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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE POLITICAL INFLUENCE OF ISLAM IN BELGIUM

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ABSTRACT: Belgium is one of the Western European countries in which Muslims have reached more relevance. The immigration process initiated in 1960s brought thousands of people from Turkey and from the Arab World to the major cities of the country. As consequence of their cultural and religious particularities Muslims were progressively claiming their own space in public life. Then, in the analysis of the Muslim political participation in Belgium two stages must be differentiated: The first one dominated by the delegates of the Arabs embassies; and the second one, when the Saudi influence decreased in 1990s giving rise to the emergence of other Islamic groups whose activities were totally involved with the real concerns of Muslims in Belgium. However, after several decades, the impact of the Islamic political activity is still low compared with the social presence of Muslims in the country.

KEYWORDS: Muslims in Europe, Islamist, Belgium, Immigration, Political Islam

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1. Introduction:

The current composition of Belgian society confirms the impact reached by Muslim community in the last decades. According to recent studies, Muslims represent more than 5.8 percent of the population in the whole country (Gutierrez 2010). This percentage is more relevant in the

Region of Brussels where Muslims constitute a quarter of the population (Torrekens 2007). Nevertheless, focusing on the political impact of Muslims in Belgium, it would not be correct to identify its representatives according to their religious beliefs. Although the relevant presence of people whose religion is Islam, several circumstances prevent referring to Muslims as a homogeneous community at political level. Then, among Islamic believers are found many particularities that determine their ideological position, leading voters to opt for one particular political tendency.

Beyond the heterogeneous composition of Muslim community, since the 1960s it is possible to highlight actions carried out by groups acting according to an Islamic ethos whose consequences have affected to the political life in Belgium (Meynen 2009). In this sense, the first evidences of the Muslims' political activities in the country were conducted by the embassy delegates from Saudi Arabia. So, the negotiations established between Saudi representatives and the government remained far from the real claims of the majority of Muslim workers living in Belgium, and they were focused on foreign issues. (Dassetto 1990). The Saudi prominence allowed its leaders to adopt the role of representatives of Islam, giving rise to a situation prolonged until 1990s when the government realized of the actual pluralism of Islam and the necessity of opening the participation to other Islamic groups.

As consequence, the Saudi hegemony was fading, while began to emerge a new sentiment of islamophobia among Belgian society (Leman 2012, 69; Sant'Angelo 2005, 33) that caused the Muslim reaction and the appearance of various Islamic parties aimed to defend the presence of Islam in the political arena. The results obtained by the Islamic political parties in elections are still poor, but have marked the beginning of a new tendency not only in Belgium but in all Europe (Nielsen 2013). Actually, the majority of Muslims have preferred to vote for the traditional secular political parties, reflecting how the religion does not play a key role in the Muslim tendency of vote.

Hence, this paper aims at shedding light on the impact of Muslim religious beliefs in Belgium political life by demonstrating how when studying the Muslim community's political behaviour the religious beliefs play a limited role. For this purpose, the work analyzes the political advocacy of the most significant Muslim entities from the 1960s, and the low relevance reached by Political Islam (Bastenier and Dassetto 1985; Boubekour 2007) in the country. I used for this propose several sources, the majority of them have been taken from the literature on Islam in Belgium, but I have also used the information appeared in newspapers, together with my fieldwork after a period of research in Brussels in 2012 where I visited different Islamic centres and took part of the daily life of Muslims in Belgium.

2. The Saudi influence and the representation of Islam in Belgium

The political activity of Islamic groups in Belgium started in the 1960s, when Muslims students supported by the embassies of Arab countries created a commission to set up a place of meeting for the Islamic community. The result of this initiative was the establishment in 1963 of

the *Centre Islamique et Culturel de Belgique* (Islamic and Cultural Centre of Belgium - CICB), in which was decisive the influence exercised by Saudi representatives (Landman 2002). The initial negotiations of this group with the government were aimed to obtain the assignment of the oriental pavilion located in the Cinquantenaire Park in Brussels (Dassetto 1990-2). In this regard, after a long period of negotiations, Belgian authorities agreed to the request made by the members of this entity, and in 1968, coinciding with the visit of the King of Saudi Arabia to Brussels, Boudewijn, the King of Belgium, conceded the control of this building to the CICB. Once the Islamic Cultural Centre obtained the control over the oriental pavilion, the King Faisal goal was to transform the building in the Great Mosque of Brussels. As result of the Saudi influence, the CICB became the Muslim World League's representative in Belgium, confirming the strategy traced by its leaders to extend the Wahhabi principles to Europe (Laurence and Vaisse 2006).

