opted for multicultural' policy approaches, but in recent years these approaches have lost much of their former popularity.

The rise of nationalist attitudes and Islamophobia

This new era in European integration policies is reflected in recent changes in the Netherlands. Long regarded as an exemplary case of successful multiculturalism, the Netherlands has now come to be regarded as a prime example of the perceived failure of such policies. Compared to other European countries, the Netherlands was known for the wide range of rights and the high degree of formal equality that it had granted immigrants. While 9/11 raised global concerns about Islam and immigrants of that faith, two high profile and unrelated domestic incidents can be seen as the catalysts for changing Dutch attitudes towards Islamic immigrants and in some ways immigration as a whole. Six months after 9/11, the right-wing flamboyant populist Pim Fortuyn challenged the broad elite consensus on immigration and integration, and criticized fundamentalist tendencies in Dutch Islam. His murder by a left-wing activist a few days before the Dutch parliamentary elections shocked the country. In 2004, the murder of film-maker Theo van Gogh by an Islamic fundamentalist of Moroccan descent seemed to confirm growing fears among many Dutch citizens about the rise of fundamentalists. Both incidents helped to transform the current Dutch approach to

* Instituto Universitario de Estudios sobre Migraciones, Universidad Pontifica de Comillas - Madrid (Espanha) (amaro_marisa@yahoo.com)

integration which now places an increased emphasis on linguistic and to some extent cultural assimilation. However, analyzing these integration techniques in a broader European context suggests that such forced integrations do not produce lasting results and indeed often foster even greater sentiments of resentment and alienation. This can be seen in the riots and attacks across Europe during the past decade.

The events of 9/11 shocked the world and raised awareness of Islamic Fundamentalism and the lengths that some terrorists would go to promote their radical beliefs. As a result, many Europeans began to question the Islamic faith, and its role in immigration. In the wake of the horrific 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid, citizens and politicians began to question - whether or not there was a difference between Islamic terrorists and Islamic faithful. The attacks in London in 2005, as well as riots in French suburbs that same year, only served to increase concerns and tensions. These changing attitudes regarding immigration coincide with an increasing rupture with previously held principles of multiculturalism. Growing concerns over the diversity that comes with immigration provided an opportunity for xenophobic parties to play up fears without offering any concrete solutions. In Switzerland, a country with a small largely Christian population, these xenophobic parties have grown in recent years, coinciding with the arrival of immigrants from different religions and culture who have often sought asylum.

Referendum to ban the building of new minarets

Recent events in Switzerland cannot be viewed in a vacuum, and should be put into the framework of immigration and integration policies adopted across Europe. It is important to start from the premise that integration of immigrants is not limited to rules for nationality or citizenship acquisition, but must be understood in a broader context that includes access to full citizenship rights – civic - legal, political, and social. Additionally, some authors also distinguish a second dimension of immigrant rights, known as cultural rights, which must be weighed along with cultural obligations that the state expects them to meet in order to obtain full citizenship rights in the country where they reside. In fact, it is often these cultural rights which lead to philosophical debates and political controversy over multiculturalism and assimilation.

Switzerland tends to favor a more assimilationist position on immigration. This model is often criticized for limiting the cultural rights of immigrants and demanding a high degree of cultural conformity with public institutions. A national referendum, held in Switzerland on 29 November 2009, called for a ban on the building of new minarets in the Muslim temples. This initiative was put forward by the right-wing Swiss People's Party (SPV), and the evangelical Federal Democratic Union (EDU). The SPV has had a modest increase in recent years, winning 29% of the vote in the 2007 federal election, as opposed to the 26.6% they received in 2003. The party champions conservative and nationalist values, praising the autonomy of Switzerland and its unique heritage as well as attacking foreigners. The SPV has tapped hidden attitudes of many Swiss people towards immigration, which is perhaps not surprising in such a small and relatively homogenous country.

Both the ruling Swiss coalition government and the international community were shocked when the referendum passed with the support of a little over half of its citizens. The ruling Swiss Government, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Council of Europe, Amnesty International and some individual European governments, including France, all were quick to condemn the results. However, many of those criticizing the Swiss government failed to recognize that the emotions leading to the ban's success, including a resurgence of nationalistic attitudes, are not limited to Switzerland.

Those supporting the referendum argued that minarets would not only be in visual non-conformity in Swiss towns, but that they would serve a political function at odds with Swiss values. Additionally, they argued that the symbols should not be protected as part of the Islamic religion, because they are political and not religious symbols. These arguments and their success raised two essential questions. First, do citizens have the right to determine the religious symbolism, or lack thereof, surrounding certain elements and symbols belonging to another group? Second, to what extent can a host society claim "esthetic harmony" as a public good that must be protected? And does protecting the public good automatically include the eradication of any threat posed by the "others"? Could the eradication of certain contentious signals lead to the creation of a single national identity that defines who is included and, by extension, who is excluded?

Conclusion

The Swiss case, while radical, is not an isolated exception, but a reflection of increasingly common approaches and perspectives on immigration, particularly among Muslims, in Europe. France, with its strong history of secularism, has banned overt religious symbols in schools. While this policy affects all religions, many saw it as an effort to remove burkhas, in particular, and were vehemently opposed. The current French debate on the possible ban on wearing burkhas in public places can be seen in some ways as an extension of this policy.

The French ruling on religious symbols, the Swiss ban on minarets, and changes in Dutch integration policy coincide not only with increased concerns over terrorism in a post 9/11 world, but also with growing economic concerns across Europe. Xenophobic parties exploiting unrest over budget deficits seem to be having a greater influence on the social and political agenda of many countries. Unfortunately, the passivity of "traditional" parties has exacerbated these problems. Mainstream parties rarely validate xenophobic slogans or politics; however their silence often seems to validate speeches that list immigrants as "problematic" and discriminate against those that are different or "foreign" regardless of whether they are immigrants.

The surprise of the Swiss vote and the negative reactions it has provoked should thus be seen as an opportunity to reflect on the authentic meaning of integration, a process where values and beliefs merge together to create a new social harmony. The emphasis placed on the identification with shared national values over the last

few years has damaged the role that diversity can play in society. As such, it should be viewed as a public asset and protected accordingly. Minarets should not be unilaterally banned; however it is perhaps reasonable to suggest that Mosque leaders and architects work with municipal leaders or urban planners to raise understanding and to create places of worships that blend into the Swiss aesthetic. Diversity should be embraced both by citizens and immigrants arriving to Europe. Once diversity is accepted as something normal, perhaps the integration debate can be redefined to avoid unnecessary divisions.