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Amiraux, V.

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CFCM

A French Touch?

VALÉRIE AMIRAUX

After more than a decade of intense discussions between various Muslim organizations and successive Ministers of Interior, ambassadors, scholars, experts, etc., a representative board for the Muslim worship in France was finally elected in April 2003. Its first general assembly meeting took place in Paris on 3 May 2003. Notwithstanding many critics, the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman (CFCM) constitutes an elected national body in charge of issuing 'principal statements on central religious topics'¹ and embodying the partnership with public authorities, nationally and locally. The CFCM is made of a general assembly and twenty-five regional agencies called the Conseils Régionaux du Culte Musulman (CRCM) in charge of the daily management of the Muslim communities' affairs, in particular relations with the French public administration. This step represents a victory in many ways, although the nature of this victory differs according to the actors that have been committed to the project since its launching by Jean-Pierre Chevènement, former Minister of Interior, in the fall of 1999.

Several Cabinets had long tried to provide a solution to the question of representation of Islam as a worship in the French context. P. Joxe was the first (in 1989) to try to set up a council of reflection on Islam in France, followed by Charles Pasqua and the creation of a council of representation of French Islam and the editing of a charter of the Muslim worship in France. In October 1999, Jean-Pierre Chevènement followed up the previous initiatives with a new concept encapsulated in the label of 'Consultation sur l'islam de France-Istichara' with a clear objective of setting up a board of Muslim representatives in charge of working as a partner with the state on religious issues. The notion of 'consultation' appeared from the very beginning as the main legitimating factor guiding the public project of helping Muslims set up a representative institution. It started like a fairytale full of promises, and should have been concluded in May 2002 with the elections of the CFCM. After many rescheduled polls, resignations, and new appointments, the arrival of Nicolas Sarkozy in the government in June 2002 gave a new impetus and accelerated the process, which turned out to be somewhat of a 'forced wedding' that finally ended as a 'marriage of convenience' after the surprising results of the 6 and 13 April elections.

The initial step of the 'Consultation' had been to list the main questions and call for concrete and rapid solutions to certain issues: the creation of denominational organizations as foreseen by title IV of the law of 1905, the creation of new places of worship, and defining the status of the religious staff. On 3 July 2001, a decisive step was taken with the setting up of a framework agreement elaborating on the principles and legal basis that organize the relationship between the public authorities and the Muslim worship. The framework agreement opens with the declaration of loyalty to the Republican fundamental principles and more specifically to the constitutional principles of freedom of conscience. One of the priorities of the Consultation consisted of identifying the most suitable procedures for the designation of the representative board (CFCM). Several Muslim representatives laid down the method for the rapid emergence of an authoritative body for Islam in France. The choice would be made on the 'church basis': the elections would intervene in the places of worship and buildings ruled by declared associations. While it was decided to hold elections, the 4

France is the second country in Western Europe, after Belgium in 1998 (see ISIM Newsletter 2, p. 26), to have elected a representative Muslim council.

The formation of the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman (CFCM) was carefully controlled by the Ministry of Interior and despite the substantial support it has received for its general purpose of consultation, many have questioned the degree to which the CFCM truly reflects the composition of the Muslim community.

to 5 million Muslims living in France were not asked to go directly to the polls in April.² Instead, they were represented by 4031 delegates stemming from 995 places of worship officially registered as associations, the number of persons representing each place being related to the size of the site. The elected board would then become an association of the July 1901 law type. On the one hand, the Consultation opened real opportunities for dialogue and raised some important issues for

the CFCM agenda. On the other hand, it only covers part of the problem and is perceived as a constraint for those associative leaders who feel they have been excluded from the process.

Does the CFCM represent the Muslims?

Since its implementation, the Consultation has been gathering different categories of Muslim representatives. One is made of federative structures such as the Grande Mosquée de Paris (GMP), the Union des Organisations Islamiques de France (UOIF), the Fédération Nationale des Musulmans de France (FNMF), the Tabligh, the Turkish DITIB – also known as the Comité de Coordination des Musulmans Turcs de France (CCMT), and the Fédération Française des Associations Islamiques d'Afrique, des Comores et des Antilles (FFAICA). Large independent mosques like, among others, the Islamic cultural centre of Evry, al-Islah mosque in Marseille, or the mosque in Mantes-La-Jolie constitute another category of participants, to which should be added the so-called 'qualified personalities', a heterogeneous group of converts, scholars, and experts. The process did not achieve unanimity among Muslims, mostly due to its working methods rather than its initial purpose. A lot of Muslim associative leaders felt 'obliged' to participate in order not to be excluded from important dossiers. Several voices from associative leaders (whether or not participants in the Consultation) have in particular very strongly criticized the participation of associations and federations considered not to be representative of a moderate Islam. This was particularly the case after Sarkozy who, last June and July, met with the leaders of UOIF on a bilateral basis. Soheib Benschekh, main mufti of Marseille, has been one of the strongest opponents from the inside – having participated in the Consultation for a while – and from the outside. Calling the whole process a 'bureaucratic *mechouia*', he stressed that the French government should get rid of 'this post-colonial approach': 'The Ministry of Interior even called this Consultation *istichara*, with a publication associated to it whose title is in Arabic! But we are in France! It seems like one is looking for "local colour", folklore.'³ The paternalism charges denouncing the 'neo-colonial' attitude of the government towards the Muslim communities at large have been the most frequent attacks against the entire initiative. The evolution of this process of institutionalization of Islam had also the ambition to solve the problem of the role of the states of origin. On different occasions (questions of the financing of the places of worship, mediation of the King of Morocco in the first 'veiling affair' in 1989), the co-administration of Islam both by the French government and by the states of origin clearly demonstrated the insufficiency of the French policies in this domain. An affair for domestic policy or for foreign affairs, the issue hardly found a proper space on the French political agenda. The Consultation itself still remains highly influenced by a diplomatic management. Indeed, the census forms for the mosques indicating the size and squared metres would have been diffused by the Algerian consulate on behalf of the Paris mosque, the Moroccan consulates having given their support to certain associations.⁴



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Muslim man leaving the voting booth for the CRCM and CFCM elections, 13 April 2003.

ject is, however, not the same from one context to another depending upon the national and local political structures: does it aim at monitoring and regulating (controlling?) the Muslims? The French framework of laicity adds even more complexity: to what extent does the state go beyond its neutrality in actively supporting the creation of a representative body (for example, since June 2002, its direct intervention as a mediator between competing structures running for elections)?

