

Macron's Anti-Islamic Crusade Fails

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Recently, French President Emmanuel Macron has been trying to make Islamic radicalism his number one enemy. The isolationism practiced by some of the most radical Islamic immigrant communities began to worry Paris about the risk of possible separatist riots in order to form areas within French territory where French law does not prevail. However, this concern for national security does not seem to be a priority for most French politicians, the mainstream media and religious movements who have been severely criticizing Macron and forcing changes in measures.

What would, at first, be a bill to officially combat the extremism of Islamic separatists has been converted into a mere document reaffirming French national ideology. Criticized by humanitarians, the bill that would be a “law against Islamic separatism” could only be discussed among parliamentarians under the name “Bill to reinforce republican principles”. The criticisms against the text not only eliminated the original title but also were the topic of 2,647 amendments by the deputies of the Assembly. The left considers the project “stigmatizing” for French Muslims; the right and the national populists of Marine Le Pen consider this insufficient to combat the problem; representatives of all religious cults also affirm their disapproval; many of the deputies of the Macron’s party itself, La Republique En Marche (LREM), are divided on the issue.

What Macron wanted to present as one of the last major marks of his mandate – and certainly one of the last laws before next year’s presidential elections – risks being reduced to simple norms totally ineffective to contain the penetration of radical Islam into all popular sections of French society – which tends to create a breeding ground for terrorism and separatism. But it is unlikely that the chaos generated by the project and the scenario of discussions and disagreements will be controlled until the next elections. Definitively, Macron and his strategists were left alone in their crusade attempt.

French religious movements are strongly opposing Macron’s crusade. Among the various measures that have been proposed to combat Islamic radicalism, the mandatory schooling of minors from the age of 3 stands out. This is to avoid indoctrination within the family and to prevent children attending clandestine Islamic schools, which are becoming more and more common in the peripheries. The Catholic Church criticizes this point in particular because it can also harm its interests when fighting religious vigilance on the education of children. Still, representatives of other religions, like Protestants and Jews, recognize the need for a law to curb the spread of extremism, but fear what they call “side effects in all

cults” – something like a scenario of religious intolerance on the part of an aggressive secular state. Obviously, those who criticize the presidential initiative most are the representatives of the French Islamist movements, who interpret the control over cultural associations and educational activities as a real attack on civil liberties.

Religious criticisms of the project combine with materialist criticisms, which highlight the value of civil liberties and the liberal principles that built not only France but all contemporary Western European civilization. “Stigmatizing” Muslims as a risk to national security is unimaginable for representatives of the liberal left and less radical political wings – even if such “stigmatized” groups also disrespect such freedoms, as in the case of forced marriages, demands of “virginity certificates” from young women and obligation to wear veils, which are common practices in Islamic communities.

There is even more radical opposition to Islamic sectarianism than that of Macron, which is the position of Marine Le Pen, with whom Macron shares favoritism for the next elections. Macron defeated Le Pen in 2017 precisely by betting on a humanitarian speech, opposing Le Pen’s “radical Europeanism”, which wants to impose even tougher norms on Muslims, such as, for example, the ban on the use of the veil on women. Macron, with a new election process approaching, made a strategic decision by creating his own crusade against Islam. The president’s strategists imagined that in doing so he would be able to co-opt votes from the pro-Le Pen electorate, but they ignored the strength of humanitarians.

With the reforms to the project, humanitarians broke Macron’s strategy, which now can no longer represent a middle ground between Le Pen’s extremist nationalism and the left’s liberal humanitarianism. The French president will only have to choose between adopting a totally liberal speech again or radicalizing his positions even further, making them similar to Le Pen’s – but this would make him lose his current electoral base.

In the end, the episode shows the overwhelming strength of European humanitarianism and generates reflections on what will become of the future of secular societies and their policies to combat terrorism and civil rights violations.

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