Meanwhile, the Belgian government saw in the presence of Saudi representatives an excellent opportunity to reinforce its relations with one of the most powerful country in the Persian Gulf (Nielsen 1992). This was the main reason to recognize the CICB as the only representative body of Muslims in Belgium (Leman and Renaerts, 1996). However, the goals of this entity were placed far from the real concerns of the majority of Muslims in Belgium, who in many cases rejected the Wahhabi principles spread from the Great Mosque.

At this time, the migratory phenomenon extended in Western Europe brought to Belgium thousands of unskilled workers. The majority of them came from Morocco and Turkey, two countries where the Wahhabi ideology did not have great relevance; causing that many of these people did not feel identified with the Islamic Centre (Nielsen 1992). In fact, the presence of people from Saudi Arabia among Muslims in Europe is negligible, and the relevance given to Saudi representatives has no sense according to the real composition of Muslims inside the country (Bousetta, Gsir and Jacobs 2007).

Nevertheless, the designation of CICB as representative body of Muslims in Belgium confirms the existence of various political interests, and places the entity far from the social problems. This situation led many people to refuse the hegemony of Saudi Arabia delegates (Dassetto 2011) and to consider this institution unfit to solve the daily conflicts generated as consequence of the increase of Muslim population. However, the interest of Belgian government prevailed over the claims performed by a large part of Muslims, and the CICB continued for long time being the institutional reference of Islam in Belgium.

Taking advantage of this situation, the policymakers tried to improve its relations with authorities of Saudi Arabia and with the leaders of the rest of the Arab countries in order to give a new direction to its foreign policy and strengthen the commercial contacts in North Africa and the Middle East (Dassetto 2011). This strategy prompted Belgian politicians to accelerate their approach to Muslim representatives at local level and to begin the institutionalization process of Islam inside its borders. The aim of the government was to build alliances with the official representatives of the Arab states and to reinforce its international presence (Panafit 1997). Therefore, along with Saudi Arabia representatives, the presence of diplomatic delegates from several Muslim countries in the CICB (Dassetto, 2011) confirms the political essence of this organization and its concern toward international affairs.

The gap between social reality of Muslims and the political representation of Islam was similar in neighbouring countries, where the interference of foreign governments in local issues has been a fact in last decades. In France the Algerian government took the control over the Great Mosque of Paris (Cesari 2002), becoming the benchmark for the French authorities to negotiate matters relating to Islam in France. In Germany, the preponderance of Turks led the government of Ankara to create in 1984 DITIB (Seufert 2004), an umbrella organization that tried to appear as a religious and institutional reference for Muslims in the country. Similarly in Great Britain the Saudis tried to lead the presence of Islam in Europe (Vidino 2010).

Coming back to Belgium, the Islamic and Cultural Centre had a relevant activity in its early years. The rapprochement to Belgian government allowed this entity to be in permanent contact with authorities and to establish the first steps toward the official recognition of Islam. This process of institutionalization found an important mainstay in the content of the Belgian Constitution, guaranteeing the freedom of religion (Torrekens 2005) and eliminating all restrictions to practice Muslim worship. In this sense, in 1971, the government issued the first statement to regulate the situation of Muslims in Belgium as prelude to the law of 19 July 1974 which recognized Islam as religion of the state.

Meanwhile, the King Faisal's decision to finance the renovation of the oriental pavilion confirmed the Saudi hegemony within CICB and the intention of its leaders to extend Wahhabi ideology among Muslims in Belgium (Fadil 2012). Hence, the Saudi Arabia's economic contribution was decisive to the consecration of the project. This circumstance allowed the representatives of Muslim World League to take control over the Islamic and Cultural Centre. The presence of the MWL was effective in 1978 when the Gran Mosque of Brussels initiated its activities and became in the main Islamic worship centre in the city (Kettani 1996). The mosque attracted a relevant sector of the Muslims living in Belgium who came to the temple looking for a place of meeting and prayer. The majority of these people remained far from the ideological Islamic trends, but the delegates of MWL focused their action on attracting them to spread their ideological principles (Landman 2002).

