

## France's immigration myths

**Patrice de Beer**

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*The French right sees the revolt of the "banlieues" through the prism of immigration. An error of judgment and policy, says Patrice de Beer.*

Three months after the suburban riots in France between disenfranchised youth – black and Arab mostly – and the police, the public debate about what to do to better integrate the disaffected young residents of the *banlieues* is still intense. It has also continued on immigration, a burning issue being heavily exploited by politicians – mostly, though not exclusively, conservative.

Today, 9 February, Nicolas Sarkozy – interior minister and candidate in the 2007 presidential election on a law-and-order platform – presents his new draft bill to restrict immigration. This is the twelfth such reform in thirty years. Sarkozy's popularity, dented though far from crushed by his controversial rhetoric and role in the revolt of the *banlieues*, has forced President Chirac and his prime minister, Dominique de Villepin, to jump on the bandwagon. They have made the "Sarko" slogan, "chosen immigration", their own.

The main goal of Sarkozy's bill is to tailor French immigration to the economy's needs for skilled and unskilled labour, and to its integrating capacities. He wants immigrants to sign a "welcoming and integration contract" which would include learning the French language and respecting French legislation. There would also be a stress on equality between man and woman, including banning polygamy and

threatening to expel those male immigrants who keep their wives at home under lock and key. Sarkozy further wants to end the practice of handing a ten-year resident's permit to illegal immigrants who have managed to remain undetected in France for ten years.

The fear of immigration which lies behind Sarkozy's new proposals has found a ready ear among a large section of French voters. Scared by the sometimes devastating impact of globalisation on their jobs, weary of Europe (presented by French governments as a frightening crossbreeding between a scapegoat and a Trojan horse), uneasy in the face of decades of massive immigration from the south, hostile towards Muslims after 9/11, fearful of the threat of terrorism, many are listening to these sirens of doom. All this is despite the fact that recent studies and statistics show a more balanced situation, one which doesn't fit banner headlines in the media or rousing nationalistic appeals from politicians.

### [A blocked escalator](#)

For instance, one of the arguments used by Sarkozy after the October-November riots was that massive immigration nurtured by family reunions between settled migrants and their spouses and children had helped provoke the convulsions. His new proposals

will toughen conditions for working husbands who want their wife – but not their wives as polygamy should not be tolerated anymore – at their side. But, according to figures published recently by *Le Monde*, the number of family reunions has dropped precipitously over the last thirty years – from 81,496 (1971) to 27,267 (2002) and to 25,420 (2004). Moreover, these reunions are, in more than half the cases, of French citizens asking for their foreign spouses and children to rejoin them in France.

Another example is the claim of parts of the government and much of the political right that most of the suburban violence had been perpetrated by foreign (mostly Muslim) hooligans, whose expulsion would help restore law and order in the *banlieues*. False again: the majority of people in the streets were black (Christian and Muslim), young and carrying a French ID card.

An academic report on "French citizens of African and Turkish origin" released by the political science research group (Cevipof) provides what might be the first in-depth study of migrant populations from the south – and demonstrates that, especially with such burning social issues, facts should be separated from politicking. Its authors, Sylvain Brouard and Vincent Tiberj, have made amazing, albeit logical findings; they show, in short, that this particular strata of French population can't be labelled "French citizens different from the others" (as is too often heard) or "French citizens against the others", but simply "French citizens with some particularities".

As can easily be guessed, their main particularity relates to religion, as the vast majority of them are Muslims: around 60%, against 28% for French citizens of sub-Saharan origin. 80% of French Muslims fast during Ramadan; 77% say they don't drink alcohol and only 43% pray daily, but 20% consider themselves as having no religion (against 28% for an average panel representing the average French).

For the rest, these "French citizens of African and Turkish origin", if they usually vote for the left, and are more conservative on moral issues, react like anybody else to social issues like employment, the role of the state in the society, secular education; 83% agree with the sentence: "In France, only secularism (*laïcité*) allows people with different creeds to live together". And the odds are that, like most French voters, they voted against the European constitution in the May 2005 referendum.

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Even on the archly divisive question of the Islamic headscarf, a majority of French Muslims agree with religious symbols being banned in schools, even if they number only 51% (against 80% for the general population). The study acknowledges the development of a worrying degree of Islamism, but it indicates that Islam in France plays a much greater role in structuring individual lives than in creating a collective structure around the mosque and fostering an inward-looking religious communalism. It is clear that Islam, like Christianity, is far less active in the public sphere than in the private, individual one.

It is too early to say whether the present crisis around cartoons of prophet Mohammed printed in a Danish newspaper and reprinted, among others, by the French media will have a long-term impact on this situation as it depends largely on what has been called the "Arab street" and on those who are fanning the flames there, partly to try to make any Muslim integration in Europe impossible.

Nothing could have confirmed more clearly that the main bases for the recent riots were not religious or Islamic, but basically social: what the "French citizen from African and Turkish origin" want is economic and social success in a more integrated and less unequal society where democracy is being shared by all. This, for the vast majority of youth leaving school, means better qualification in better schools and less unwritten segregation in access to jobs. In France as elsewhere, social inequality – when "the social elevator is blocked" – breeds cannon-fodder for Islamist terrorism. This shows that what they criticise in today's French society is not its values but the fact that they are not really implemented in their daily lives. So, one has only to hope that it will become clear for politicians stressing law and order, and that those who agree to show more courage in defending them.

#### The immigration tinder-box

Brouard & Tiberj portray a country very different from the image given of a navel-gazing, soul-searching people worried about anything coming from abroad. Indeed, France probably has the largest immigrant population of any European nation.

In 1999, 23% (13.5 million out of 59 million) of the population were of immigrant origin – 4.3 million were migrants themselves, 5.5 million were children of immigrants, and 3.6 million were grandchildren. Of these, 22% were connected to north Africa, 5% to sub-Saharan Africa, and 53% to other European countries

(mostly Italian, Spaniards, Portuguese and Poles, who also took decades to integrate). To understand the complexity of this situation, a reader might try to imagine what such percentages could mean for his or her own society.

In targeting only "coloured" and Muslim immigrants – less than 30% of the total – some French politicians seem to be playing with fire. Moreover, they run the risk of alienating former French (and francophone) Africa where France's influence has been paramount since it reached independence in the 1960s. The

magazine *L'Evènement* (Burkina Faso) recently quoted the late Ivory Coast president, and former member of the French government, Felix Houphouët-Boigny, who once said: "I waited for the bride in front of the church with flowers in my hands but she didn't come. And my flowers have wilted". The magazine added a comment on Jacques Chirac's last visit to Africa: that, if France couldn't come out with a new and more sensible African strategy, she "could miss her second rendezvous with the Africans. And, this time, it could mean divorce."

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*Patrice de Beer* is former London and Washington correspondent for *Le Monde*.

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