

Racism and Islamophobia in Spanish School Systems

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LIU Global

November 10, 2019

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Introduction

Racism in Spain can be seen in hate crimes, the avoidance of equal rights, and even cyberbullying. These ideologies have strongly impacted Muslim students in primary, secondary, and tertiary school systems throughout Spain. Muslim students are not given equal rights, such as having *halal* food options, freedom to wear Muslim garments, or have Muslim teachers. It is common for Muslim and other minority students to experience hate crimes, physical and cyberbullying, and humiliation from their classmates, teachers, and school officials. After the Cooperation Agreement of 1992 was established between Spain and minority organizations, equal rights for Muslim students were incorporated within the agreement and it was institutionalized. However, the rights for Muslim students remain avoided in several school systems throughout Spain; thus, emphasizing how the government does not consider it to be an important issue. The current government continues to push anti-muslim rhetoric while ignoring the unacceptable treatment of Muslims in Spain. My research question: Is Islamophobia present in primary and secondary Spanish schools? I hope to explore the effects of Islamophobia within primary and secondary Spanish school systems, while using academic and non-academic resources.

Findings

Defining Racism & Islamophobia

Islamophobia continues to grow in Spain, and according to Open Society Foundation (2018), it is defined as the “[I]rrational hostility, fear, or hatred of Islam, Muslims, and Islamic culture, and active discrimination against these groups or individuals within them.” In 2017 and

years after, Islamophobia has been on the rise and its sentiments are expressed through hate crimes such as vandalizing mosques, cyberbullying, and the intentional avoidance of integrating Muslim education in Spanish schools. Due to islamophobic rhetoric being pushed by far-right and racist groups throughout Spain, xenophobia and Islamophobia have been widely encouraged and contagious amongst Spanish communitites, some being: Catalonia, Andalucia, Valencia, and Madrid (Michanie, p.1, 2018). Now, according to Open Society Foundations, in the past two decades, Muslim associated groups have been held responsible for carrying out “high-profiled” terrorist attacks in the U.S. and European countires, including Barcelona (OSF, p.1, 2019). However, there is absolutely no correlation between religion and terrorism, and those who choose to believe there is, have used such “statistics” or “findings” to defend their purposes of discriminating against Muslims. This level of ignorance and idiocracy further enhances Islamophobia and Xenophobia, when it is imperative to eradicate both concepts. In 2017, 546 incidents of Islamophobia were reported in Spain, and the internet continues to play a big role in encouraging it (Michanie, p.1, 2018). Due to the strong presence of Islamophobia in Spain, we can infer that it influences the lack of Islamic religions and cultures being taught in Spanish school systems. In the dark age of Xenophobia and Islamophobia, families and individuals are often times ostracized for their Muslim identities, and in schools, children risk their comfortability due to the absense of Islamic culture.

The Presence of Islamic Culture throughout Spain

Islamic cultures are present throughout Spain and its culture. Positive integrations of Islamic culture include a plethora of Islamic influences in food, art, architecture, and tourism throughout Spain, including one of the most popular dishes: Paella; however, do not

acknowledge the rich Islamic influence in the Spanish culture Besides Islamophobia and Xenophobia, other hurtful Spanish actions include the disregard for Islamic cultural studies in secondary school (Casani, p.1, 2016). This is a major issue, one being that this issue was addressed in the Cooperation Agreement of 1992, that was created to ensure equality and representation for Muslim students. Another crucial importance is that as children shift from primary to secondary education, their opinions, values, and ethics begin to form, and there is not an overflow of positive rhetoric towards Muslims; as a matter of fact, most are considered racist and practically propaganda. Today, most (if none at all) secondary schools have not included *halal* menus, hired more Muslim teachers, or incorporated Islamic cultural teachings. For Muslim families and students, the absence of faith, teachings, or sole acknowledgement is a form of disregarding them, which in turn, is unacceptable and could be seen, if not considered, racist and islamophobic in itself.

