

Tolerance in French Political Life

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In France, it is difficult for groups to articulate ethnic and religious demands. This is usually regarded as opposing the civic understanding of French citizenship that guarantees a vertical relationship between the state and the citizen. It is considered as stemming from Article 1 of the 1958 French constitution that reads: “the French Republic shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law regardless of their origin, race or religion”. Any political claim articulated in ethnic or religious terms is considered favouring the pursuit of particular interests over general interest.

Does this mean that French political life is intolerant towards minority claims? In fact, there has been a tradition of immigrants’ mobilization since the post-war period and activists have learnt to articulate their claim and negotiate their identity in Republican terms.

The mobilization of minority activists in the “defence of laïcité” is one instance which illustrates how activists have adapted their claims to the dominant frame of *laïcité*. *Laïcité* is the French understanding of secularism that ensures the strict separation of church and state, and confines religious expressions to private matters. It is regarded as a core Republican value. Despite the reluctance of some minority activists - who may have seen this principle as opposing their religious beliefs - most have affirmed their commitment to *laïcité* and used it to articulate a claim for equal treatment as religious minority.

Despite the difficulty to articulate group interests in the French context, minority organizations have mobilized and have learned negotiate their identity and adapt their claim to the French Republican context.

As an instance of this, organisations that are fighting Muslim discrimination have articulated their claim for equal treatment in terms of laïcité.

Minority claims can be articulated in the French context as long as they adopt a Republican lexicon. Does this provide for enough acceptance of diversity in French political life?

To answer this question, we look at the mobilization of minority associations (such as immigrant based associations and religious organisations) and evaluate the level of acceptance of religious diversity in French political life.

Religious diversity is difficult to measure since there are no official statistics that record religious affiliation in France. However, a recent survey indicates that 11.8 million French people in between 18 and 50 year old identify themselves as Catholics, 2.1 million identify themselves as Muslims, 500,000 as Protestants, 150,000 as Buddhists and 125,000 as Jewish (TeO Survey, 2008).

Religious diversity is difficult to express since religious beliefs are considered to be restricted to the private sphere. However, talking about *laïcité* is often a way to talk about religious diversity and the place of Islam in France. Investigating minority claims of *laïcité* is therefore a valuable angle of approach to analyse the perception of minority organizations and the state of acceptance of religious diversity in France.

Looking at minority claims of laïcité allows evaluating the state of tolerance to religious diversity in French political life.

Evidence & Analysis (Key Findings)

CASE STUDY: Minority claims of *laïcité* in the French Republican Context

Although Muslim people, in general, may be reluctant to adopt the notion of *laïcité* (perceived as anti-religious and used to restrict their practices), Muslim activists, in particular, identify *laïcité* as a useful principle to protect their religious belief:

"At first I thought laïcité was something antireligious, atheist, and then, after the first headscarf affair, in the 1990s, I met with these organisations that defend laïcité - the Human Right League, the Education League - and I understood that it was something to protect, it was an idea that defended the freedom of religion" (Interview with a Muslim activist, January 2012)

Claims of *laïcité* on the part of minority activists are actually claims for equality and against discrimination:

"We need to appropriate ourselves the principle of laïcité, as a principle of equality" (Speech of a Muslim female activist at a public meeting, February 2012)

"I was told that a Christian cross was not a religious sign in comparison with the Islamic veil. I refuse this discrimination." (Testimonial of a Muslim woman at a Public meeting, Feb. 2012)

Minority organisations that are mobilised on the issue of Muslim discrimination articulate their claim for equal treatment in terms of laïcité to make themselves heard in the French context.

Central to their mobilisation is the idea that *laïcité* tends to be diverted from its legal meaning when it is used to discriminate against Muslim people. As a result, organisations usually provide legal information about *laïcité* on their website and make it central to their mobilisation.

"Laïcité is what protects Muslim and their freedom of religion. It is central to our mobilization" (Interview with a Muslim activist, January 2012)

The initial reaction to the first headscarf affair of 1989 was essential in **linking the topic of Islam with *laïcité* and feminism in France**. When a school principal of a secondary school in the Paris region excluded three young girls wearing a veil on the ground that they infringed the principle of *laïcité*, the Islamic headscarf was interpreted as a sign of religious extremism and women's oppression. It prompted the mobilisation of organisations mobilised on the defence of *laïcité* and feminists *against* the veil.

However, with the growing stigmatisation of Islam and the systematic use of *laïcité* to pass laws restricting the practice of Islam, some defenders of *laïcité* and feminist activists **shifted their position** to rally with Muslim organisations and denounce an intolerant interpretation of *laïcité*.

*« I understood that in 1989 and 1994 we took wrong decisions. We tried to apply to individuals a principle that usually applies to institutions. The laws that we are applying now are going contrary to the liberal principle of *laïcité*, they are restricting the freedom for and of religions” (Interview with a member of the Human Rights League - February 2012)*

*Articulating their claim in terms of *laïcité* helps minority organisations receiving the support of other groups, such as Human Rights organisations and feminist groups.*

French feminists are divided on the issue of *laïcité*. Most French feminists support the restrictive interpretation of *laïcité* because they interpret the wearing of the Islamic veil as a sign of discrimination against women. However, there is also an alternative current in feminist organisations' discourse which oppose this restrictive interpretation of *laïcité* because they see it as discriminatory towards Muslim women. They consider that there is a manipulation of a discourse on gender equality to discriminate Muslim women (this can be regarded as a case of *intersectionality* between racial and gender discrimination).