Furthermore, the prominence reached by Saudi representatives reinforced their institutional position as interlocutors of the Muslim community. Consequently, the CICB not only monopolized the main place of prayer, but also the teaching of Islam in schools (Mahi, 2005). As result of the absence of any organization able to represent the interest of all Muslims, the government gave to CICB the role of hegemonic entity. Then, on February 20, 1978 was endorsed the deal (El Battiui and Kanmaz 2004) that granted to the Centre the task of appointing teachers of Islam in public schools and gave the CICB the financial management of the mosques (Bastenier and Dassetto 1985).

Actually, the Wahhabi control over the education of Islam gave rise to an unfair situation that was denounced from several forums. In this regard, those groups of Muslims contraries to the hegemony of the CICB began to express their rejection toward the situation created by the government (Rath, Penninx, Groenendijk and Meyer, 2001). This incipient confrontation led Belgian authorities to observe the real circumstances around Muslim community and to realize the low social support reached by the Islamic Centre. The new scenario prompted rulers to seek a

renewed way to approach Islam, in which different groups and trends could have their own representation. The first initiative was impelled by the Minister Jean Gol in 1985 (Furnemont 1997). He was the responsible for drafting a Royal Decree that set the stage for the creation of a "Conseil supérieur des musulmans de Belgique" (Supreme Council of Muslims of Belgium). However, the good intentions of the government failed to be implemented due to the constraints imposed by the Belgian Constitution regarding religious issues. These restrictions, addressed to preserve the secular state, prevented the approval of the document by the Council of the State (Renaerst and Manço 2000).

The new initiative of the government to approach Islam did not only respond to the demands made by the majority of Muslims, but this change was also motivated by the growing gap emerged between the Belgian authorities and the leaders of the CICB. The proliferation of Wahhabi elements in Belgian schools (Merry 2007) caused a difficult situation for the authorities because of the problems encountered to progress in the dialogue with this Islamic institution. Moreover, the pressure exerted by other Islamic groups forced the Belgian authorities to decide to open the political participation to the associations that for years had expressed their disagreement to the preponderance of the CICB.

The government rapprochement towards Islam was endorsed years later as a result of several riots performed by Muslims in Europe. The impact of these events drove Muslims in Belgium to demand firmly their recognition as part of the European society. These actions started on April 1986 in Brussels with the demonstration that brought to the streets hundreds of Muslims condemning the attacks performed by American forces in Libya (Dassetto 1996). The massive presence of Muslims in these protests enabled Belgian authorities to observe the real dimension of the presence of Islam in Europe. This situation led them to confirm the suitability of further the project started one year before, seeking to give voice to different Islamic groups existing in Belgium (Vandemeulebroucke 1990). The incidents were the turning point for other protests performed by Muslims in Europe, like the Rushdie affair and the issue of the veil in France. These mass demonstrations represented a clear change on the behaviour of Muslims in Europe who started to demand their rights as European citizens.

Similarly to the process experienced in neighbouring countries, the growing presence of Muslims in Belgium provoked the reaction from other sectors of the society which started to express their disagreement and their permanent rejection towards Islam (Zemni 2011). This refusal resulted in confrontations that led to the appearance of a sentiment, known today as islamophobia, whose consequences were reflected in polls (Castaño 2012). In this regard, it should be noted the ascent experienced by the far-right party Vlaams Blok (Flemish Bloc) since the elections of 1991. Its nationalist discourse contrary to the presence of immigrants in Flanders was accepted by those who consider the Muslim presence in Belgium as a menace for the stability of the country. This political party was banned in 2004 because of its racist and xenophobic stance (Van den Wyngaert, 2006). However, its leaders established a new formation under the name of Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest) with the same members, objectives and ideology, only few days after the Ghent court forbade the activities of the party. The results ob-

tained in the elections after the court decision succeeded in improving the percentage of votes obtained so far (Dowing 2011), reaching the 12% of the total votes in 2007.

This conflictive situation caused the reaction of the rest of political forces, which since 1990s started to promote reforms in order to reinforce the institutional position of Muslims in Belgium (Foblets and Overbeeke 2002). With these changes, the policymakers sought to confirm the presence of Muslims as a part of Belgian reality and prevent those radical political groups acting against the Islamic community. Among the amends undertaken by the government it must be emphasized the creation of the Centre for Equal Opportunities and the Fight against Racism on February 1993 (Visscher and Maiscoq 2007). This entity resumed the dialogue with the representatives of Islam in Belgium in order to establish a provisional Executive. Then, on November 7, 1994 the government recognized the interim Executive as the sole interlocutor to address all issues related to Islam.

