

Belgium

MONIQUE RENAERTS

**After 25 years of equivocation, the matter concerning the representation of secular affairs of the Muslim community is finally on the verge of finding a resolution acceptable to both the Muslim communities and public authorities. In Belgium, the State recognizes and financially supports various faiths: Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Anglican, Jewish, and Muslim. Even secularism is supported. Unlike the other recognized faiths, Islam does not fully benefit from the advantages that are conferred theoretically to its followers. Until now, the absence of a representative body, unanimously recognized by all Muslim groups, has been used in discourse to justify this discriminatory situation.**

As in other European countries, Belgium has seen during the last thirty years the nascence of Islam as the second most professed religion in the country. Not having viable statistics at our disposition, which is due to the fact that it is forbidden to register people according to religion, the number of Muslims in Belgium is estimated at approximately 350,000. Included in this number are both practising and non-practising Muslims, as well as those of Muslim origins who have become atheist or agnostic. The number of converts to Islam, however, is highly speculative. According to sources, none of which are genuinely viable, the number of converts could be anywhere from 3,000 to 15,000.

The Executive Body of Muslims in Belgium, temporary interlocutor for public powers of limited function, was set up after long negotiations in the different Muslim communities during the course of 1993. The Executive Body proposed, in agreement with the Minister of Justice, to organize elections in order to give a

# Elections in the Muslim Community of Belgium

legitimate and democratic base to a body that would finally be able to obtain official recognition and which would have all of the powers normally conferred to a *Chef de Culte* (Religious Group Leader).

In March 1998, the Executive Body re-submitted its project proposal to the Minister of Justice and, on June 12, the Council of Ministers ratified the project, entrusting the organization of elections to the Executive Body.

On 21 June 1998, the Executive Body invited the representatives of all mosques, religious teachers, and religious charity workers country-wide, in order to explain by means of a multi-media demonstration, the *ins and outs* of the project. It was the first time that such an event, bringing together Muslims from diverse ethno-national communities and various dogmatic sensibilities, took place in Belgium.

July 1998 saw the formation of an accompanying committee comprised of, on the one hand, three officials representing the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of the Interior, and the Centre for Equal Opportunity and the Fight against Racism, and on the other hand three members of the Executive Body. Its purpose was to follow the preparation for elections, the

actual elections, and the process of validating results. The project anticipated the election of a 51-member assembly. This assembly was to be increased by 17 co-opted members, 10 of which were to be nominated by the current Executive Body and 7 by those elected, plus the first 10 members.

The goal of co-opting is to allow for continuity in the work of the Executive Body as well as to give equilibrium to results taken from the voting boxes, calling upon Muslims who would be less likely to be elected: women, youth, certain community minorities, and those with specific technical qualifications useful for the community.

These 68 persons would have to assign, from amongst themselves, the Religious Group Leader Organ, which would include 17 members comprised of 7 Moroccans, 4 Turks, 3 converts, and 3 'other nationalities'.

To respect the elective principle, at least three-fourths of the members of the Religious Group Leader Organ should be directly elected.

Regardless of what is claimed by certain religious tendencies, deciding upon a contingent per community group has as its objective to assure, from the outset, equal representation

and minority participation. At present, followers still frequent the religious loci of their own communities. However, there are certain minorities of which the converts do not have their own mosques. Not taking this into account would have given preference to Moroccans, who clearly constitute a majority.

Muslims over 18 years of age domiciling in Belgium since more than one year prior, were authorized to register to vote between September 1 and October 31, 1998. On the register form, the voter was asked to indicate his preference for voting either at a mosque or in a public place.

Muslims (male or female) over 25 years of age domiciling in Belgium since more than 5 years prior, utilizing their civil rights, having neither political nor diplomatic mandate and mastering one of the official languages of the country, could present him/herself as a candidate. Each mosque had the right to present from one to three candidates.

In order to give a chance to those who do not frequent a particular mosque, persons wishing to do so could freely present themselves as candidates, 50 supporting signatures being required. ►

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Those wishing to participate in the Religious Group Leader Organ furthermore should have a secondary school diploma.

At the closing of registration there were 72,000 voters and 264 candidates. Amongst the latter, there were 8 converts, 43 'other nationalities' (Algerian, Tunisian, Pakistani, Egyptian, Syrian, and sub-Saharan African), 170 Moroccans, and 43 Turks. Albanians did not participate in the voting: based on their own statistics, they demanded beforehand a certain number of seats attributed without consultation in the grand assembly of 68.

Days before the election, the voters were called upon by mail. The preferred location for voting, as indicated by the voter on the registration form (mosque or public place), was taken into account, as well as proximity to the voter's domicile. The elections took place on December 13 between 11 a.m. and 5 p.m. at 124 voting stations, of which 20 were in public places (schools, foreign integration centres, communal locales) and 104 in mosques. These latter were chosen from amongst all mosques in the county by drawing lots. The electoral process in the Muslim communities was a first not only for Belgium, but for all of Europe as well. Many countries followed the process with great interest.

The election results were validated on 6 January 1999. The first co-optation took place in the second week of January. Elected members and the first co-opted group came together for the first time on Friday, January 15. They proceeded to co-opting 7 additional persons.

The members that fulfilled the diploma and language requirements were asked whether they wished to take part in the Religious Group Leader Organ. The names of those who responded affirmatively are to be presented to the Ministry of Justice. Though the Minister does not have the right to designate the representatives of religious groups, he can nonetheless reserve the right to refuse certain candidatures for reasons of public security.

Despite the fact that candidates were informed of this step in the process ahead of time, it still risks being the most delicate part of the process. Amongst the names accepted by the Minister, each community group is to choose its representatives for the Religious Group Leader Organ. Should a community group not come to an agreement, the grand assembly will intervene. If the entire process runs smoothly, the Religious Group Leader Organ will be, in theory, instituted by the end of February at the latest. ◆