

RSOG Seminar: “Muslim in Europe: Towards a New Civic Pluralism”

with

Professor James Piscatori

When : 3 June 2013
Where : Razak School of Government
Who : Professor James Piscatori

About The Seminar

Europe and the realm of Islam have had close relations with each other for centuries. The history between Islam and Europe can be contributed to wars, conquests of territories and trade between Islamic nations and European countries. Today, there are millions of Muslims residing in Europe. Muslims comprise a large segment of Europe’s illegal immigrants, which cannot be precisely enumerated. The massive migration of Muslims to Europe is triggered by several factors including a chance to seek better education and employment opportunities, better quality of life and to leave a war-torn homeland.

However, whether in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Netherlands, or elsewhere in Europe, Muslims have been subjected to media stereotyping and discrimination on the job and in schools, even as they engage with and participate in the system. In the process, they are both adapting to life in these societies and challenging some of their social and political assumptions. For the vast majority of Muslims in the West, prevailing norms are not being rejected; rather, they are often invoked in defence of distinctive minority rights.

Prof. Piscatori discussed issues pertinent to the presence of Muslim communities in the European continent. The discussion focused on how the Muslim community in the Western society adapts to the challenging environment while maintaining their religious and cultural identity.

Summary

Prof. Piscatori began the seminar by presenting statistics on the demographics of Muslims in the United States and European Union. It is noted that France has the highest number of Muslim population in Europe with 4.7 million, followed by Germany with 4.1 million and United Kingdom with 2.9 million. The Muslim population in Europe is expected to increase from a proportion of 6-8% currently to at least 15% by 2030. Interestingly, 1 in 10 people in the United Kingdom under the age of 25 is a Muslim. He further illustrated that Muslims in Europe are conditioned by minority status through several factors including prevailing economic and social conditions, cultural attitudes and formal organisations for Muslims.

Many Muslims in Europe have been victims of "Islamophobia". In France, Muslim women felt discriminated as the government banned the donning of the "burqa" in public. In Switzerland, an overwhelming majority of citizens supported a referendum to ban the construction of minarets. Furthermore, Muslims have been labelled as terrorists, criminals, uneducated, wife-beaters and other negative stereotypes by a large segment of European society. In addition, statistics reveal that in 2009, 1 in 3 Muslims had been discriminated against within a 12 month period, and 79% of such cases went unreported to the authorities.

Many Muslim organisations have emerged in response, to serve as advocacy groups and interlocutors between the government and the Muslim community. An example is the Muslim Council of Britain, created by the British government. However, many European governments are still struggling with how to deal with Muslim communities.

Several thorny issues have surfaced regarding the religious and cultural norms of the Muslim community. For example, there were questions whether the Muslim students should be allowed to wear the Hijab to school or to build alternative schools catered specifically for Muslim students. Post- 9-11, many Muslims in Europe have been viewed with suspicion of either being terrorists or having links with terrorist organizations. Several violent incidents such as the Madrid and London bombings in 2004 and 2005 respectively have reinforced the stereotype of Muslims as terrorists. Even more alarming is the emergence of a new breed of young men from the minority groups in European countries involved in acts of violence in their adopted homeland.

The policy of Multiculturalism in Europe is experiencing a crisis. Many Western experts claim that the immigrants are not integrating well into society and instead lead segregated lives while enjoying the material luxuries provided by their host economies. Others argue that the European laws are not sensitive towards the religious and cultural sensitivities of immigrant communities. This could lead to a further divide between the European society and the immigrant communities. Questions arise on the possible solutions for complex situations involving a clash of Muslim religious and cultural beliefs with the modern democratic notions advocated by Western society.

Prof. Piscatori concluded the seminar by reinforcing the need for the European governments and the Muslim communities to engage in dialogue to create a better

understanding of the needs of minority communities while safeguarding national interests.

Issues Raised

- Islam and Muslims should not be associated with violence or acts of terrorism. Islam like any other religion preaches peace and love. Individuals committing acts of terrorism has deviated from the true teachings of Islam.
- Muslims in Europe are currently facing societal and cultural discrimination from the European laws. As minorities, they have been conditioned with various impositions. Acts of discrimination include the banning of the Burqa/Niqab in several European countries, objection to building mosques/minarets and lack of employment and education opportunities.
- The policy of multiculturalism in Europe is failing with the emergence of many interest groups and stakeholders with different needs and ideologies. It remains to be seen if European governments can introduce policies that will be able to strike a balance between maintaining democracy and respecting the cultural and religious beliefs of minority groups.

About the Speaker

Professor James Piscatori is Professor of International Relations and Head of School in the School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University. He is also a member of the Centre for the History of Political Thought, Durham University.

His work has centred on two themes which include Islam and international relations and Islamic political thought. His research interests are Islamic political and international thought, politics and international relations of the Middle East and religion and politics in the Arab states of the Gulf. He has published numerous books and articles and is currently a member of the advisory board of various organizations including the National Centre for Excellence in Islamic Studies, Australia.

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