The new representative body adopted a configuration that tried to reflect the social composition of Islam in Belgium. For this purpose, authorities decided to establish a proportional distribution of the seats based on national origins. This structure gave a clear prominence to Moroccans and Turks while the delegates of Saudi Arabia, who for years had acted as the only reference for the institutions, were placed in a secondary role (Renaerst and Manço 2000). Thanks to this agreement, the majority of Muslims accepted the provisional Executive, at the same time that this new entity was able to end with the interferences of Arab embassies (Renaerst and Manço 2000, 87).

After four years, the good results obtained by the provisional Executive allowed the celebration of free elections within this body to create the definitive Muslim Executive of Belgium. It was established on December 13, 1998 and its official recognition took place five months later. Since this time, the Executive has been the sole representative of Islam, assuming the responsibility of organizing the courses of Muslim religion at public schools, the training of imams, and the management of financial assistance for the mosques. Similarly, the Executive played a leading role as the highest authority in the certification process of halal products (Dassetto 2011), giving to MEB a relevant economic power. From the beginning, the control over halal products increased tensions between its members and the permanent confrontations have hampered the work inside the new institution.

In this context of politicization of Islam, it is significant the low participation of groups close to Political Islam positions, although since the 1960s some evidences confirm the presence of entities linked to the Muslim Brotherhood ideology in Belgium (Maréchal 2010). However, the difficulties encountered by these associations to act together have relegated them to a marginal participation in the process of institutionalization of Islam (Esposito and Voll 2001). In contrast with others countries, the direct activity carried out by the Muslim World League in the country through CICB left the Muslim Brotherhood apart in the process of expanding the conservative principles of Islam in Belgium (Castaño 2013, 165). In neighbouring countries like Germany or France (Dassetto 1998) the MWL provided external funding to the Brotherhood representatives to reinforce their presence in social and political life. In contrast in the case of Belgium, this economical support was granted directly to the CICB, forcing Muslim Brotherhood's followers to

seek other sources of funding. On the other hand, the influence of Milli Görüs has been not very relevant in Belgium (Dassetto 2011), placing political Islam in a disadvantaged position compared to other Islamic trends and the Arab embassies. Nevertheless, in recent years the significance reached by the Islamist Moroccan parties have led the leaders of Justice and Spirituality, and the Justice and Development Party to expand its presence to Belgium, thanks to the preponderance of this nationality among Muslims. Yet, the action performed by these groups has been focused in foreign matters, showing low interest on internal issues of Islam in Belgium (Koutoubas, Vloeberghs and Yanasmayan 2009).

The limited and scattered presence of local political Islam organizations in Belgium contrasts with the relevance obtained by supranational entities positioned in this ideological trend. These groups have decided to establish their headquarters in Brussels looking for their integration into European institutions. Thus, entities like FIOE and FEMYSO have achieved a prominent place, which has led them to become preferred partners for EU authorities (Castaño, 2014). At the same time, these supranational federations have exerted a decisive influence over the local Islamist entities whose activities are focused on improving the situation of Muslims in Belgium.

3. Political participation of Islam in Belgium

The low popular support reached by political Islam has been reflected in polls where Islamic political parties have not obtained relevant impact (Portail Fédéral Belgique 2003). Nonetheless, the increasing influx of people from North Africa, especially from Morocco, and the significant presence of Turkish population in Belgium gave to Muslims a significant role in political arena since the 1990s. Then, in the last twenty five years Muslim representation in Parliament has enlarged its percentages, but contrary to the desire of Islamic political parties, these deputies have been integrated into existing political structures in Belgium. This evidence confirms that religious beliefs do not determine political preferences. So, following the theory stated by Giulia Sandri and Nicolas De Decker; elements such as the socio-professional status or the educational level have wider relevance than religion to explain the political inclination of different Muslim groups in Belgium (Sandri and De Decker 2008). Therefore, the Muslims main support to the Socialist Party responds to the condition of workers and employees of a huge segment of Muslims. In contrast, other sectors decided to give their vote to the Humanist Democratic Centre (CDH) due to its roots in Christian democracy and the weight granted to the spiritual matters, although the principles of this formation are away from the Islamic values. This situation proves that in many cases religion remain in a private sphere and corroborates the low political influence of the main Islamic ideological trends whose influences have remained in religious issues.