Now that the CFCM is elected, the central question deals with its capacity to provide the Muslim population living in France with the right answers to their multiple questions. In an interview for the Muslim journal *La Medina*, Sarkozy declared shortly after being appointed that '[t]he purpose of the Consultation is to represent Islam of France, not Islam in France',⁷ based on what he called the 'reality of the field', explaining thus the dominant role of the regional committees. Until now, these challenges have been resolved thanks to the state having delegated to the local authorities the means and competences for managing religious issues (e.g. Muslim plots in cemeteries or the decision to exclude a veiled student from a public school). The training of imams will be one of the first questions to be answered by the newly elected board. Around 1,000 imams are working in France, 90 per cent of whom are foreigners (often with insufficient levels of French language capacities, un-

The elections of the CFCM are certainly the most 'performative' aspect of the whole project. Chevènement conceived it as a Consultation emphasizing the participative and deliberative components of the representation perspective. The two-round elections have been perceived as a means of legitimizing the institution. The rate of participation was approximately 88.5 per cent. Two points should be made in that respect. First of all the diversity of the trends: there is not a single association that could be considered as a winner that would dominate exclusively the CFCM. The elections have demonstrated the diversity of trends within the French associations of Muslims. The explicit loser of the elections is the Grande Mosquée de Paris, which, despite its representation all over France, gathered only 12 per cent of the national votes. Dalil Boubakeur has, however, been confirmed as president of the CFCM as he was designated to this position last December after a meeting of the COMOR. The two winners of these first elections of the CFCM are the FNMF, with 39 per cent of the votes, and the UOIF, with 27 per cent. Who should sit around the Republic's table? One central aspect of the consultative nature and one of the main results of the elections has been called by certain experts a 'democratization' of Islam.⁵ It illustrates in a way the political skills of the various organizations, in particular in terms of tactical moves and construction of alliances that will probably appear as soon as the CRCM are officially organized and identified. Will then the CFCM and the CRCM be able to work jointly and efficiently?

A French touch?

In France, the principle of laicity is based mainly on a denominational definition of religion, meaning that religions exist for the French state through their religious institutions.⁶ In many respects, the French institutionalization process of a representative structure is very much similar to what occurs elsewhere in the European Union in terms of public policies dealing with the recognition of Islam as a worship. Muslims are almost everywhere systematically disqualified for their incapacity to provide the state with a unique and unified speaker, preventing thus its institutionalization, its 'churchification'. The meaning of this institutionalization pro-

clear status, and dependency on foreign countries, notably Algeria, Morocco, and Turkey): the problem is multi-faceted. It is actually conceived as involving not only the Ministry of Interior and the CFCM but also as an issue covered by the Ministry of Education. It seems that the university (in particular the faculty of Islamic Studies) could be mobilized in shaping the proper format to be adopted in France, something probably along the lines of an intermediary between a pure faculty of theology and a religious seminary.

One week after the second round of the elections, visiting the annual meeting of the UOIF in Le Bourget, Sarkozy was severely booed when he stated that women should be bareheaded when posing for pictures for their national identity cards. The immediate controversy (in particular activated by the media) that followed clearly illustrates the limits of the CFCM both as an institution and as an authority as far as its regulating capacity is concerned. Moreover, if the French state has demonstrated a public commitment to treat Islam equally in comparison with other worships, it seems impossible to solve, in one and the same body, the social issues raised by the visibility of religious signs in the public space.⁸ Jean-Pierre Raffarin, French Prime Minister, noted in his discourse in front of the first CFCM General Assembly meeting on 3 May 2003: 'Religion is coming back and it is good news to me.' The veil is certainly going to be, again, a hot and central topic in France for the coming months. But this time, it will open up a discussion that goes far beyond the issue of equality of Islam and other worships and the individual right of a Muslim to be respected as a citizen.

Valérie Amiraux is a research fellow at the CNRS/CURAPP, France.
E-mail: valerie.amiraux@u-picardie.fr

Notes

1. N. Sarkozy, Interview with *La Medina* 17, September–October 2002, pp. 18–21 (see www.lamedina.fr).
2. Two structures were in charge of organizing the CFCM, the COMOR (Commission Organization), and the AOE-CFCM (Association for the Organization of the Elections), the latter dedicated to the electoral procedure.
3. *Libération*, 22 October 2001.
4. *Le Monde*, 30 November 2001; *La Croix*, 6 February 2002.
5. See the article by Franck Fregosi in *Libération*, 21 April 2003 (www.liberation.fr).
6. The same path has been followed by Jewish organizations that gave in to the Republican requirements by negotiating its public recognition on the basis of its capacity to create a central authority.
7. *La Medina* 17, September–October 2002, pp. 18–21 (www.lamedina.fr).
8. See Valérie Amiraux's article in *Libération*, 25 April 2003 (www.liberation.fr).