

On Multiculturalism, Islam, and the Far Right

Written by Terri E. Givens

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TERRI E. GIVENS, SEP 13 2011

The July 2011 attacks in Norway have once again brought the issues surrounding success of far right parties and movements to the fore in Europe, as well as governmental responses to immigration and immigrant integration. Although Anders Breivik attacked members of the Norwegian governing party, his “manifesto” focused on support for multiculturalism and the spread of Islam. These issues have also been the focus of far right parties and organizations, including those who Breivik cites as influencing his actions. Many analysts (myself included) quickly focused in on the impact of the far right in Europe in the context of the attacks in Norway. For example, Joerg Forbrig discussed the spread and success of the far right in an article on CNN’s Global Public Square.

In 2005 I published my book *Voting Radical Right in Western Europe* (Cambridge University Press), which examined the role of coalition politics and other factors in the success of far right parties. When I was conducting my research, I was regularly told that these parties were a “flash in the pan” and that they would disappear after the next election. The last decade has shown that these parties not only have staying power, but in several instances have taken part in governments, either in a coalition (e.g., Austria after the 1999 parliamentary election), or supporting a minority government (e.g., Denmark since 2001 and more recently the Netherlands).

The influence of far right parties has been studied from a variety of perspectives, including their influence on immigration and immigrant integration (Schain, etc...). However, an even more important trend has been the focus on Islam and a rejection of “multiculturalism” which has become a catch-word for allowing minority groups to maintain separate societies which hold on to cultural and religious practices which may seem alien to natives. In the last decade we have seen politicians on the left and right taking hard positions on both immigration control, and the need for immigrants (particularly Muslims) to conform to their host cultures. Politicians including Angela Merkel, David Cameron and Nicolas Sarkozy have stated in one form or another that “multiculturalism has failed.” A consensus has developed among the political elite in Europe that attacks on multiculturalism are a useful means of thwarting support for the far right. This is despite the fact that supposed “multicultural” policies have been considered ineffectual since the late 1990s.

Mainstream politicians in Europe have fed into the support for the far right by pulling far right discourses into mainstream rhetoric. Since I began studying these issues in the 1990s the rhetoric has clearly shifted towards the far right. Proclamations that “multiculturalism has failed” (particularly ironic in countries like Germany that have not practiced it) have fed into an emphasis on Muslims and their lack of integration. Certainly this has not necessarily led to what happened in Norway, Breivik had been planning for many years and was motivated by his own demons. However, it is critical that mainstream politicians don’t turn a small minority into a scapegoat for larger public ills.

It’s clear that the attack on multiculturalism is focused on Muslims, often discussed in the context of security issues (e.g., Cameron’s speech on radicalization). The securitization rhetoric has fed into the perception of Muslims as threat. It’s important to keep in mind that Islam has only recently (in the last 15 years or so) become a major focus for the far right, as well as other groups that take an anti-Islam position. However, these policy approaches have broad impact.

Immigrants, people of color, and Jews have been ongoing targets of violence and discrimination for many decades. However, it is important to keep in mind that Anders Breivik targeted the current Norwegian government and his

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fellow countrymen. Nothing justifies this type of violence and the goal seems to be changing the system, rather than targeting the small Muslim minority in the country. Breivik's actions have shined a light on the far right, but there are many issues underlying his actions (besides madness) and the positions that different groups take that tolerate or advocate violence.

It must be kept in mind that the far right has not only found success at the regional and national level, but also in the European parliament. Another important point is that the far right, particularly organizations like Geert Wilder's Freedom Party and the English Defence League (as well as Defence Leagues which have formed in other European countries) have made linkages with anti-Islam and far right organizations in the U.S. This is not just a European problem it is a transatlantic problem. Many far right organizations in Europe get funding and other resources from U.S. sources as well as wealthy supporters in their own countries (as detailed in investigations by the Guardian).

These are very complex and dangerous times, with the need for greater fiscal austerity potentially causing greater pain for those who may be attracted to the rhetoric of the far right. The series of protests and riots across Europe over the last two years are another symptom of the frustrations felt by young people, those who are un-or under-employed and the current fiscal crisis. Politicians like Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders have distanced themselves from Breivik's action, which is to be expected, but they are not likely to back down from their focus on immigration and Muslims as the root of Europe's problems. This has already played well in the political arena, and mainstream politicians are likely to continue their own attacks for short-term political gain. However, it is important in the context of the Norway attacks that courageous politicians like Norway's Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg continue to emphasize the importance of tolerance. Clearly we need more understanding and analysis of the discourses which have developed around the issues of immigration, immigrant integration and Muslims in Europe. Politics and rhetoric will continue to be important factors as countries continue to struggle with these issues.

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