« Few feminists were opposed to the law against the veil in 2004. I actually think they were more of them but they were scared to say it. Many times feminists came to talk to me saying they agree with me but did not want to say it.” (Interview with a feminist activist - February 2012)

The strategy to articulate their demand according to a concept, such as *laïcité*, that is clearly identified as Republican and, in a manner, that stays strictly in the framework of the law, can be regarded as way to **meet standards of reasonableness in claim-making**. As such, the mobilisation of Muslim people for the defence of their interests (namely, the fight against discrimination) demonstrates their ability to adopt standards of French political life and have their claim tolerated.

However, beyond the fight against discrimination and the reassessment of their commitment to *laïcité*, organisations are thriving to maintain a network of associations nation-wide and appealing to a Muslim identity in France. Some of them launched an appeal to the French presidential candidates during the 2012 campaign to ask for their positioning on Muslim issues (mainly the fight against discrimination).

"We aim to synthesize the expectations of Muslims in France in view of the Presidential Election and to transmit them to each candidate so that they position themselves clearly on the issue and allow all citizens to vote knowingly" (Call for a civic initiative of Muslim people of France, February 2012)

*By articulating their claim in terms of *laïcité* Muslim activists are negotiating their identity as Muslims in France*

By laying the emphasis on the experience of discrimination, minority organisations are stressing the commonality of Muslims' experience in France. They are **negotiating their identity as Muslims in a post-migration society**. The fact that they lay the emphasis on the egalitarian dimension of *laïcité* is evidence that the issue is not only the protection of religious freedom but also the acceptance of Muslim people in France.

Minority claims of *laïcité* are not only about toleration. They are claims for the acceptance of Muslim people as equal citizens in France.

Key Messages for Policy Makers

TAKE ACTION AGAINST RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION

Minority claims of laïcité are claims for an equal treatment of Muslim people in France in response to their perceived discrimination.

Because the public expression of religious identity is seen as illegitimate in France, there is a tendency to justify or downplay the importance of religious discrimination.

However, policy makers should take action for the recognition of religious discrimination in the legislation.

This could be done by:

1. Organise meetings with NGOs that mobilise to defend the rights of Muslims and raise awareness about what kind of religious discrimination people may experience in their everyday lives (since there are no official statistics available)
2. Issuing a law proposal that condemns discrimination on religious grounds
3. Launching a media campaign to raise the awareness on the issue of religious discrimination in the population

Methodology

CASE STUDY

The case study consisted in a literature review, a press review, a collection of secondary sources on the issue and material collected during fieldwork.

FIELDWORK

The fieldwork consisted in the attendance to meetings organised in reaction to the governmental decisions regarding *laïcité* (demonstrations and public meetings) and a selection of interviews (n=7). Interviews were conducted with activists of different organisations in an effort to keep an equal repartition in terms of gender, origin and religious belonging.

SELECTION OF ORGANISATIONS

The organisations were selected so as to keep a balance in between old organisations mobilised on the issue of *laïcité* and new organisations (organisations that are specifically mobilised against the passing of restrictive laws on *laïcité*; organisations that are mobilised on the issue of *laïcité* as part of a larger objective to defend Islam and Muslim people). However, the mobilisation involves few people and some activists participate in several of these organisations. It explains the limited number of interviews.

SEMI-DIRECTIVE INTERVIEWS

Interviewees were asked about their understanding of *laïcité* as a value and if they saw *laïcité* as a necessary frame to articulate any minority-related claim in the French context, and if this was the case, what other options they would see. Interviews also dealt with resources of mobilisation and individuals' understanding of issues pertaining to diversity. The point was not to define *laïcité* but to analyse its use to articulate claims with respect to the acceptance of religious diversity in French political life.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Interviews were analysed using discourse analysis with the aim to identify interpretative frames for claim making. The concept of *laïcité* was left as an open concept to be filled with varied meanings so as to highlight the different points of view of the actors and their different interpretation of what the problem consist in.

Project Identity

- Acronym:** ACCEPT PLURALISM
- Title:** Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe
- Short Description:** ACCEPT PLURALISM questions how much cultural diversity can be accommodated within liberal and secular democracies in Europe. The notions of tolerance, acceptance, respect and recognition are central to the project. ACCEPT PLURALISM looks at both native and immigrant minority groups.
- Through comparative, theoretical and empirical analysis the project studies individuals, groups or practices for whom tolerance is sought but which we should not tolerate; of which we disapprove but which should be tolerated; and for which we ask to go beyond toleration and achieve respect and recognition.
- In particular, we investigate when, what and who is being not tolerated / tolerated / respected in 15 European countries; why this is happening in each case; the reasons that different social actors put forward for not tolerating / tolerating / respecting specific minority groups/individuals and specific practices.
- The project analyses practices, policies and institutions, and produces key messages for policy makers with a view to making European societies more respectful towards diversity.
- Website:** www.accept-pluralism.eu
- Duration:** March 2010-May 2013 (39 months)
- Funding Scheme:** Small and medium-scale collaborative project
- EU contribution:** 2,600,230 Euro
- Consortium:** 17 partners (15 countries)
- Coordinator:** European University Institute (Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies)
- Person Responsible:** Prof. Anna Triandafyllidou
- EC officer:** Ms Louisa Anastopoulou, Project Officer