

A Hijab Ban and a Fatal Shooting Reveal the Racial Divisions in France

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purely coincidental, and in many ways, the cases are different. One involved a fatal traffic stop that French officials have condemned; the other involved a charged debate on the visibility of Islam in French society. But both touch upon long-simmering issues of identity and inclusion in France.

The police shooting was initially explained in the French news media as self-defense. Anonymous police sources claimed Mr. Merzouk was shot after he plowed his car into officers to evade a traffic stop. But a bystander video emerged, seeming to show he was shot by an officer from the side of the car, as he drove away.

Though a French citizen, Mr. Merzouk was of Algerian and Moroccan heritage. Many minorities living in the country's poorer suburbs believe that the police would never have shot a young white man living in an affluent neighborhood of Paris, even if he had a history of minor traffic violations, as Mr. Merzouk did.

"We are doubly judged," said Kader Mahjoubi, 47, who was among the thousands who attended a vigil march for Mr. Merzouk last week. "You always have to justify yourself."

An official in President Emmanuel Macron's office last week rejected outright the idea that there were two Frances of different conditions and treatments. As for the police, the official dismissed the notion of institutional bias.

"It was the act of one man, and not the institution of the police," said the official, who in keeping with French rules could not be publicly identified, adding, "The police today are very mixed, very diverse, a reflection of France."

In recent years, studies have made clear just how prevalent racial discrimination is in France, particularly among the police. In 2017, an investigation by France's civil liberties ombudsman, the Défenseur des Droits, found that "young men perceived to be Black or Arab" were 20 times as likely to be subjected to police identity checks compared with the rest of the population.

Last week, the representative for the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights called on France to "seriously address the deep issues of racism and discrimination in law enforcement."

The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs called the accusation "totally groundless" and said that the French police "fight resolutely



MOHAMMED BADRA/EPA, VIA SHUTTERSTOCK



ABDULMONAM EASSA/GETTY IMAGES

against racism and all forms of discrimination."

At the same time, the attitudes of many French people hardened as a result of a series of horrific terrorist attacks since 2015.

Discussion of race in France is deeply taboo, as it goes against the republic's founding ideals that all people share the same universal rights and should be treated equally. Today, just talking about racism is believed to deepen the problem, said Julien Talpin, a sociologist at the National Center for Scientific Research who studies discrimination in the French suburbs.

"It's kind of a strange position that the best way to solve the problem is to not talk about it," he said, "but that's basically the dominant consensus in French society."

The result is that many minorities feel doubly penalized.

"We are discriminated against because of our race," said Mr. Talpin, recounting what he hears from the subjects of his studies. "And then, on top of it, the problem is denied, it couldn't exist."

Yet, many residents of the suburbs "silently find their place in France," said Fabien Truong, a sociologist. For them, "the Republi-

can promise" of equality and integration has largely worked, as they get higher education, better jobs, move out of the suburbs and feel essentially part of the mainstream, he said.

Others feel regularly targeted, and spend nights in jail simply for not carrying their ID. Those residents, he said, most of them teenagers, internalize a message of illegitimacy at a particularly tender time of emotional development, when they are building their sense of self.

"It's a mandatory thing in France, but no one carries their ID. If you are white and you live in the center of Paris, and you go out to buy your baguette, you won't carry your ID," said Mr. Truong, a professor at Université Paris 8. "You could be arrested, but you know you won't be. But those boys, they might be and they know other people won't."

Mr. Truong has studied the experiences of about 20 of his former secondary students in Seine-

Saint-Denis, the sprawling Parisian suburb where riots were ignited in 2005 after two teenage boys were electrocuted as they were pursued by the police.

What some tell him, he said, is: "We do feel French. We were born here. But we're not French-French."

He sees parallels between last week's riots and the court ruling: Both have to do with controlling young, marginalized people in the public space who are deemed a threat.

In theory, the country's principle of secularism, which emerged after the 1789 revolution to keep the Roman Catholic Church out of state affairs, is aimed at ensuring that the state does not promote any religion and that everyone is free to practice whatever faith they want.

Critics say it has sometimes been used as a weapon to exclude Muslims, especially women wearing head scarves, from public life.

It was under the principle of

neutrality that France's soccer federation barred players from participating in matches while wearing hijabs or other religious symbols.

A group of young Muslim players from different teams, who call themselves Les Hijabeuses, or the hijab wearers, launched a legal challenge to the rule in 2021, arguing that it was discriminatory and excluded Muslim women from sports.

The expert adviser to the country's top administrative court agreed with them last week, noting that soccer was replete with religious and political symbols, like the many players who habitually cross themselves before entering the field.

Still, the court ruled otherwise, stating the federation was entitled to putting the ban in place "in order to guarantee the proper functioning of public services and the protection of the rights and freedoms of others."

The ruling went further, saying that not only neutrality but the smooth running of matches, without confrontations and clashes, was at stake.