At this point it is interesting to compare the political participation of Muslims in Belgium with the situation in countries like France, Great Britain or Germany. In this regard, following the statement of Salima Bouyarden: there is not a specific “Muslim Vote” in Europe, although the attempts carried out by Islamic activism to establish Muslim Lobbies in different countries

(Bouyarden, 2013). Hence, the majority of Muslims in Europe opt for supporting the traditional parties and the impact of Muslims' political parties is not very significant (Didero 2013).

The heterogeneous composition of Muslims in Belgium and the absence of a strong representative organization of Islam have prevented the existence of a high ideological instance to influence the political decisions of the majority of Muslims, and to provide support for any political party (Zibouth 2011). Even though the presence of Islam has caused important changes in the political life, this impact is still low compared with the real social influence reached by Muslims, especially in the region of Brussels (Kovacs 2008). Nonetheless, since the late 1990s emerged in Belgium several small Islamic political parties whose programs were based on Islamist principles. These parties did not hide their wish to implement an Islamist state ruled by Sharia in Belgium. In many senses, the desire showed by these groups has been considered contrary to the European democratic values and has generated a permanent debate around the political legitimating of Islamic parties (Kelek 2012). Actually, this position is compatible with democracy concepts because the leaders of these political parties do not try to impose their Islamic vision of life, but the aim of these formations is to persuade people and convince them of the need to evolve towards an Islamic society. Therefore, once Islamic parties have achieved their goal, the society should understand the benefits of the proposed system based on Islamic values.

This approach raises many questions like: what is the model of state desired by these political parties? Do these political forces want to change completely the democratic structure of the state? Are they seeking to adapt the current concept of democracy in their particular vision of life? In the first case, the ambitions of these groups are absolutely illegal and could lead to break the democratic balance of the country, giving rise to a new concept of the state different from what are considered the traditional European values (Arts and Halman 2004). The second possibility could be considered similar to the situation experienced by the Arab countries in recent years, in which Islamist parties have tried to adapt their positions to the democratic principles. This compromise has reflected many ambiguities due to the contradictions between their public discourse and their ideological principles, as it has already been observed in Egypt (Kingslay and Chulov 2013). Despite of all, nowadays both possibilities are a utopia in Europe; nevertheless, if Muslims maintain the demographic growth registered in the last decades, this possibility might become a challenge for Belgian authorities in the future. Actually, the support to political Islam among Muslims in Europe is not relevant; however, the proliferation of ghettos in Brussels and in other cities in Belgium together with the lack of opportunities for young people in these neighbourhoods might give rise to a situation in which Islamist groups could increase their presence in social and political life.

In fact, the Islamist agenda defended by the Islamic political parties has been able to attract only a small sector of Muslims (Maréchal 2010). Islamic parties have obtained much lower results than they expected, confirming the preference of the large majority of Muslims for the traditional political forces or even for the abstention. To understand this reality, it is necessary to observe the evolution of immigration in Belgium and the position adopted by the first immi-

grants who considered its presence in Europe as temporary, refusing to be involved in the public life.

This situation changed once immigrants were settling in Europe and forgot their initial wish to return to the homelands. Then, the family reunification initiated in 1970s led young Muslims to dilute their links with the countries of origin and to claim their rights as European citizens (El Asri and Maréchal 2013). Nevertheless, family tradition kept cultural influences imported from Muslim countries, allowing the consolidation of a European Islam, which currently is fighting for its recognition. In this sense, social and political participation has increased but not always in the same way. In recent years, Muslims had participated in public life but in each case following their own sentiments. Among the multiple expressions carried out by Muslims, some of them have decided to focus their activities on social matters, while others have chosen to participate in political arena. Sometimes this political implication has been performed in traditional political parties (Zibouh, 2011), but in parallel the Islamic sentiment has led people to establish political groups aimed to preserve the principles of Islam in Europe.