The Cooperation Agreement of 1992: Spain

The Cooperation Agreement of 1992 was the first instance where Islamic culture and religion were acknowledged on an institutionalized level (Casani, p.1, 2016). As prepared by the Spanish Ministry of Justice, the actual Spanish Constitution of 1978 was created in order to create a Democratic and Pluralistic state, and ideally that change would ensure the acceptance and respect for other religions, instead of supporting Spanish nationalism (Spanish Ministry of Justice, p. 1, 1992). The Cooperation Agreement of 1992 recognized Islamic cultures and traditions, in turn, several rights were to be acknowledged such as: the option of *halal* meat, having Islamic religion lessons, and even Muslim teachers (EIR, p. 35, 2017). The purpose of the Cooperation Agreement was to provide equality within the realm of religious and cultural

acknowledgement. Although the Cooperation Agreement states that all Muslim students have the right to a Islamic education in public and private education, there are very few, if none at all, Muslim teachers. Generally, Islamic education is offered to students through mosques; however, there are very few mosques in the entire country of Spain. There are three schools in Madrid that offer Islamic education: The Escuela Iraqui, Al- Fateh Arabe, and the Instituto Saudi Umm Al-Qura (Faria, p. 1, 2010). Today, within the Spanish context of equality, Xenophobia and Islamophobia continue to grow; therefore, it can be inferred that due to the absence of representation, inclusivity, and installments of Muslim rights, that in itself is a form of Islamophobia.

Vox's Sentiment about Islamic Inclusion

Hate crimes and discrimination towards Muslim people has become contagious amongst the Spanish population. With the rise of far right political party, Vox, the judgements towards Islam have strengthened. In 2015, the president of Vox, Santiago Abascal, was published in a news article highlighting the “potential dangers” of teaching Islam education to Muslim students in primary schools. Abascal continued with his rant by stating that Islam is a “dangerous privilege,” and this powerful rhetoric coming said by politicians is dangerous for Muslims, especially vulnerable groups such as children. Abascal was responded with statements that he is Xenophobic and Islamophobic. Since then, the Vox party has remained the same in terms of ideologies. In 2018, Vox was campaigning throughout Spain and recently during their speeches in Andalusia, they continuously used the term “Reconquista” (Reconquest) which refers to the historical expulsion of Muslims by Isabel and the “Crusades of Christains towards Muslims,” as stated by Open Democracy (Carnerero, p.1, 2018). According to Carnerero, Santiago Abascal

continued his rhetoric by explaining that there is no Islamophobia in Spain, rather it is the presence of Islamophilia that has become the paradox of fear and danger throughout the country. According to YourDictionary, Islamophilia is the love and admiration of Islam or Islamic civilisations, and in the eyes of Abascal, it is a dangerous factor.

Santiago's word choice implies the idea that Muslim people are not Spanish people; however several Muslim people are and to assume they are not is more than problematic; it is dangerous. During radio interviews and press conference, Santiago highlights his reasonings for withholding rights for Muslim students. In response to him being labeled as "Xenophobic," Santiago spoke about immigration regulation and stated "According to their compatibility with our culture... [so that] we don't have to change our traditions or menus in schools" (Carnerero, p. 1, 2018). Providing *halal* menus in schools is a basic example of the Cooperation Agreement of 1992 (Carnerero, p. 1, 2018). It is disheartening to see that the Spanish Government is not honoring the agreement; instead the rights for Muslim people remain unacknowledged and disregarded.

Along with discrimination, hate crimes towards Muslim people has been on the rise throughout all of Spain. Hate crimes throughout Spain include non-physical ways such as verbal abuse and cyberbullying. In Andalusia, a student, Takwa Rejeb was required to remove her *hijab* in a public high school, and after she refused to do so, she had to miss classes. This issue was brought to the regional education department, and they stated that every school had the right to establish their own rules on student attire. Furthermore, the department stated that if the school was not going to make an exception for Rejeb, then she should transfer schools (Zafra, p.1, 2016). That is a specific example of how the Cooperation Agreement of 1992 was

institutionalized, but not practiced. There are important aspects of this issue not being taken into account: one being, her attire is a part of her identity, secondly, she has the physical right to express herself due to the Cooperation Agreement of 1992. According to the European islamophobia Report 2017, there was an Islamophobic incident at the Autonomous University of Madrid where a student was forbidden to wear her *hijab*, during an exam. There were other students present who also wore *hijabs*, and in solidarity, they continued wearing them. Another case was in Galicia, Spain where a cooking teacher forced a Muslim student to drink alcohol, which is disrespectful and inappropriate (Bayrakli & Hafez, p.41, 2017).

