

The thorn in France's side?

SABRIA CHOWDHURY

FRANCE'S relationship with its Muslim population is in the limelight once again, and not for any positive reasons. 2011 has been the year of two major decisions which impacted the Muslim population of France and once again brought into the forefront the almost love-hate relationship the two share.

In April of this year, the French Parliament decided to ban the *burkha* and any other articles of clothing which hid a person's face and prevented her from being identified. Fair enough. The line stretches further. Since September 16, 2011 a ban has been put in place on praying on the street, the French Interior Minister further stating that force would be applied if necessary.

This new ban, in the minds of many no doubt, opens up a large can of worms. There are undoubtedly the logistical, practical questions. One such question being: since France is home to Europe's largest Muslim population (6 million, to be precise, almost the population of smaller European countries such as Norway and Denmark), why then are there not enough mosques at least in major metropolitan cities such as Paris and Marseilles? Why has it reached a point where the few mosques are so overflowing that people are obliged to pray on the streets? In every major city in the United States there is at least one mosque. Why then has France somehow overlooked this necessity for its Muslim population and permission not been granted to build new ones?

The convenient political answer no doubt lies in the fact that France has had a separation of the Church and state and has been practicing secularism since 1905. This answer would be largely acceptable had it not been for the underlying negativity or rather apathy at times which the French government seems to portray towards Muslim -- a large majority of them born and bred in France.

Many examples can be cited to support this position even prior to this recent ban. The 2005 riots were further flared by the comments of the then French Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy that the largely North African Muslim rioters "lived on the margins of society."

This hits the nail on the head of the crux of the problem. Why are French Muslim youth and French

Muslims in general, the largest minority in the country, on the margins of society socially and economically? There are two sides to the coin and this writer for one has been attempting to seek the response to this dilemma for many years -- usually unsuccessfully.

Firstly, there may be remnants of sentiments of colonialism dating back to France's occupation of North African countries such as Morocco, Algeria and

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Tunisia. Perhaps there is a hint of the colonist overseeing his subjects and not providing adequately for the latter to rise up and achieve the maximum potential of their goals. Affirmative Action exists in France, largely in theory. Concretely and in practice there seem to be no substantial incentives to prevent these people living in the "margins of society." What incentives and opportunities are given to stop them from roaming the streets and engaging in crimes? What incentives are given to stop them from living on the fringes of society in the forms of educational and vocational programmes in order to be competitive in the work place like their non-Muslim counterparts?

One is told time and time again that the Muslim population is not being able to integrate into the fabric of French culture. It is no doubt high time the

French government took several introspective steps back and asked itself how to not just integrate but to embrace them and to allow them an opportunity to rise above and beyond the peripheries of society. If even possessing an obviously Muslim sounding name on a CV can carry a stigma and preference will be given to someone with exactly the same qualifications without a Muslim name, can this be regarded as integration on the part of French society?

Marine Le Pen, the leader of the far right-wing party, the National Front, only added insult to injury when she compared the act of praying on the streets to the Nazi occupation of Paris, alluding to the "invasion" of Muslims praying on the street. What Miss Le Pen hopes perhaps, along with her counterparts in the French government, is that the Muslims of France, who have been there for generations, will somehow just go away if laws are made so stringent that they affect their everyday lives. Furthermore, one wonders how Miss Le Pen, aged 43, would even recall the Nazi invasion of Paris! It should not be forgotten that these people come to France leaving their homeland in search of a better quality of life, better schools, health care, freedom and democracy.

Are they really that much better off years down the line? Instead of integration there is often marginalisation. Instead of an understanding of cultural and religious differences, there is a sentiment of "us" and "them." It would be the realisation of a dream to see many more Zinedine Zidanes in France but, very sadly, the shift seems to be heading in the opposite direction in Europe in general.

It would be fair to say that this pushing away of the Muslims and alienating them further creates an anger which manifests itself in the negative actions that particularly the youth engage in. Would it not be more advisable for France to not create further rifts and conflicts in a situation, which will only cause turbulence in an already increasingly failing economy? Is France actually not losing out on a huge work force also in consequence?

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Criticism and democracy

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ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

AMONG the many famous statements that Winston Churchill made, I cannot think of any other more appropriate in the current environment of our country than the one that states: "Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfills the same function as pain in the human body. It calls attention to an unhealthy state of things."

The significance of this statement becomes more relevant when we remember that this statement was in the context of parliamentary debates that characterise the traditions of the British Parliament, which we apparently are enamoured of, but rarely try to follow.

