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A Presidential Race Leaves French Muslims Feeling Like Outsiders

By **STEVEN ERLANGER**

MARSEILLE, France — Nassurdine Haidari knows that people like himself — black and Muslim and a former imam — are not a target audience for France’s presidential candidates. But he is outraged nonetheless that voters in the banlieues, the poor, heavily immigrant suburbs of French cities, are not only taken for granted but are also used as symbols to promote racial and religious anxiety.

“The banlieues are the great absence in the campaign,” Mr. Haidari said. “We don’t talk about them. People don’t want to talk about them. They don’t want to engage.”

At 34, French-born of parents from the Comoros Islands off Africa’s east coast, Mr. Haidari is a success — a deputy mayor for youth and sport for the First and Seventh Arrondissements of Marseille and a member of the Socialist Party.

But even his party’s presidential candidate, François Hollande, while campaigning on diversity, equality and new spending on job creation and education, speaks in generalities, Mr. Haidari said. “The entire political class has a problem with Islam,” he said. “It’s disconnected from reality.”

Mr. Hollande proposes a minister for women, Mr. Haidari said, but not for Arabs. “We need a minister for equality, to deal with all the discrimination,” he said.

As for President [Nicolas Sarkozy](#) and the members of the far-right National Front, they are playing the politics of division and scapegoating, Mr. Haidari said. “The issue isn’t the [burqa](#),” the full-face veil, he said. “They do it to raise the pressure. It’s to show people that ‘we can handle the Muslims.’ ”

The language is particularly pointed now, after the [murders in Toulouse](#) of seven people — three Muslim soldiers and four Jews, three of them children — by a French-born Muslim, [Mohammed Merah](#), 23, who claimed inspiration from Al Qaeda. The killings have been

followed by a [series of arrests](#) of suspected Islamic radicals, which Mr. Sarkozy says has no connection with Toulouse or presidential politics.

Even in Marseille, a city renowned for its tolerance, there is a heated issue around an effort to build a large mosque that has been stymied by problems of politics, financing and fierce internal divisions among Muslims. Altogether, they represent about 30 percent of Marseille's 850,000 people but are having more children than the non-Muslim population. Muslims represent 8 percent to 9 percent of France's 63 million people.

"City Hall never wanted a big mosque," Mr. Haidari said. "This is a profoundly Christian city where the National Front is very strong, and to decide to build the largest mosque in France in the second-largest city in France, well, you lose a big part of the vote. People here want an invisible Islam; they prefer small prayer rooms to a grand mosque like a cathedral."

Mr. Sarkozy, of the conservative Union for a Popular Movement, and the National Front — with its focus on [immigration](#), radical Islam and Muslim mores — have pushed French politics to the right.

"There's a rightification of politics in France, even among the left," Mr. Haidari said, with Islam as a hot issue. "It's easier to have a Buddhist temple than a mosque, and why? Because it poses the problem of Islam in France."

As for most Muslims themselves, "they don't care about the mosque — they want work, they want to eat, they want a good education," Mr. Haidari said. The issues, he said, are jobs, discrimination and poor schooling. Muslim children leave school unqualified to work, he added.

"A child born is already condemned to be excluded from society, because he lives in a slum and has not been educated properly," he said. "There is a ghettoization that creates an injustice."

But the constant discussion of Islam has made Muslims feel more of a sense of identity and distance than before. A recent report, "[Banlieue de la République](#)," by Gilles Kepel, an Islam expert at the Institute of Political Science, found an "intensification of Muslim identity" and an increasing disengagement from wider French society.

After the riots of 2005, the plight of the banlieues was featured in the 2007 presidential campaign, with the winner, Mr. Sarkozy, promising a "Marshall Plan" for the suburbs and naming a feminist, Fadela Amara, as a junior minister. Most of those grand plans fell away

with politics and the economic crisis, as did the minority and Muslim ministers whom Mr. Sarkozy named as part of his long-gone “opening” to the left.

Still, Mr. Sarkozy managed to invest more than \$30 billion into what the French call “sensitive urban zones,” and he can point to the absence of new riots since 2005, even if youth unemployment in these areas is now about 45 percent.

In poor northern Marseille, where the new mosque was supposed to be built on the site of the old city slaughterhouse, next to a parochial school called Saint-Louis, poor white residents, many of them retired sailors, are happy that the project appears to have been abandoned. “We need to build something that makes money and creates jobs, not a mosque,” said a patron at the Grand Bar Bernabo. “Five minutes away from here kids are taking drugs.”

Down the street, Muhammad Jamat was working in his uncle’s grocery, Les Épiceries de Provence. Mr. Jamat, 34, who was born in Tunisia and is a driver licensed for heavy trucks and dangerous cargo, said he came here from Italy because Marseille was a port and he was sure there were plenty of trucker jobs.

But he cites case after case of white friends with fewer qualifications getting jobs he was denied, because, he says, of his Muslim name, his darker skin and his address in the 15th Arrondissement, known for its immigrants and for crime.

“People look at the address and say, ‘We don’t hire people from there,’ ” he said. “Or they say they’ll call, they’ll call — and no one calls.” He is angry, discouraged and unhappy to be dependent upon his uncle, he said, but needs to feed his two young children. “Hollande will never change the situation,” he said of the presidential candidate.

Mr. Hollande has made some proposals, especially in a speech here, vowing job creation in areas of high unemployment, with tax breaks for companies that hire in the banlieues; better education, including specialized classes in French; extra police officers; more young doctors; and better housing. As a Socialist, Mr. Haidari said he prefers Mr. Hollande. “But he’s got to get his shirt wet, and not just play on symbols,” he said.

Mr. Haidari went to Chicago in 2010, one of a number of stars from the banlieues chosen by the United States Embassy in Paris to travel to America to learn community organizing. It was one of the best weeks he has ever spent, he said. He has been pushing a five-point program for the banlieues with some American ideas: public money that goes only to companies that act against discrimination, the appointment of minority diplomats to serve

France abroad, and rules to force the police to hand out dated, signed receipts after every identity check, to prevent abuses.

“What I learned in Chicago was to ask only for what you can get,” he said. “You can’t change the world, but you can change something concrete.” In France, he said, “the real problem is discrimination, not the burqa. It’s millions of people without work.”