Effects of Islamophobia of Students

These type of violating regulations placed on Muslim students distracts them from excelling in school and maneuvering throughout their lives, specifically academic lives. Although this specific incident did not occur in Spain, Xenophobia and islamophobia are constantly expressed via social media and newspapers; therefore, it's easy for other students in different cities to witness the atrocities happening to members of their community. This is similar to the Black Lives Matter Movement in the United States that protests against police brutality.

If injustice is occurring anywhere in the world, social media is the platform for all people to relate to and address a plethora of global issues or further influence hatred. In the realm of social media, everything spreads like wildfire. According to a Spanish survey done by the National Center of Biotechnology Information (2016), minority students are more likely to be victims of bullying and cyberbullying (Llorent, Ruiz, Zych, p.1). As stated by InfoMigrants, political parties such as Vox and other anti-democratic ones continue to push islamophobic and racist rhetoric through social media and politics, which again spreads quickly and can manipulate

the minds of viewers. According to InfoMigrants, president of Movement Against Intolerance, Esteban Ibarra, arrived in Madrid, Spain to give the “Raxen Report 2018” which addresses incidents of racism, xenophobia, anti-semitism, islamophobia, homophobia, etc. The reports stated that there was a major increase of hate crimes, specifically, annual hate crimes range between 4,000 to 6,000 attacks, but some go unreported (ANSA, p.1, 2019).

Diversity within Education Systems

Children first recognize their differences based off color, class, gender, race, etc. in the midst of educational systems, such as primary school. Creating an environment where students can coexist and appreciate their differences is imperative for equality of representation and opportunity. Often times, racism and Xenophobia amongst children are concepts that are taught to them.

Studies of Immigrant Spaniards

According to the Prevention and Detection of Racism, Xenophobia, etc. support manual by the Spain government, racism and other threats to the integrity of person is brought from outside the school. They did a study observing schoolchildren, and immigrant children said that Spaniards consider themselves superior to them, so they are racist. Once children are about to associate what is racism, they begin to divide just as the rest of the world does. Just as students can be racist, so can teachers. For instance, here was a case of a Moroccan girl, and her teacher would always look to her when speaking about Moroccans, Africans, or Muslims (Anton, p.17, 2007-13). Although this example may not appear as a serious matter, it is racist; nonetheless, it makes students uncomfortable. Racism can also be seen in subtle forms, where one discreetly emphasizes the differences between groups of people in an uncomfortable manner. Although

some Spanish schools allow Muslim studies to embrace the identities, the majority of them do not. According to the Spanish Government's support manual, they recognize that "Schools should integrate all children, irrespective of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic conditions, etc" (Anton, p. 48, 2007-13). The irony behind the previously mentioned statement is immense, because in light of the Cooperation Agreement of 1992, on an institutionalized level, Muslim rights were acknowledged however they were not put into practice. The only way to fully address and dehumanize racism, xenophobia, islamophobia, etc. is to fully commit to its eradication and honor equally motivated agreements between the differences of persons.

Attributions of Racism

There are several attributions of racism that have stemmed from Spanish culture and politics. One of the most alarming attributions is the rise of the far right political party, Vox, as well as the avoidance of equal rights in Spain. On November 10, 2019, Spain had its fourth elections in 4 years, and conservative parties PP (Popular Party) and Vox both received more voters than the last elections in April and May. The current left party, PSOE, lost three voters, and lately there has been fear that the conservative parties will eventually take over. In the past decade, conservative parties have gradually become more popular throughout the world, especially in the United States and Spain. Obviously, being conservative does not equate to racism and other synonymous concepts should as Islamophobia and Xenophobia. Although there has been an institutionalized concept of equal rights for Muslim students, they are not being practice under the current political party, and conservative parties have shown no interest in this

change either. Actually, the Vox party wants to make Catholic education mandatory in public schools while constantly dehumanizing Muslim people.

Conclusion

In relation to education systems in Spain, it is imperative to protect and educate children as they remain a vulnerable community from outside influence. After reviewing my findings, I realized that racism, Xenophobia, and Islamophobia are apparent in Spanish education systems. The best way to provide equal rights for Muslim students is to continue emphasizing its importance to the government and demand them to honor the clauses of the Cooperation Agreement of 1992 as well as Muslim customs. Some schools have included Islamic education and food menus, however, we need to see this action on a national scale.

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