

Processes of political (and civic) engagement and participation in the London area: views from British Bangladeshi and Congolese youth¹

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Introduction

While there is a climate of concern about the political ‘alienation’ of youth, reflected not only by low political interest but also by poor participation in traditional forms of political involvement such as voting (Curtice, 2005; Dalton, 2000; Franklin, 2002), the diversification of modes of political and civic engagement linked to ‘non-conventional’ forms of participation has also been seen as increasingly relevant to the current political behaviour of youth (Forbrig, 2005; Marsh, O’Toole & Jones, 2007; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins & Delli Carpini, 2006).

This conference paper explores the views of minority youth in relation to modes of belonging and processes of political and civic engagement. We are particularly interested in the ways in which minority status (in relation to age, gender, ethnicity and religion) may relate to the understanding and use of ‘traditional’ and new forms of political participation and civic engagement. Drawing on exploratory focus groups organised among young British Bangladeshis and Congolese in London, we wish to question the relationship between understanding/perceptions of citizenship, opportunities and resources to participate, and the potential influence of a range of sources of civic and political information.

¹ Paper presented at the 6th Annual Conference of the Centre for Research on Nationalism, Ethnicity and Multiculturalism (CRONEM), *Living Together - Civic, Political and Cultural Engagement Among Migrants, Minorities and National Populations*, 29th-30th June 2010, University of Surrey, Guildford, UK. Address for correspondence: Dr. Dimitra Pachi, Department of Psychology, University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey GU2 7XH, UK; email: d.pachi@surrey.ac.uk. The research reported in this presentation was supported by a grant received from the European Commission 7th Framework Programme, FP7-SSH-2007-1, Grant Agreement no: 225282, *Processes Influencing Democratic Ownership and Participation (PIDOP)* awarded to the University of Surrey (UK), University of Liège (Belgium), Masaryk University (Czech Republic), University of Jena (Germany), University of Bologna (Italy), University of Porto (Portugal), Örebro University (Sweden), Ankara University (Turkey) and Queen’s University Belfast (UK).

The Bangladeshi and Congolese communities have two different (colonial and postcolonial) migration histories with distinct diasporic, social and religious dynamics. The comparative approach of our wider PIDOP research project will shed some new light on a diversity of experiences of citizenship and civic engagement in the context of multicultural Britain.

The Bangladeshi population in the UK comes predominantly from the district of Sylhet, a rural area in the North-Eastern corner of the country. The history of Bangladeshi migration has been well documented (Adams, 1985 ; Garbin, 2008 ; Wemyss, 2009; Eade et al, 2006) and can be traced back to the colonial presence of the East India Company in Bengal and the circulation of Sylheti *lascars* (seamen) within this early 'globalised' imperial space of trade and economic exploitation (Wemyss, 2009). Today Bangladeshis in Britain are a largely young population (283,063 Bangladeshis live in the UK according the 2001 census). The vast majority lives in the Greater London area, in particular in Tower Hamlets (comprising 22.8% of the UK's Bangladeshi population) but also in Newham, Hackney or in the borough of Camden where we organised our focus groups. Despite evidence of social mobility, British Bangladeshis experience disproportionately high rates of unemployment.

In contrast, the settlement of Congolese in the UK, the largest African francophone groups in the country (yet a 'minority within a minority') is more recent and can be attributed to a range of factors (Garbin and Pambu, 2009). While some Congolese fleeing Mobutu's regime were present in London (considered safer than Brussels or Paris) during the 1980s, the bulk of Congolese migration to the UK occurred from the early 1990s (Styan, 2003). These waves of migration were linked to growing economic and political insecurity and the collapse of the state followed by the overthrowing of Mobutu's regime by Joseph Kabila's armed rebellion. Consequently, many Congolese associated with the Mobutu regime sought refuge abroad (for example in South Africa, Belgium, France or the UK) where, ironically, they joined those who had fled Mobutu's dictatorship a decade earlier. The subsequent 1998 war linked to the Rwandan/Ugandan invasion triggered a new migration of Congolese to Francophone and non-Francophone countries (such as the UK, USA, Canada, Germany or Holland). It should be noted that most of the Congolese who came to Britain during that period applied for asylum, generally for political reasons.

