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Sweden Democrat's anti-Muslim hysteria

Barzoo Eliassi, 28th November 2011

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Ethnic discrimination and vilification of Muslims in Europe show that European democracy is declining while racism and repressive policies are taking root and becoming the natural order of mainstream politics in many European countries.

About the author

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Sweden is a world-leading democracy and few would doubt the impressive ambitions of the Swedish state to reinforce the civilised accommodation of ethnic and cultural differences through extensive support for integration policies and multiculturalism. Despite this official version, the discourse of assimilation has started to take root within different political parties and public spaces in Sweden. A newly assertive assimilation ideology that has come to dominate the public spaces of Sweden emphasises the ways in which a monolithic Swedish national identity and national core values should be nurtured as a 'cure' for a plural society.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Sweden has gradually adopted more exclusive stances towards migrants from non-western countries and in particular, Muslims. Today, Sweden is like many other western countries: Muslims are viewed in a wide range of political spaces as the problematic multicultural 'other' and radical right-wing populist parties are sowing profound sentiments of hatred toward Muslims among the population as part of their project to intensify the political boundaries between the "West" and "the Muslims." This mobilization also involves the construction of negative discourses about Muslims as a disruptive force threatening the imagined white and Christian ideals of Europe. In this vein, the radical right-wing populist party, [Sweden Democrats](#) [10] (henceforth, SD), which entered the Swedish parliament in 2010 and now holds 19 parliamentary seats, presents itself as the only political party to defend the rights of Swedes vis-à-vis Islamic immigration and a supposedly destructive multiculturalism. *Folkhemmet* (the people's home), was once a central political concept in the politics of the Social Democrats, implying a strong welfare state based on universalism and class equality. This notion has now been integrated into SD's nostalgic political language and imbued with dreams about the restoration of a glorious past, untouched by political, cultural and social antagonism - an antagonism to which Muslim immigrants have putatively contributed.

Sweden Democrats: a Sweden-friendly party

SD was founded in 1988 and was a direct successor of the Swedish party *Bevara Sverige Svenskt* (Keep Sweden Swedish). SD has its roots in Swedish fascism with direct links to anti-democratic, Nazi and fascist groups. In order to present itself as a respectable democratic party, it openly rejected Nazism in 1999. The terminology shifted to this new self-definition as a Sweden-friendly party. Lately, there have been attempts to define SD as a socially conservative party, a position that has encountered resistance within SD for forsaking nationalism as the main ideology. The other political parties in Sweden or *the establishment* as SD calls them, are accused of conducting Swedish-hostile



politics through their immigration policies.

European debates concerning asylum-seekers are notorious for deploying metaphors drawn from nature, such as “natural disasters”, “big waves” or “floods”. In the case of SD, these metaphors are extended to the military domain, where Muslim immigration will result in an “occupation”, “invasion” and “war”. Sweden is invoked as a state under siege threatened by an imagined Islamisation of Swedish society. In the same vein, the SD leader Jimmy Åkesson has argued that, “Muslims are Sweden’s greatest foreign threat since the Second World War”. Further, he has attacked mosques and veils for being markers of Islamic cultural imperialism, and sites of terrorism, gender oppression and fundamentalism. SD presents itself as democratic when it refers to Swedish law and the right to exercise one's faith. But this democratic stance remains purely rhetorical because what SD goes on to add is that freedom of religion, however, does not entail building mosques or wearing veils, or any other tangible example of the exercise of freedom of religion.

In SD's representations of immigrants, Muslims are 'othered' in cultural and religious terms regarded as incompatible with Swedish and western “core values”. These are limited to Judeo-Christian values, values of enlightenment and humanism that Muslims allegedly lack. When Muslims are discussed by SD, a variety of negative collective attributes are generalized and assigned to them such as gender oppression, forced marriage, animal abuse, social welfare abuse, criminality, rape, anti-democracy, intolerance, terrorism, and fundamentalism. The birthrates of Muslim immigrants are also viewed as a great threat by SD which forewarns that with current levels of Muslim immigration, Swedes will be a minority in their own country outnumbered by fertile Muslims. All these distorted and ill-informed provocations are used as argumentative devices to persuade and enhance anti-Muslim racism and justify exclusionary practices against Muslims.

What is “genuine anti-racism” ?

