

Anti immigrant sentiments in the Netherlands and the reactions of Moroccan associations

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Abstract

In this paper the development of the Netherlands from a tolerant and liberal society into an unfriendly surrounding for immigrants is described and analyzed. The reactions of the ethnic group that was targeted most, Moroccans, were investigated by interviewing board members of associations. Three main types of reactions towards the stigmatization of Islam and Moroccans are distinguished.

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1. Immigrant groups in the Netherlands

Though immigration to the Netherlands was considerable in the 18th and 19th century, there was nearly no immigration in the 20th century until the late sixties (Lucassen & Penninx 1997). The influx of immigrants between 1960 and 2006 consisted mainly of four groups: the first ones to arrive were former colonial citizens from Indonesia (393.175) and Surinam (331.953)¹. Secondly guest workers were invited and brought to the Netherlands to do low skilled jobs in factories: first from Greece, Spain and Yugoslavia, later larger numbers from Turkey (364.608) and Morocco (323.272). Thirdly there is a considerable group of Western immigrants (Germans: 383.921). And finally in the last 15 years the number of refugees is growing (Iraq: 43.778, Iran: 28.781, Afghanistan: 37.307, Somalia: 19.875).

On a total population of about 16 million, the number of immigrants including the second generation is now slightly more than 3 million (18%), of which 1.7 million from non-Western origin (10%). In particular in the poor neighborhoods of Dutch cities, changes because of this influx are noticeable. The autochthonous Dutch feel threatened, particularly by the increasing number of Muslims, though the actual percentage of Muslims in the Netherlands is only 7% of the population.

2. Policies and attitudes in the Netherlands

In the 18th century, the Netherlands were famous for their advanced level of tolerance (Lucassen & Penninx 1997). Huguenots, religious and political refugees fleeing from France, and Jews from Spain and Portugal were received without hesitation. Incorporation into Dutch society seemed to take place without a lot of problems. For ages the image of the Netherlands as a tolerant and open society has survived, even though the actual attitudes by both citizens and government did not remain as positive as sometimes presented. Though this development did not start in one day, the changes in the last five years are dramatic. Both the policies by the Dutch government and the attitudes of Dutch people in the street are changing rapidly.

Bader (2005:9) correctly remarks that the Dutch government - while in the 1970s and 1980s one of the forerunners on multiculturalism - has now one of the most restrictive immigration and integration policies of the Western world. These restrictions encompass the terrain like asylum, family reunification (higher age requirement for spouses: 21), required income guarantees for visitors and expelling 'white illegals'. Integration policies also became stricter. The pressure for immigrants to adjust and assimilate to Dutch culture and to speak the Dutch language has increased. The payment for not getting through the new citizenship exam can reach as much as €12.000.

Actually these changes in the policy slowly evolved in a period of 10 years. Starting with the negative tone of conservative politicians around 1990, a sharp increase of anti immigrant feelings was stimulated by the populist politician Pim Fortuyn, who was murdered in 2002. Against a background of an increasing negative climate towards Muslims world wide during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, incidents like 9/11, bombs in London and Madrid, and the murder of Theo van Gogh stimulated negative feelings towards Muslims in particular.

A consequence of the increasingly negative image presented in the media and the increasing numbers of immigrants in big cities, the attitudes of people in the street towards immigrants, but especially Muslims changed also.

¹ Figures from the Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS) per 1 January 2006

3. Frustrations of Moroccan youngsters

The group of immigrants that somehow ended up in the focus of negative attention was the Moroccan group. Moroccans, who arrived as guest workers, usually from traditional countryside areas with very little education are currently above 50 years old and unemployed. Their children, who grew up and went to school in the Netherlands, had no easy access to Dutch society. Only a limited number managed to get to medium or higher education and better jobs. A high percentage went to lower vocational training or dropped out from school and difficulties on the labor market led to frustrations among many and to street criminality among some of them. The generational divide with the parents is huge, but young Moroccans also feel left out by the Dutch.

Some of the issues that trouble Moroccans in relation to the Dutch are: - a - their religion is considered backward and their ideology even dangerous, - b - they are supposed to be unwilling to integrate into Dutch society, - c - youngsters are viewed as possible criminals. - d - since 9/11 they are even viewed as possible terrorists. The enormous prejudice is difficult to cope with. Another problem of young Moroccans is, the limited availability of teachers on regular Islam. That's why a section of Moroccan youngsters searches on the Internet and becomes receptive to Islamic radicalism.

4. Reactions of Moroccan associations

As we have shown in several publications, associations have an important role in representing the interests of specific communities. What a single person cannot achieve becomes a powerful message, when stated by an association (Fennema & Tillie 2001, Van Heelsum 2004 and b). The 720 Moroccan associations were nearly forced to react to (or against) the increased stigmatization in their Dutch surrounding? From our 80 interviews in the last four years with representatives of Moroccan associations (van Heelsum, 2001; Kraal & van Heelsum, 2002), we can distinguish three main reactions:

- a) Associations of the first generation went ahead on with their own religious and cultural goals and targets, though sometimes more actively informing community members on 'real Islam'.
- b) An increasing number of associations organized meetings with Dutch and Moroccans, started providing information and discussion with local government and people from city neighborhoods
- c) a third, smaller number of associations has decided to fight back: some in a positive sense by showing good aspects of Moroccan culture and some in a negative sense by attacking Western social and cultural values.

5. Conclusions

Anti immigrant sentiments are a phenomena, that is not only visible in the Netherlands but also in the US and several other European countries, like Denmark, Austria and Germany. In the US Mexicans are targeted but in the Netherlands anti immigrant sentiments are particularly targeted at Muslims. The second generation youngsters are the ones who feel most frustrated about this compared to their parents. And finally migrant associations could take an important position in coping with these feelings and defending the interests of immigrants.

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