In France, many in the mainstream see the Islamic head scarf, at best, as an archaic symbol of women's oppression, and at worst a sign of failed integration and religious radicalism. Just the sight of a hijab can raise tensions.

The country's interior minister, Gérald Darmanin, who has led the government's fight to root out Islamic establishments deemed "separatist" across the country, told a French radio station last week that if female soccer players were permitted to wear a hijab, it would be a "very important blow" to the French "Republican contract."

"When you play soccer," Mr. Darmanin said, "you shouldn't have to know the religion of your opponents."

Ms. Diakité, who now plays with fellow members of Les Hijabeuses only for fun, surmised the ruling was based on political ideology and not fact. If the court had come to speak to the players and club managers in the suburbs, she said, it would have learned that there has never been violence on the soccer pitch because of players wearing the hijab.

She had been hoping for dialogue, connection and inclusion. Instead, she felt the opposite.

"We have French identity cards," she said. "But we don't feel completely at home."

French Mayors Targeted in Violent Protests

By EMMA BUBOLA and VIVEK SHANKAR

The mayor of a suburb of Paris said on Sunday that protesters had rammed a car into his home and then set the vehicle on fire, injuring his wife and one of his children, as violent demonstrations across France over the police killing of a 17-year-old stretched into a fifth night.

"Last night, a milestone was reached in terms of horror and ignominy," the mayor, Vincent Jeanbrun, of L'Haÿ-les-Roses, a town to the south of the capital, said in a statement on Twitter.

In a separate attack, the police said on Twitter that rioters had tried to set fire to a car belonging to another mayor, in the town of La Riche, near the city of Tours, southwest of Paris.

Across the rest of France, Saturday evening had generally been calmer than recent nights, during which hundreds of protests have taken place nationwide. But still, local news media reported rioting, looting and clashes in Marseille, France's second-largest city, and hundreds more people were arrested.

Tensions remained high on Sunday after the funeral the day before for the 17-year-old, Nahel Merzouk. The teenager, of Algerian and Moroccan descent, was fatally shot on Tuesday during a traffic stop in Nanterre, a Paris suburb. Many protesters said that they saw themselves in the victim, connecting his fate with their own experiences of neglect and racial discrimination in France's poorer urban suburbs.

Mr. Merzouk's grandmother, who was identified by only her first name, Nadia, spoke to the French news channel BFMTV on Sunday and asked the rioters to stand down.

"People who are breaking things, I tell them, 'Stop,'" she said, adding that they should refrain from smashing shop windows or targeting schools and buses.

"It's the moms who take buses," she said.

In L'Haÿ-les-Roses, Mr. Jeanbrun said that he had been spending the night in the town hall, as he had been for the previous three nights, when a car was driven at his house at 1:30 a.m. while his



GEOFFROY VAN DER HASSELT/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

Police officers outside the home of Vincent Jeanbrun, the mayor of L'Haÿ-les-Roses, France. Protesters rammed a car into a wall.

wife and children were sleeping inside. His wife and one of his children were injured as they tried to run away, he said.

Stéphane Hardouin, the public prosecutor in Créteil, a town nearby, said that initial indications were that the car had crashed into the house with the intention of setting the building on fire, and he noted that some accel-

Demonstrators stay in the streets after the police killing of a teen.

erant had been found in a bottle.

Mr. Hardouin said that a small wall had stopped the car before it reached the house's veranda, and that only the front gate and the family's car had been affected. Hearing the noise and seeing flames, the mayor's wife and his children, ages 5 and 7, tried to flee through the back garden, but his wife injured herself, apparently breaking her shin, Mr. Hardouin added.

The French interior minister, Gérald Darmanin, called the attack "cowardly and terrible," and said in a post on Twitter that an attempted-murder investigation had been opened.

The French prime minister, Élisabeth Borne, traveled to L'Haÿ-les-Roses to express her support for the mayor, calling the attack unacceptable. She said that

the government would move to impose harsher punishments on those who attack local representatives.

President Emmanuel Macron of France held a meeting at the Élysée Palace on Sunday evening with the prime minister, the interior minister and the justice minister to assess the situation across the country.

An official who participated in the meeting said Mr. Macron asked that the authorities "continue to do everything to restore order and guarantee a return to calm."

The official, in keeping with French government rules asked not to be publicly identified, added that Mr. Macron also requested to "undertake a long-term project to understand, in depth, the causes of the situation."

While the number of police officers deployed across the country was not increased, more were sent overnight to quell protests in Grenoble, Lyon and Marseille, according to Mr. Darmanin.

In a statement on Twitter early Sunday, the Interior Ministry said that 719 people were arrested overnight and that 45 police officers had been injured. On Friday night, more than 1,300 were arrested.

In a Twitter post, Mr. Darmanin added that 45,000 police officers had been deployed across the country on Saturday evening, a number similar to the night before.

"A calmer night," he wrote on Twitter, "thanks to the resolute action of the police."

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Maud Bodoukian contributed reporting.