For SD, integration and multiculturalism are nefarious means by which the established political parties attempt to dissolve and undermine Sweden. National identity is seen in this worldview as a negation of multiculturalism and integration. Besides, the question of integration as a mutual process is resolutely rejected. According to SD, one-sided adaptation should be the absolute rule and if the immigrants cannot assimilate, then they should be repatriated to their original homelands. Historical examples such as the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia are regarded as evidence for the fate of every multicultural society. Of course one might wonder instead if the opposite is not the truth: that ethno-nationalisms claimed purity and distinctive boundaries within the former multinational Yugoslavia and that it was these ethno-nationalistic claims that gradually led to genocidal acts and ethnic divisions.

When SD attacks a multiethnic or multicultural society, it starts by denouncing any accusation of being a racist political party:

SD is often blamed for being racist. That is not true. We think that all people are equally valid, but that does not mean that everybody should have the right to move to Sweden. A “multicultural” society does not serve peace and democracy. Therefore we want among other things to limit greatly immigration from culturally distant countries. The starting point for our attitude is every people's right to their own country.

SD combines in a peculiar way equality ideas such as “all people are equally valid” with segregationist ideas that “people from culturally distant countries are too different to assimilate”. In this way, the culturalist discourse adopted by SD neither needs to describe itself as racist nor as hierarchical in intent. On the contrary, it argues that in order to sustain peace, promote democracy and fight racism, different cultures and nations should stay put in their places of origin. Limiting immigration from Muslim countries is regarded as an anti-racist policy by SD. Culture or cultural identity as fixed entities function in this way as a useful surrogate for race and blood ties in SD's



discourse about belonging and difference. Another effective strategy that SD has adopted is recruiting party members with immigrant/Middle Eastern backgrounds that are ready and willing to dismiss criticism of SD as a racist party and thereby validate the "truthfulness" of SD's discourse about Muslims. SD has also called upon Christians from the Middle-East in Sweden to vote for SD in order to restrict Muslim immigration to Sweden as a form of revenge against the maltreatment of Christians in certain parts of Iraq. In this respect, SD declares itself as the only responsible political voice capable of expressing the true and inner beliefs of the Swedish people about Muslims:

There is only one party that does not tremble in front of the task to claim traditional Western and humanist values in Sweden and with pleasure takes the responsibility for stopping the spread of intolerant and narrow-minded Muslim dogmas in the Swedish society.

Note well, how SD appoints itself as the owner of the truth and shoulders this responsibility through taking upon itself the sole task to blast through the hypocrisy which will not speak the truth - that Muslim immigrants are indeed a burden for Sweden and the west. SD alone will denounce the ostrich policies that refuse to give a name to those plagues that "Swedish people" experience due to Muslim immigration. Frequently, SD reveals the "uncomfortable truths" about Muslims (such as the social costs, criminality and rape) claiming to be the only political party that shoulders the responsibility and dares to "lift the lid" and break the silence that supposedly dominates the politically correct Swedish public spheres with regards to immigration issues. At the same time this heroic SD claims that along with the "Swedish people" they are the victims of a censoring political establishment. Of course, SD does not cite all the scholarly works in Sweden about the mass media and the political representation of immigrants that show indisputably that immigrants or Muslims are often discussed in relation to social problems or as a problem. In other words, these "uncomfortable truths" to which SD makes sole claim, have been circulating continuously in the Swedish press, radio and TV-debates, and they have been doing that for some time.

To sum up, SD has made it its national mission to define Muslims as a problem that should be solved and cured through repressive policies such as assimilation, ethnic and religious discrimination or expatriation. It is time for Europeans of conscience to speak up and find some viable antidotes to the emergence of these racist parties that are appearing in public spaces, smartly dressed in their suits and ties, and with no sign of swastikas. Apparently the mantra has not convinced many Europeans that "it should never happen again" because ethnic discrimination and vilification of Muslims in Europe show that European democracy is declining while racism and repressive policies are taking root and becoming the natural order of mainsteram politics in many European countries.

A more just representation of Muslims will describe them neither as angels or as demons, but allow them to represent themselves and/or be represented beyond the dichotomies of "good" or "bad" that so often imprison their subjectivities as they are portrayed in European public spaces. We don't lack knowledge about these racist developments in Europe but the political will to impede them. Sadly enough, the Swedish liberal party, once committed to anti-racism, is intensifying its illiberal discourse against migrants in order to neutralize SD and fish for the anti-immigrant votes. Ironically, this can only validate the position of SD as the true representative and spokesman of anti-Muslim politics.

Country or region: Sweden

Topics: Civil society

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