Another wave of migration to the UK was also recently formed by ‘Euro-Congolese’ (coming from France, Belgium, Holland, Spain etc) attracted by what they perceive as better labour market conditions in Britain, with lower levels of discrimination (Garbin and Pambu, 2009). UK Congolese communities can be found in Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow and London where we conducted our focus groups (boroughs of Newham and Camden).

Qualitative data were collected from focus groups conducted among young Bangladeshi and Congolese participants in London. The focus groups participants were recruited through local London youth clubs and via contacts established through past or ongoing CRONEM research projects. In this paper we present preliminary results from eight focus groups which were conducted with British Bangladeshi youth in Camden and Congolese youth in Camden and in East London (Newham and Redbridge). Among both Congolese and Bangladeshi samples, we conducted separate focus groups with two different age groups (16-18 and 20-26 years old). Each focus group had a minimum of 5 participants with a good gender balance.

Summary of preliminary findings

Understanding of citizenship

Most youth linked the notion of citizenship to the idea of ‘legal’ status, which involved a number of rights and duties, such as paying taxes, right of residence, voting, etc. This legal dimension - often connected to the idea of ‘*jus soli*’, i.e. birth in Britain - was considered an important component of nationhood and citizenship by the majority of participants. However, some among the younger Congolese participants also pointed out how, with the evolution of immigration laws, this notion of (legal) citizenship had become gradually restrictive and exclusionary. In other words, they argued that minorities in British were not considered ‘full-rights citizens’ as it was more and more difficult for migrants and their families to gain ‘legal’ British citizenship.

Forms of expression

The focus group participants mentioned a wide range of potential forms of expression connected to political participation and civic engagement. These included Internet-based social networking - mostly through Facebook and Twitter - as well as signing petitions, writing letters/emails, being active in youth centres or organisations, voting and public demonstrating.

Many young participants had taken part in public demonstrations. Several British Bangladeshis (including girls) of our Camden focus groups discussed, for instance, their participation to a demonstration in support of the extension of the Harrow mosque, opposed by right-wing and BNP-oriented groups. Some Congolese mentioned participating in demonstrations about the political situation in the Congo, for instance in front of the Congolese embassy in London or in Belgium. While the Bangladeshi youth stressed the positive dimension of their participation in terms of resistance (to right-wing groups), belonging and 'religious rights' in Britain, some Congolese youth criticised the organisation of political demonstrations seen as mostly benefiting a handful of 'community leaders' and politicians.

Most agreed, however, that while demonstrations were important forms of organisation related to collective modes of belonging, they were also most of the time ineffective in triggering change, in political or civic terms.

More 'radical' forms of expression and 'direct action' (some examples used were occupation of building, chaining oneself to a tree, or writing graffiti) were also perceived by the majority of Bangladeshi and Congolese participants as ineffective. However, while violence was generally considered counter-productive, some Bangladeshi youth stressed the legitimacy of active resistance, for instance against oppressive and discriminatory police practices. Here it should be noted that some discussed at length how they were regularly 'stopped and searched', sometimes several times a day, while 'hanging out' in Camden.

Unlike young British Bangladeshis, most male Congolese participants expressed their interest (and concern) about the political situation in their 'country of origin' - the Democratic Republic of the Congo. However, while several participants were very critical of the current regime led by Joseph Kabila in the Congo, they also rejected the methods used by a group of Congolese activists known as '*les Combattants*' ('the Fighters') who are opposing Kabila's government and who are active in the diaspora

Participation: opportunities and resources

The majority of Bangladeshi and Congolese youth we talked to thought that there should be more opportunities for young people to actively participate in the British society. They stressed how youth have the possibility of (publicly) expressing themselves in a wide range of ways but they also deplored the fact that young people's opinions were being marginalised and not taken seriously. However, several youth (especially among older Congolese participants) argued that young people's lack of participation was due more to passivity than to the absence of real opportunities.

Sources of civic and political information, media and institutions

Not surprisingly, most of the youth stated that they were informed about political and 'societal' issues through the Internet (including social networking sites), the TV, but also at school or university. Some Congolese participants also referred to the influence of hip hop lyrics - though remaining critical of 'gansta rap'.