Debates are essential parts of the democratic process, and facing criticism in these debates is an indispensable element of this process. Debates in the parliament are discussions on issues that affect the nation on wide ranging issues; these are supposed to put on the table views from a wide spectrum of constituencies that the parliamentarians bring to this legislative forum.

The statements are not necessarily sugar-coated to soothe the ears of those who are discussed or criticised, and in many cases the statements may represent partisan interests to convey a contrarian point of view. Yet, the norms of parliamentary debates dictate that all parties listen to the opposing views and respond to them in a fashion that respects those statements and provide a suitable answer. The parliamentary norms do not dictate that we chastise the critics; nor try to stifle any debate with extra-parliamentary admonitions.

We began our parliamentary journey based on British traditions forty years ago with high hopes, but the journey was cut short within a few years, and we had to suffer several bouts of dictatorship and pseudo-democracy with the rump parliaments. We got back to parliamentary government after an interregnum of nearly two decades and yet, after four successive governments based on parliamentary democracy since then, we still have not come to grips with accepting the fundamentals of this democracy.

Our leaders seem to be impervious to the high traditions and principles that govern this type of democracy. We are still enveloped in a mindset that abhors criticism of our policies, our actions, our parties, and our party men.

Running a government is not an easy task, especially when it is run on a parliamentary system that depends on teamwork, and consensus of a wide body of legislators. The Team Leader, which in this case is the head of the government, needs support of the whole team to carry the tasks.

Yet, successful leaders keep their eyes and ears open to see that the team is doing a good work by listening not only to what the team has to say, but also from those who observe the team's work. In a democracy the legislative bodies provide the appropriate forum to evaluate the work of the government, and avenues to the head of the government to take corrective measures. A successful leader is also a good listener -- a listener to not only praises but also criticisms.

Unfortunately we live in a culture of politics in our country that rewards sycophancy and fawning, and frowns upon negative appraisals or comments. Brown nosing from the workers and colleagues becomes the norm and our leaders become so accustomed to it that any negative comment or critical assessment is taken personally with serious consequences for the critic. Flattery replaces honest critique. The result is that gradually the leader is dissociated from reality until disaster happens.

The US does not have a parliamentary form of government. The president is both head of state and the head of government. He does not go to the Congress, but the legislations and policies that he wants implemented have to be passed by the Congress -- the senate and the house of representatives -- which is split between two parties -- the democrats and the republicans.

One would imagine that for a president elected on democratic party ticket, legislations that the president wants would be welcomed to his party followers in the Congress. To the contrary, some of the toughest opposition that the president faced in some recent legislation came from the members of his own party. In fact, many democrats in the Congress voted against the recent Debt Ceiling bill. But this is what democracy is all about. Everybody is allowed to have his or her own opinion. And everyone should listen.

It is said that the greatest threat to democracy is absence of criticism. Without criticism we become blind to reality. We fall prey to false confidence and dissociate ourselves from truth. Flattery is a blinder that keeps one away from the reality one needs to know and act upon. As Jonathan Swift said "it is the worst and falsest way of showing our esteem." The sooner our leaders know this the better it is for our country.

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Arctic deal between oil giants and climate threats

PETER CUSTERS

THE deal has been described as a coup, but then the question is: what kind of a coup is this? On August 30, two well known oil giants -- US's Exxon Mobil and Russia's state owned company Rosneft -- signed a strategic deal. It paves the way for cooperation between the two oil companies in Russia's Kara Sea, and also elsewhere around the globe.

The deal seems to be aimed at outflanking other companies in the world's oil sector. Exxon Mobil is one of the world's largest privately-owned oil giants, while Rosneft reportedly is responsible for no less than a fifth of all crude extracted by Russia. Furthermore, the deal replaces one that Rosneft had previously sought to clinch with the British owned corporation BP, which backfired because of internal opposition within BP's Russian subsidiary.

Nevertheless, the Exxon Mobil-Rosneft deal may be considered a kind of coup. Other Western oil giants had vied for a deal with Rosneft, even as negotiations between Exxon Mobil and Rosneft were on. The deal cuts straight across the divide between privately owned and state-owned oil giants in the sector. It puts Exxon Mobil and Rosneft in a strategic position to compete for undiscovered and unexplored oil reserves, at a time when world oil production has reached its peak.

