

Extrait du Tariq Ramadan

<http://www.tariqramadan.com/France-s-defining-vision-of-change,11936.html>

France's defining vision of change

- English - ARTICLES -



Date de mise en ligne : Wednesday 18 April 2012

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The country wields deceptive political concepts today. If it wants to preserve its theoretical values, it needs to modify its political practices

Some residue of France's universalistic and secular ambitions, once colonialism's driving force in the name of the country's "civilising mission," and in defence of its economic and geopolitical interests still subsists in the country's collective memory. Successive governments have attempted to define the destiny of the "French nation", imagining themselves as conquerors in the realm of values, and as being independent in the realm of policies.

Under the Fifth Republic, national ambitions have not changed; the vision and rhetoric of its leaders still reflect the same self-perception, the same claim to exceptionalism. From cultural exception to exceptional destiny, France felt duty-bound to set itself apart, which it attempted to do, sometimes in pride, more frequently in arrogance. Such qualities were on display when France refused to participate in the invasion of Iraq. France said 'No' to the United States, Great Britain and Israel as it courageously affirmed the singularity of its mission calling, one that is still relevant today.

Yet, as we look back over the five-year term of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, we can only conclude that though France's ambitions persist, new realities have left it behind. France is no longer quite what it once was. On the international scene, it has never been so closely aligned with the Atlantic alliance, so in line with American positions. One would have thought that with the emergence of new centres of economic and political power China, Russia, India, South Africa or Latin America France would reposition itself advantageously in the new multi-polar world. Nothing of the kind has happened. France found itself sidelined in Tunisia, failing to realise how much of its 'own terrain' in North Africa the US had already occupied.

Only with the consent of the US government was France able to intervene in the Ivory Coast or to assume some initiative in Libya. The coming months are likely to reaffirm the same strategic alliance in northern Mali and Niger, two regions that have assumed crucial importance following discovery of plentiful petroleum reserves. In Africa and in the Middle East (where France has never been so pro-Israel), Afghanistan and more broadly in Asia, France has chosen sides and no longer possesses an ounce of political independence. Officials may well strike the occasional pose, but France has relegated itself to the humdrum concert of secondary nations.

To Europe, Sarkozy presented himself as the prime mover of European political unity, as a problem-solver in times of crisis, as a reformer, alongside Germany, of course. But behind the theatrics and posturing, France now occupies a subsidiary position; Germany has emerged as the model for economic achievement. Even a few years ago such an alignment was unthinkable.

France's power structure, which had been so deeply involved in defining Europe, its vision and its objectives, has been reduced to technocratic or managerial status, bowing to the banks, the multinationals and the wealthy, with no alternative but to celebrate Germany's success while its own situation becomes daily more like Spain's. But even though the reality has changed, the rhetoric has not; France continues to strike poses and to brandish symbols, as it does in the case of Turkey.

So desperately does the country seek to embody the European ideal that it consciously confronts an emerging Turkey, seen as 'non-European,' 'too Muslim,' all too much 'the other,' and legislates to criminalise doubt about the Armenian genocide. The strutting and empty bravado perfectly symbolise the contradictions of today's France, which wields deceptive political concepts void of any substance. Confusing rhetoric

The symbols may be new; the methods are not. Domestically, the president attempted to project a new image for

France. He appointed three women 'of immigrant backgrounds' and 'integrated' them into his government. They were to embody France's 'diversity.' But the experiment failed, and the country's old demons rose to the surface from the depths of a social order where nothing had changed. A growing income gap, discrimination, structural racism and geographical segregation (of disenfranchised and wealthy alike) remain objective facts. Since 2005, when rioting wracked the banlieues, nothing has changed.

Those who reside in the country's public housing projects, be they white, black or Arab, are second-class citizens, viewed with suspicion and mistrust. They may well refuse to see themselves as victims, but the machine that has marginalised them has successfully transformed them into the 'other.'

Political rhetoric leads only to confusion. Labelling social problems as ethnic or Islamic has become the default position of an entire political establishment: an approach that leads directly to the return of the colonial mentality. In the past, France's civilising mission served as a code to mask the economic and political ravages of colonialism. Today, at home, cultural and religious problems are referred to in order to mask social and economic injustice. The arguments are identical, the avoidance is identical, the exploitation is identical. The Interior Minister, Claude Gueant, has even intimated that certain civilisations are more worthy than others. We have come a full circle: colonialist thinking has joined hands with national politics. Marianne is not what she used to be, nor is she something entirely new.

In the years leading up to France's presidential elections, there has been talk of headscarves, niqabs and burqas, of prayers in the streets, of halal meat, of immigration (just as Tunisians were throwing off a dictatorship supported by France), of civilisation and, most recently, of Muslim extremism and security. The poverty and paucity of political debate is certainly one of the hallmarks of the campaign.

Meanwhile the absence of social and economic issues, the disproportionate harping on Islam, security and immigration have revealed a noxious political climate. It would seem that France is unable to see itself, to listen to its multiple voices. Political blindness and deafness stalk the land; everywhere there is mistrust.

France calls upon its Muslim citizens to become autonomous while at the same time the government continues to manage religious issues (and identity politics) through the embassies of Algeria, Morocco, Saudi Arabia or Qatar. Political themes calculated to produce controversy are exploited on a daily basis; issues become polarised, debate turns hysterical. While France is caught up in change, its politicians mislead their electorate, stoking their fears while reassuring them that everything will remain the same. Against the course of history.

Times have changed; so must the lenses through which we see the political future. It is only a matter of time. A French citizen henceforth can be white, Asian, Arab, atheist, Hindu, Buddhist, Jew, Christian, Muslim or anything else. France is an indivisible Republic, yet multi-cultural; its history the creation of memories, its future dependent upon its respect for equality and dignity, for rights and in the confident celebration of diversity with justice. It will not happen overnight. The current election campaign is like a distorting mirror showing what should not be done; it reminds us of what history expects of us. If France wants to preserve its theoretical values, it must change its political practices.

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