Negative representations and stereotyping were important issues which emerged from the focus groups conducted among Congolese youth. Indeed, most participants thought that the image of Congo conveyed by the dominant British media has been very negative. For instance youth felt that news and some documentaries shown on mainstream media (BBC, Channel 4) were 'biased', choosing to focus only on violence and conflicts occurring in Eastern Congo. Other TV productions were described as constructing a very stereotypical image of Congolese in the diaspora,

emphasising sensationalist issues of *kindoki* (witchcraft) or the culture of *sapeurs* (ostentatious fashion style among some Congolese musicians). For many, these recent stereotypical representations of Congo and Congolese in the media were adding to pre-existing negative representations of black British and Africans communities in general.

Diasporic media

Both Congolese and Bangladeshi participants mentioned the use of ‘diasporic media’ through the Internet or Satellite Television. However Bangladeshi youth reported watching Bangladeshi Television channels (either broadcast from the homeland or the diaspora) only with their parents. These channels were perceived to hold too ‘narrow’ views and were thus rarely seen as ‘reliable’ sources. Bangladeshi youth appeared to be less critical of Islamic channels and pointed out the influence of particular figures such as like Dr Zakir Naik, a religious scholar appearing regularly on popular Islamic channels and who was perceived by participants as ‘objective’ and ‘scientific’ analyst of current affairs and religious issues.

Some Congolese youth were also very critical of Congolese TV programmes, for instance those broadcast of BEN TV (diasporic African channel), considered to lack ‘professionalism’ and to be too concerned with unimportant ‘community gossips’ (*‘songi-songi’*). Congolese youth also talked positively about their use of Internet, and some mentioned a programme called *‘Lingala Facile’* (with many episodes on YouTube) produced in Kinshasa (capital of the Congo) and providing news about the daily life of Kinshais (inhabitants of Kinshasa).

Interestingly, the traditional popular genres of *‘natok’* (‘drama’ for Bangladeshis) and *‘maboke’* (‘theatre’ for Congolese), were sometimes described as ‘entertaining’ while reflecting on ‘cultural’ and moral values - especially for female participants of our Bangladeshi and Congolese samples.

Religion

Many youth saw religion as an important component of their everyday lives. In their discourses, religion was often connected to a wider set of issues in relation to family, community life, but also marginalisation and Islamophobia (among British Bangladeshi youth).

British Bangladeshi female participants raised the issue of women's rights in relation to what they see as a 'confusion' between 'cultural tradition' and Islamic values and practices. Thus, some respondents deplored the parents' view that according to both religious norms and Bangladeshi cultural 'traditions' women are supposed to stay in the domestic environment and not get involved socially or politically in the public sphere. However, British Bangladeshi female participants often stressed the idea of empowerment of women through religion and emphasised the equality of women and men in Islam both socially and politically.

Although all Congolese participants talked about the positive role of religion in terms of providing moral values, and in terms of constructing a sense of 'virtuous citizenship' (Fumanti, 2010), some also said that they did not consider pastors or religious leaders as influential sources of information and knowledge (even though pastors were seen as playing an important role 'in the community'). Some argued that (first generation) Congolese pastors were too concerned about the situation in the Congo and not interested in the UK context, in other words not willing to 'adapt' to a new environment. They also pointed out that some pastors could not express themselves in English, only using Lingala or French. (While most young British Congolese understand Lingala and sometimes French, they interact mainly in English with each other).

Concluding points

While this preliminary analysis is still early stage we can argue that British Bangladeshi and Congolese youth appear to share some common attitudes, perceptions and behaviours concerning political/civic information and participation in

the UK context. However, individual and collective experiences appear to relate to different ways of constructing cultural, ethnic or religious identities, especially in connection with the homeland or the 'idea of an homeland', with transnational ties and the (postcolonial) history of migration and incorporation in multicultural Britain. Gender did not appear to be a central issue in the discourses, except perhaps in relation to Islam and women's position. More research will be conducted to explore these issues and other connected questions, for instance how voting age may be an important differentiating factor in relation to perceptions of existing opportunities, forms of expression, and the perceived impact of sources of information.

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