If this were the end of the story, the Rosneft-Exxon Mobil deal could perhaps be bypassed. It could be put aside as one more example of the endless struggle which monopoly companies wage to gain the upper hand over global competitors. But then the principal target of the deal between the American and the Russian giants is to drill in the Kara Sea.

During winter, large parts of this sea are covered by a layer of ice. At a time when the melting of glaciers, icebergs and ice sheets has become a global issue, this immediately raises questions on the implications of the Exxon Mobil-Rosneft deal for climate change.

During the last four decades, both the extent of horizontal coverage and the thickness of ice in the Arctic have dramatically decreased, making it one of the regions on earth where climate change is most visible. In 2007, the ice area of the Arctic during summer time was a reported 4 square kilometres. It was roughly half the ice coverage registered three decades earlier. Whereas the Arctic ocean has not been ice-free in 8,00,000 years, some computer models have predicted it might be entirely free from ice during the

warm season by the thirties of this century!

These concerns, however, are very distant from the minds of the two oil companies. Instead, their deal, in one gigantic blow, re-sets the parameters of ongoing conflicts between the Arctic states. During the last decade, conflicts between the five main Arctic states the US, Canada, Denmark, Russia and Norway -- have escalated rapidly. So far, the central part of the Arctic, the North Pole, was considered a common human heritage. It was a region over which no Arctic state had any territorial rights. Yet they have been trying to extend their rights, by claiming an extension of their national sovereignty to portions of the Arctic in the past considered humanity's commons.

Russia, for one, has sought to prove that its continental shelf in the far North, the so-called "Lomonosov," naturally extends to sections of the North Pole. Other states have followed suit. Russian bombers are reported to have undertaken reconnaissance flights above the North Pole, and both Canada and Norway have announced plans to built military bases at points bordering the Arctic. These conflicts evidently are very closely related to the appetite for fossil fuels and minerals, at a time when the melting of Arctic ice opens lucrative prospects for their future extraction. Western observers have speculated on a resumption of the Cold War.

From the latter perspective, the coup staged by Rosneft and Exxon might appear to be a healthy one, because the American and the Russian oil giants have successfully eased some of the tension between the two most powerful Arctic states. Reacting to growing speculation over the risks of a military conflict in the Arctic, Russian spokespersons in recent months have repeatedly insisted that it is possible to contain tensions between Arctic states. With the Rosneft-Exxon Mobil deal patronised by the Kremlin they seem to have proved their point.

But then recent tensions between the Arctic states have bypassed what to all accounts is the largest danger looming on the horizon. Extraction of fossil fuels in the Kara sea and the Arctic can only be started in consequence of the climate change that has been caused by these same fuels. Moreover, the Arctic is not

just a region of the globe where climate change is highly visible; it's a region where a future catastrophe threatens to be unleashed.

Two factors which climate scientists have pinpointed as future "tipping points" -- points setting the transition from climate change to a climate catastrophe -- will be played out in the Arctic and its adjoining areas. One is the release of huge quantities of the greenhouse gas methane, once hitherto frozen earth melts. The other is the end of the "albedo," which is the reflection of the sun's rays back into outer space by the ice. Once all this happens, the Arctic's main ice-mass in Greenland will disintegrate faster, and the world's coastal areas will see a deluge!

In short, the corporate deal over the Kara sea is a deal with global implications in more than one sense.

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It changes the balance of forces between giant corporations in the oil sector, and it heralds a new phase in the efforts of Arctic states to open up the region for exploration of fossil fuels, at the risk of an acceleration of climate change. There is thus the need for formulation of an agenda that is clearly alternative to the Rosneft-Exxon Mobil deal, at a time when the world is preparing to hold its next climate summit in November.

Russian environmental organisations have been highly critical of any oil exploration in the Kara sea well before the Rosneft-Exxon Mobil deal was sealed. Again, Exxon Mobil has been the target of US environmental organisations for long, notably since it caused an oil spill in Alaska. There now the need for a global alliance of

American and Russian environmental organisations and Southern states to combat any fossil fuel exploration in the Kara sea or the Arctic.

Such an agenda is by nature positive, for it seeks to protect humanity and the earth from a climate catastrophe. But it could include additional points, such as the demand for a complete clean-up of nuclear debris previously dumped in the Kara sea. In any case, the stakes for Bangladesh and other coastal nations and island states most vulnerable to climate change are huge. They can only survive if they develop a common agenda, which inter alia includes prohibition of fossil fuel extraction in the Arctic.

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