

THE RIOTS OF RAMADAN

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Alexis de Tocqueville had the French state in mind when he worried about the paternal power of the democratic state. He considered civil associations as the salve that could heal the pathologies of the democratic soul, including its individualism and its tendency to seek salvation in world-transforming ideologies. Tocqueville's teaching helps us to understand the impact of the riots in France, both for their impact on France's domestic politics but also for international politics. Domestically, the riots underline the difficulty the French state has in integrating up to three generations of Algerian Muslims, who remember the brutality of their struggle for independence. French statism, seen as the guardian of *le nation*, in fact undermines the art of civil association that makes integration so necessary. The French response to the riots will have implications for the war on terrorism. For instance, Ahmed Ressay, the so-called Millennium bomber who had planned to blow up LAX but was stopped at a border crossing at Washington state, belonged to an Algerian terrorist cell in Montreal. Just last week the [Canadian Security Intelligence Service \(CSIS\)](#) announced they had broken up an Algerian terrorist cell in Toronto. Finally, the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) reported recently that Algerians make up the largest contingent of foreign insurgents in Iraq. France's Algerian and Islamist powder keg has exploded and the situation and the regime's response illuminate some of the deepest fault lines of the modern age.

Integrating Immigrants and Civil Associations

The majority of commentators blame the riots on the staggeringly high unemployment (as high as 35% in some areas) among the immigrant populations. However, the high unemployment is more symptomatic of deeper political and economic problems that the political class has been ineffective in addressing and understanding. For instance, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin's longstanding economic policy has been to use the state to provide jobs while setting up trade barriers to protect French companies. Of course, this policy is self-contradictory and typifies the sclerosis of the French political class and perhaps of the Fifth Republic itself. With unemployment at ten percent for non-immigrants, the French economy is too sluggish and dragged down by the welfare state to generate jobs.

The government's policy of housing these immigrants in public housing projects compounds the problem. Americans will be familiar with the "projects" that originated with Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society programs and with the various criminal and social pathologies they created. The lack of private ownership and the lack of self-respect that accompanies it produce the conditions for these rioters. Nicholas Sarkozy was criticized for labeling the rioters "scums" because he was supposedly insensitive to the problems caused by their unemployment. To his mind, they are scums because they destroy their own communities. The press has interviewed several shop-owners whose shops were attacked and who agree with Sarkozy. However, in another sense they are not destroying their own communities because their communities are not their own. This is why [one local community leader](#) explained that the ideals of the French Revolution –

liberty, equality, and fraternity – have not trickled down to them. With no sense of ownership of their own communities, the rioters view themselves as dependents or wards of the state. The projects were meant to enable immigrant populations to practice self-government – Tocqueville’s civil associations. [Amir Taheri](#) compares this system to the “millet” system of the old Ottoman Empire where Christian and Jewish communities ran their own affairs under the more-or-less tolerant umbrella of Islamic officialdom. However, with rioters pelting their own imams with rocks, it is clear that they reject even this level of association with the broader French culture. Therefore, the “root causes” argument once again fails to account for their lack of pride in themselves. The essence of mass man, that is to say those who lack a sense of their own personality, gets enacted through such acts of violence. The violence might “express” desperation, anger, or lack of self-ownership, but it has no strategic or political goal. Villepin’s attempts to engage in “dialogue” with the rioters might constitute salutary window-dressing of a benevolent government policy, but it is at best a stop-gap measure that has come too late because his government was too timid in stamping out the violence.

Global Islamists as Tocquevillian Individualists

Beneath the problem of Muslims in France is the deeper crisis that contemporary Islam finds in defining itself, especially among Muslims in Western countries. [Olivier Roy](#), author of [*Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*](#), convincingly argues that Muslims, especially those in Europe, have a “de-territorialized” sense of themselves. In Tocqueville’s terms, they are those hyper-individualists whose traditions have been shorn by the forces of democracy and who lack a sense of place and of themselves.

Muslims have historically practiced their religion with a strong sense of place and local rituals. This is why decisions based on the Shari’ah often reflect local circumstances, whether the Pakistani tribal imam who *rules* female adulterers be stoned or the British [Internet imam](#) who merely *advises* the biological father of an illegitimate child has the moral obligation to support that child. In addition to drawing different judgments from ostensibly the same Shari’ah, the tribal imam has authority over an identifiable community in a specific location, while Western imams must redefine what Islam means because they can no longer take the moral and religious traditions of their people for granted. Their community, such as it is, is too nebulous and ill-defined to have common features beyond allegiance to something called, “Islam.”