The first Islamic party to appear in the political scene was Noor, founded in 1999 by Redouane Ahrouch. The Ahrouch commitment towards Islamic values consented the rapprochement to the conservative Islamic groups in Belgium, among which were various members identified with the ideological movement of the Muslim Brotherhood (Maréchal, 2008) and other Islamist trends. So, the new party sought to offer an Islamic social and political alternative, far from the proposals made by secular Muslims who at this time began to take some relevance in the political ground. In this sense, the program submitted by Noor defended some Islamic values (Dassetto, 2011), which as has been mentioned above, presented some elements contraries to the Belgian Constitution. This position caused the emergence of a public debate about controversial issues like forced marriage or punishment by death that reached to damage the image of the Islamic party (Kern, 2013). These matters led to various sectors of the Belgian society to reject the presence of Islamic parties. Meanwhile, Noor continued extolling Islamic principles and confirming its ideological position, refusing the European lifestyles and condemning drugs and alcohol consumption. In addition, Noor tried to exalt the value of the family as the primary social nucleus (Koutoubas, Vloeberghs and Yanasmayan, 2009), attempting to offer an Islamic way of life to respond to the injustices caused by the materialistic and immoral European society (Maréchal, 2010).

Despite the social impact achieved by the party before the elections, the final support obtained by Noor at the polls was only one thousand of votes (Portail Fédéral Belgique, 2003). The failure to attract the Muslim vote led the party to abandon the political forefront and to design a new strategy. The renewed approach did not seek attracting voters, but intended to place Muslims far from the traditional Belgian political forces. Following this performance, Noor carried out the campaign: "ballots blank" for municipal and provincial elections in October 2000 (Del Valle, 2002), showing its rejection to secular political groups. However, the defiant stance adopted by the Islamic party reduced the number of followers and caused a progressive weakening that forced the formation to demise in 2007.

The poor results obtained by Noor were not an obstacle for Jean-François Bastin and Basam Ayashi to found a new Islamic party in 2003. The formation was called Parti de la citoyenneté et de la prospérité (Party of Citizenship and Prosperity - PCP). Bastin - better known as Abu Abdullah Abdulaziz Bastin after his conversion to Islam -, tried to take advantage of the controversy created around the Islamic veil (D'Arripe, 2004) in some schools (Borloo and Dorzee, 2003) to appear as the main defender of the rights of Muslims in Belgium. In this regards and following the strategy initiated by Ahrouch, the founders of the PCP sought to adapt their Islamist discourse to the Belgium democratic values. With this moderate position the new political party managed to attract a relevant sector of Muslims who felt identified with the proposals made by the PCP (Maréchal, 2010).

As consequence of the modest results obtained by Noor in the previous elections, the PCP presented a new line of action that tried to avoid addressing the controversial issues like those which had brought discredit to Noor. Basing on this conciliatory discourse, the PCP submitted its candidacy for legislative elections in 2003, where in an act of prudence, they only filed candidates for the constituency of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde. The results confirmed a significant improvement over previous elections. PCP obtained 8.258 votes which accounted for 0.13 percent of total participation (Portail Fédéral Belgique, 2003). Nevertheless, these results were far from the 3 percent expected before the polls.

The PCP had based their hopes on the statement of a moderate speech aimed to achieve the support of the majority of Muslims in Belgium. This wish was complicated because of the diversity in the composition of Islamic community. In turn, the leaders of the party looked for the recognition of Islamic values among Belgian authorities and the rest of the society, defending the integration in the democratic system, and showing its rejection towards the use of violence for political or ideological purposes (Dassetto, 2011).

Despite these encouraging results obtained by the Islamic formation, the percentage of votes achieved was not enough to get representation in the Parliament (Maréchal, 2010). This failure gave rise to an internal dissent causing a clash between Ayashi and Bastin in order to establish the political position for the next elections. The Franco-Syrian cleric (Bloom, 2011) proposed to change the moderate line defended by Bastin and elaborate a new program in which the party showed its commitment towards those controversial matters avoided in first instance. The conflict led Bastin to abandon the party, which after his resign went into serious decline (Hugues, 2004). This weakness was confirmed shortly afterwards in Brussels regional elections where the PCP reached a poor result.

Nevertheless, Bastin did not resign to continue with his political project, and decided to establish the Parti des jeunes musulmans (Muslim Youth Party - PJM). The new formation appeared as competitor of PCP and managed to attract a significant percentage of Islamic votes that allowed the PJM overtake its rival by over 2,000 votes. The electoral result confirmed the relevant role of Bastin and his influence over an important segment of Muslims in Belgium. Meanwhile, the victory of Muslim Youth Party tipped the balance towards moderate positions, leaving the PCP in a delicate situation that would lead to its downfall (Dassetto, 2011).

