

Deconstructing France's Emmanuel Macron. The Surge of Islamophobia

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The Modi government has earned the distinction as the “first non-western” voice to come out in support of French President Emmanuel Macron over the recent [horrific killings](#) in that country. This distinction apparently presents itself as too good to miss. The Rajya Sabha TV slotted a programme to castigate “Islamist terrorism” in France.

Religious fundamentalism is repugnant. Indians should know it better than anybody, and what is happening in France is not difficult to understand. The French condition bears striking resemblance to India's widespread social pathology.

Islamophobia is on surge in French society, too. The thinly-veiled anti-Muslim statements, barbs and innuendos by senior French ministers are a daily occurrence. If assailants stabbed two Muslim women wearing veil near the Eiffel Tower, it no longer makes news. Patently anti-Muslim attitudes give respectability to Islamophobia and fuel social tensions, as France is also a [multi-ethnic society like India](#).

The Pew Research Center found in their Global Attitudes Survey in 2017 that 54.2% of the French regarded themselves as Christians, with 47.4% belonging to the Catholic Church. Islam is the second-most widely professed religion in France. Christians number roughly 38 million while Muslims account for close to 5.5 million. [Around 21 million French people do not have affiliation with any religion.]

However, although Christianity is the most represented religion in France, there is deep disquiet in the Christian mind bordering on paranoia that feeds into Islamophobia. In democracies, it is a special responsibility for trade unions, churches, local newspapers and other public institutions to help foster social cohesion and promote civic participation and incubate the sense of responsibilities of citizenship, but that is not happening in France.

Social tensions are also exacerbated due to the uneven growth and yawning social inequalities. The Internet significantly contributes to the radicalisation of society. Most important, in the most recent decades, there has been an overall weakening of the national ideology of secularism. France's political and intellectual traditions have weakened.

Enter Macron. Just a few days before the current mayhem, on October 2, in a long-awaited [national address](#), Macron unveiled a plan to defend France's secular values against what he termed “Islamist radicalism.”

“Islam is a religion that is in crisis all over the world today, we are not just seeing this in our country,” Macron said. His core theme was that his government will make “no concessions” in a new drive to push religion out of education and the public sector in France.

He announced that the government would present a bill in December to strengthen a 1905 law that officially separated church and state in France. The new measures, Macron said, are aimed at addressing a problem of growing “radicalisation” in France and improving “our ability to live together”.

This may seem a fine thing to do in the best traditions of separation of the state and religion. But the devil lies in the detail. Thus, while “secularism is the cement of a united France,” and Macron’s new law permits people to belong to any faith of their choosing, the outward displays of religious affiliation would be banned in schools and the public service! (By the way, wearing the hijab is already banned in French schools and for public servants at their workplace.)

Macron claimed he is seeking to “liberate” Islam in France from foreign influences by improving oversight of mosque financing. There would also be closer scrutiny of schools and associations exclusively serving religious communities. In effect, Macron announced that France is once again evaluating its relationship with its Muslim minority, the largest in Europe.

Macron’s remarks produced a furious reaction in the Muslim community. A prominent French Muslim activist tweeted: “The repression of Muslims has been a threat, now it is a promise. In a one hour speech Macron emboldened the far right, anti-Muslim leftists and threatened the lives of Muslim students by calling for drastic limits on home schooling despite a global pandemic.”

Macron was speaking one week after a man attacked two people with a meat cleaver outside the former Paris offices of the Charlie Hebdo satirical weekly, an assault condemned by the government as an act of “Islamist terrorism”!

What is Macron up to? In a nutshell, Macron is a besieged politician today. His electorate is abandoning him and he thinks he can save his political career by taking a page out of the far right’s playbook. Macron has failed to deliver on his promises, especially on the economy. Rampant street protests and major public sector strikes show that disaffection is growing exponentially. The so-called Gilets Jaunes (yellow vests) protests highlighted the depth of alienation. Macron has to order force to quell the protests.

Major demonstrations erupted through last year against pension reforms, fuel-price hikes, police violence, and unemployment. The year ended with one of the longest public transportation strikes in French history, which paralysed the country.

The upheaval has halved Macron’s ratings from approximately 60 percent in 2017 when he got elected as president. In the last municipal elections in June, his party suffered a crushing defeat. Macron is getting frantic, as the presidential election in April 2022 draws closer.

Fanning the flames of Islamophobia is a desperate attempt by Macron at gaining political ground — specifically, at the expense of the far right. Macron estimates that Islamophobia holds the key to galvanise the supporters of the far right.

Macron is succeeding. A chorus of media pundits and politicians across the political spectrum has lately united in the conviction that French “values” are under threat and that the general population needs to mobilise for a fight.

The mood is captured in a tweet by a senior politician Meyer Habib, deputy chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee at the National Assembly — “To arms, citizens”, using an evocative phrase from the French national anthem.

The air is thick with highly provocative demands — that this “war” should include the rescinding of citizenship for Muslim migrants, obligation to adopt French first names, reinstatement of death penalty, etc.

Now, the belligerent rhetoric has also put on the defensive Macron’s main political opponent in the presidential election, the socialist leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon, head of the *France Insoumise* (Unbowed France) party, against whom a smear campaign has begun for voicing disquiet over the stigmatisation of Muslims in the French society.

In an attempt to undermine the Left by associating it with “Islamism”, which has a very negative connotation in the minds of the French majority, Mélenchon has been branded as an “Islamist-leftist”. This character assassination campaign may work to Macron’s advantage.

But to be fair to Macron, he is only riding a popular wave, since for well over two decades, the French state has been moving in a vicious circle in its relationship with its Muslim citizens. Ali Saad, noted French sociologist and media critic focusing on the influence of mass media, wrote recently,

“The [French] state still does not acknowledge the fact that Islam is a religion of France, that it is not wise to systematically remind or refer to French Muslims by their racial or geographic origins, and that French Muslim issues are inherently French issues.

“The state does not want to recognise the fact that there is no empirical evidence to suggest that religion is a primary motivator for violent extremism and that radicalisation is a social phenomenon... The state has done little to address job and housing discrimination, police brutality, poverty and everyday racism and yet it accuses the French Muslim community of failing to “integrate” or even of “separatism”. It has relied on a security-centred approach in which Islam has been systematically perceived as an evil that society should confront, and Muslims as a threat to the way of life and to fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression.”

In a nutshell, the French state has separated itself from the Muslim segment of the population and is insisting on treating them as outsiders. There is refusal to acknowledge that multiculturalism is innate to plural societies and should be embraced as such. (This is where Britain puts France to shame.)

All in all, the Modi government shouldn’t have popped up as a flag carrier in the barricades where Macron has positioned himself. It draws attention needlessly to [India’s deep-rooted malaise](#). It is sheer naiveté to assume that the crisis in France is over the the [“French version of absolute liberty”](#) (whatever that may mean.)

This is a familiar Indian sight: a discredited politician taking a plausible route to stage a comeback and get re-elected — and that too, in the chaotic times of the pandemic. Inability to see Macron for the cowardly politics he practises makes us apologists for bigotry.

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