For Roy, political Islam is very much a modern phenomenon because it is driven by masses of displaced or deterritorialized Muslims who have left their traditions and are searching for an “essential” Islam. Roy notices a strongly individualistic streak among them. For instance, he observes that 9/11 bomber Mohammad Atta’s suicide note contained significantly more references to himself than to Allah, which he takes signifies a modern obsession with the self. The rioters are indeed Islamists, as evidenced by their [frequent chant](#), “Allahou Akbar!” -- “God is great!” Of course, it is difficult if not impossible to identify the “essence” of a 1,500 year old tradition. Ironically, Islamists do what Westerners do when the latter express their “Orientalism” in reducing that complex tradition to a few slogans such as, “Islam is a religion of peace” and “Islam is a religion

of war.” Islamists paradoxically, and perversely, treat themselves as “the Other” in reducing their own tradition to some kind of “pure Islam.” Doing so enables them to identify (and destroy) those deemed apostate but also because Muslims can no longer take their religion for granted as something connected with the soil. Their traditions have been uprooted over the past several generations, which contributes to a radicalized sense of identity politics.

Sarkozy and Villepin

This returns us to the l’affaire Villepin-Sarkozy and the Tocquevillian difficulty of creating civil associations with a paternal state. The style and the substance of both politicians illuminate the limitations the Fifth Republic is under in dealing with this crisis to its legitimacy. It is no wonder that these riots have been compared to the riots of 1968, the last time the Republic’s legitimacy was seriously questioned.

In terms of style, l’affaire Villepin-Sarkozy is a contest between a political outsider (Sarkozy) and an insider disguised as an outsider (Villepin) which helps to understand their respective approaches to the rioters. Sarkozy, whose full name is Nicolas Paul Stéphane Sárkőzy de Nagy-Bócsa, was born to a Hungarian father who earned French citizenship by serving in the Foreign Legion, and mother whose father was a Sephardic Jew and who raised three sons after his father abandoned them, and then went on to a distinguished career as a lawyer. It is no wonder Sarkozy comes across as an American-style politician because he embraces the principles of individual responsibility and admires people who overcome adversity and find success. His law and order approach to the riots is consistent with these views.

As a protégé of Jacques Chirac, Dominique de Villepin is very much an establishment figure. The “de” in his surname suggests nobility but his family gained that title through the practice of *redorer son blazon* or “to re-gild one’s coat of arms,” whereby wealthy commoners enrich aristocratic families in exchange for the prestige bought by an aristocratic title. His fake aristocratic origin matches his fake posture as an ethnic outsider. Villepin was born and spent the first few years of his life in Morocco which he claims gives him special insight into Islam. His knowledge of Islam was displayed when he has the imams and community leaders attempt to “dialogue” with the rioters who responded with stones.

Integrating Muslims Using the Paternal State

Both Sarkozy and Villepin in the past have attempted to reach out to Muslim communities through various affirmative action programs or what Villepin calls “[Republican cadets](#),” where immigrants from disadvantaged neighborhoods receive state support to train for police and fire services. The two disagree over the manner of integrating Muslim populations into the Republic, however. Sarkozy received [favorable reviews](#) among some Americans for his criticism of secularism and his views, expressed in his book, *La République, les religions, l’espérance*, that the French republic needs religious voices informing public debate. However, Sarkozy’s approach to creating this

pluralistic public square is Gaullist in making the French state the primary guarantor of the French nation. While he rejects the 1905 law that separated church and state, and established *laïcité* for the republic, he established the French Council on the Muslim Religion as a way of regulating the imams. [One of its wings issued a fatwa](#) against the rioters, but it is likely the rioters will view this government-sponsored fatwa as even less legitimate than the imams who marched on Villepin's prompting. Instead of making a Madisonian commitment to public pluralism of religions, Sarkozy's approach would find its counterpart in English-speaking liberalism in David Hume's support for a Church establishment to contain sectarian enthusiasms.