The composition of this Islamic party founded by Jean-François Bastin Abdulla in 2004 reflects the permanent links with the representatives of political Islam in Belgium (Koksal, 2006). However, the PJM tried to attract the attention of the whole Muslim community through the adoption of a provocative speech that reached an important impact in media. The controversial discourse elaborated by Bastin led him to express in various occasions his desire to move towards the social and political Islamization (Maréchal, 2010). Nevertheless, Bastin was aware of the social environment in which he was living, and his pragmatism made him realize of the impossibility to advance in his proposal at this time. So, as Bastin asserts; "it will be reached when God decides" (Koutoubas, Vloeberghs and Yanasmayan, 2009).

Analyzing the discourse of Bastin, it is noteworthy the presence of many elements that could lead to identify it with the ideological positions of the most relevant Islamist trends like the Muslim Brotherhoods or Milli Görüs. The difference between Bastin and the groups integrated in these international movements is: while Bastin expresses in public his desires to advance in the global Islamization, the majority of the Islamist entities try to use a double speak that hides their real ambitions (Vidino, 2010; Fourest, 2004). Precisely the direct statement of its program and the absence of a double discourse in the PJM could be the reason of its poor electoral results on 2007, where the group of Bastin got 0.07 of the national vote, down from 0.13 obtained by PCP in 2003 (Portail Fédéral, 2007). The electoral defeat did not impede the Islamic political party to achieve a relevant position in media, adopting in some cases the role of representative of Muslims in Belgium.

Besides the aforementioned political parties, it is necessary to highlight the activity carried out by the Arab European League since February 2000. This entity was founded by Dyab Abou Jahjah (Simons, 2003), a Lebanese close to Hezbollah (Maréchal, 2010). Originally, the organization adopted the name Al Rabita ASBL, and its leaders tried to follow a similar strategy to that used by the Muslim Association of Britain in UK, seeking to become the main defender of the Palestinian Cause. The action of this group began with the complaint against Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon which together with the demonstration in Antwerp gave to this organization a high social and political significance (Chu, 2002).

However, the activity carried out by Abou Jahjah was not limited to the Palestinian issue. The Lebanese tried to be present in all matters related to Muslims; Jahja has been especially critical of the controversy emerged around the use of Islamic veil in Belgium, adopting the attitude that had allowed the Union of Islamic Organizations in France (UOIF) to take a significant role in the institutionalization of Islam (Venner, 2005). In this regard, as a measure to increase its presence in the public arena, the Arab European League established in 2003 a political alliance with the Parti du Travail de Belgique (Working Party Belgium – PTB) for the legislative elections, creating the coalition Resist (Koutoubas, Vloeberghs and Yanasmayan, 2009). This political party managed to obtain more than ten thousand of votes, reaching 0.15 percent of the total national electorate. Nonetheless, the popular support obtained by Resist provoked the authorities began to control the actions of Abou Jahjah, whose ties to Hezbollah and other extremist organizations were on the edge of legality (Planchar, 2003). This situation led the government to prepare the

dissolution of this formation in 2007, and the organization was finally settled on October 21, 2010.

Among the positions defended by Islamist political parties in Belgium, it should pay attention to the attitude adopted by the PJM regarding its commitment on Islamization in Europe. This subject had been treated by the ideological leader of the Muslim Brotherhood Yusuf al-Qaradawi (Qaradawi, 1992), who due to the impossibility of evolve towards Islamization in contemporary Europe, called for the creation of a parallel society in which Muslims could live according to Islamic law (Vidino, 2006). Inspired in the statement of Qaradawi, Bastin tried to establish in Belgium the suitable frame to provide Muslims a space to develop their own structures (Maréchal, 2010).

Finally, and after several attempts to situate Islamic parties in political arena, the Islam Party, the last political venture headed by Redouane Ahrouch, has achieved the success in local elections, placing one representative in Molenbeek another in Anderlecht in 2012 (Torrekens, 2012). Islam Party ran candidates in three municipalities and obtained a total support of 5150 votes: 1939 in Anderlecht, 1833 in Brussels-Vile, and 1478 in Molenbeek. Although the new performance of Islam Party, Ahrouch admits continuity in his political project and asserts: "The agenda is still the same, but our approach is different now. I think we have to sensitize people, make them understand the advantages to having Islamic people and Islamic laws. And then it will be completely natural to have Islamic laws and we will become an Islamic state (RTBF, 2012)". Therefore, the Islam Party has achieved 4,1% of the votes in Anderlecht and Molenbeek but in Brussels-Capital the support was not enough to situate a representative in the Council. The leaders of this new Islamic party seek to present themselves as a reference for all Muslims, overcoming the ethnical, national and ideological aspects that for long time have distanced members of the Islamic community in Belgium. In this sense, and following the strategy performed by the PJM, they avoided to include the term Arab in its name, trying to approach to people from Turkish origin committed to Islamist values. However, the majority of the followers of Islamists parties in Belgium come from Morocco and they have remained distanced from the Turkish community so far.

Analyzing the electoral result, the question is: who supports these Islamic political parties? According to Abigail R. Esman, the Islamist parties are not the real threat but people who support them and chose their candidates as representatives in local councils (Esman, 2012). The Islam Party has maintained the line of action of the PJM, appearing as the political party for all Muslims. One of the elements used to attract followers has been the situation of exclusion lived for a big segment of Muslims in Europe, attributed in some cases to the colonial legacy. The current situation in various municipalities of Brussels like Molenbeek and Anderlech favours the spread of a message commitment with the situation of these inhabitants. In this sense it should be emphasized the role adopted by young people who constitute more than a third part of the population. In many instances, the lack of opportunities led them to support radical Islamic groups as way to complaint for their unfair situation (Israeli, 2009). Thus, according to Hind Fraihi: "a separate Muslim state is grown and where Belgium feels sometimes so far away" (Jenkins, 2007). This assertion complement the statement of Bruce Bawer considering that

many Muslims observe Molenbeek not as part of Belgium, but as a space under Islamic law in which the rest of Belgian people is not welcome (Jenkins, 2007). Although the situation is improving in recent years, the access to education and labor market is still low. For this reason the economic situation of this social group causes discrimination (Fadil, 2012).

On the other hand, the descendants of the first immigrants refuse to follow the same path of their parents who had to perform jobs in worse conditions than the rest of the society (Scheiffer, 2011). New generations struggle for the recognition of an Islamic identity inside Belgium. For this purpose, they have displayed greater activism trying to overcome the action initiated by their parents. At present time, they want to intensify the actions performance by religious associations, adding to these entities a relevant political activity. In some cases, this new approach led their members to support the Islamic political parties. Hence, young Belgian Muslims are more involved in political matters, leaving in a secondary position their commitment with the religious associations. However, the experience lived in Molenbeek and Anderlecht cannot be extended to the rest of the cities in Belgium (Israeli, 2009) where, as I stated above, Muslims constitute a heterogeneous community supporting several ideological positions. Therefore, apart from these two municipalities in Brussels, Islamist parties find a low support among Belgian society, who normally observe this kind of political parties as radicals, and consider their discourse far from the reality of contemporary Belgium. Besides, the followers of PJM and Islam Party come from those social sectors that reject Western democracies and feel themselves discriminated by the majority of Belgians (Euroislam.info).

In sum, although several groups have tried to appear in Belgium political scene, their impact is still reduced. The Islamic political program has failed to attract the majority of Muslims who have chosen to confer their votes to the conventional Belgium parties.

4. Conclusions

The demographic studies so far confirm the increase of Muslim population and their active presence in social and political life in Belgium. However, this social impact has not been reflected in political arena where Islamic groups have not obtained the expected results. In this sense, it can be observed how Muslims have reached more relevance in media than in electoral processes in which the Islamic political parties have played a secondary role. This fact confirms how, despite the large numbers of Muslims living in Belgium, only few of them vote according to their religion. Likewise, it is remarkable that Muslim is not synonymous of Islamist, then Islam is understood in different ways and in most of cases the religious beliefs remain in the private sphere. Therefore, religion do not determine the political will of the citizens, and among Muslims there are people who opt by left or right parties, ecologist, nationalists, Islamists and followers of other ideological trends.

Although at present time Islamic parties are not in Parliament, since the '60s it is observed a clear political influence of Islam in Belgium whose effects have had consequences both on foreign policy, as well as in local issues. The activities of Islamic groups allowed improving the ex-

ternal relations of the Belgian government with the Arab countries. On the contrary, the social presence of Muslims helped to the emergence of right wing extremist groups, and the subsequent appearance of Islamic political groups that tried to defend the Muslims positions in social and political life. In addition, some political parties have amended its electoral programs in order to attract Muslims. Hence, beyond the impact reached by Islamic parties in Belgium, the indirect pressures exerted by different Muslims groups have achieved to modify several aspects of the political life in the country, confirming the beginning of a process that could be more intensive in the future.

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