For his part, Villepin supports the 1905 *laïcité* law. He told Canada's [National Post](#) before hurrying back home to deal with the riots that France and Quebec, Canada's most secularized province, "share the same humanistic vision of the world." Even so, both agree that Islam needs to be managed and Villepin merely chooses other devices to achieve this end. He established agencies to provide oversight on private foundations (some of them foreign with ties to the Middle East) that would support and regulate imams. Governmental agencies charged with regulating contracts and foreign money transfers would keep tabs on them, while the government has established various "community groups" organized by social workers to regulate the affairs on the street. In other words, Sarkozy seeks to regulate Islam by having the state create a "French Islam" while Villepin seeks to regulate Islam indirectly through the welfare state and regulation of the finances of associations.

The approach of neither is palatable from the perspective of the rioters and from the broader Muslim community. Villepin offers them two illusions. He offers them the economic illusion of jobs from a state that cannot afford to create jobs. He offers the political illusion by assuming their problems can be addressed with "social justice," that is, redistributive economics. His support of the 1905 secularism law means at least publicly, Muslims must drop their Muslim identity. Villepin offers social justice but insults them. Sarkozy ostensibly offers greater recognition by allowing Islam into the public square, but his managed pluralism delegitimizes those imams who are brought closer to the state than others. The state, not their communities, legitimates them.

Yet, Sarkozy's embrace of the ethics of individual responsibility at least offers those communities a method to regain their pride. It may be a coincidence that now the rest of the French government, including President Chirac, are talking tough on crime (though their actions may tell a different story) as Sarkozy did at the beginning. French public opinion certainly refuses to tolerate the rioters, and the riots may transform French politics in a manner similar to the way the murder of filmmaker Theo Van Gogh moved the Dutch to reject the postmodernist multiculturalism that ruled over it since World War Two. Sarkozy's bellicose speech may or may not inflame the rioters, but there are clues that the broader immigrant community has responded positively to it. As one inhabitant told the [Washington Post](#), "'We don't have the American dream here,' said Rezzoug, as he surveyed the clusters of young men. 'We don't even have the French dream here.'" "American dream" might refer to the rap culture that many youths are drawn to, but it may point to something deeper.

Self-Governing Individuals in the Fifth Republic?

Underneath Sarkozy's Gaullist views on state and society and his "hard-line" approach to the riots is the closest the French have to providing that American dream in the sense of a pluralistic public square constituted by self-governing individuals and associations. Sarkozy is as close to Tocqueville as French government has, and for the French to resolve this problem, for their sake and ours, they will have to listen to Tocqueville's critique of democratic paternalism which their state typifies, and to his advocacy of civil associations. Tocqueville's praise of civil associations derives from his assessment of the democratic soul, which he examined in 1830s America and finds important similarities with today's deterritorialized Islam: both find themselves reconstructing their sense of selfhood amidst fractured traditions and both are highly individualistic. Tocqueville thought civil associations addressed this fractured sense of self because they enable citizens to practice at the arts of self-government on a small scale. Villepin's reliance on private foundations, and Sarkozy's rejection of *laïcité*, would address this aspect if they were not so tied to statist ideology and practice. Even so, Tocqueville thought civil associations had a way of moderating sectarian passions because it forces participants to see the consequences of their ideas in action. Bad ideas get thrown out by those who have to live with their consequences. Of course, such moderation depends on the ability of individuals to take ownership of their communities, which may no longer be realistic for them under the French regime.

French politics has historically been characterized by theatrics, and today Villepin's illusions find their counterpart in the Islamist slogans chanted by the rioters. The strategy of both Villepin and Sarkozy has been to use a version of Tocqueville's civil association teaching to integrate France's Muslims. However, Sarkozy's [French Council on the Muslim Religion](#) is statist and lacks legitimacy among Muslims, while Villepin's *laïcité*, which is also the French establishment's *laïcité*, insults Muslims. Sarkozy understands Tocqueville's insight that democracy needs religion, but undermines his own efforts. Villepin seems more willing to encourage associations, but fails to understand them in the context of the democratic soul. The failings of both illuminate the limitations of the French political culture. Sarkozy's muted representation of an ethic of individual responsibility possibly offers more to immigrant communities, but they will reject his message insofar as years of welfare dependency has made them nearly incapable of practicing such responsibility.

The riots of Ramadan strike at the basis of the French state and its political culture with possibly greater significance than the 1968 riots. Other European governments are worried about the riots spreading to their countries because they too would face a similar crisis of legitimacy. The threat to European security would, of course, draw in the United States, who already has a problem with deterritorialized foreign insurgents in Iraq. The riots of Ramadan constitute a revolutionary moment for Europe, and people in other parts of the world will hope the revolution gets contained.