



OSCE

Meeting on Human Dimension Implementation

4-15 October, Warsaw

BELGIUM

**Political Regulation of Islam
and Foreign Religions**

In the 20th century, Belgium has welcome waves of immigrants fleeing political persecution or looking for job opportunities.

Those immigrants brought with them their culture, their language and their religion. There is now in Belgium a strong Muslim community of about 350,000 people. For many years, the Belgian state has tried to accommodate them and to domesticate them.

In 1998, a so-called Muslim Executive was elected and approved by the state to serve as a mediator with the authorities on management and educational issues. Unfortunately, from the beginning, the government has repeatedly intervened in the

internal affairs of this representative body, including by seeking to influence its composition.

Throughout their first mandate, the Assembly and the Executive have had to work in difficult conditions: continuous interference of the state in their internal matters, eviction of elected candidates by the then Minister of Justice (vivid controversies about the discretionary screening procedure based on the work of the Intelligence Service), mistrust in the first president of the Executive, government's manipulation of some Muslim movements to its own ends, lack of funding. All this led to continuous tensions in the Muslim community and to radicalization of some Muslim movements towards the state's policy.

In 2003, the Assembly filled in, with sovereign power, some positions that had become vacant in its midst and in the Executive. The state refused to recognize those unilateral appointments (9 members out of 16 were set aside by the Minister of Justice on the grounds of so-called "radicalism") and the rift between the various actors widened dramatically. Under constraint, the Assembly and the Executive had to negotiate the appointment of the new members with the government. This compromise fuelled renewed anger in the Muslim community and divided it once more. The mandate of the Executive-bis as it was then called was validated by the government until 31 May 2004.

Last but not least, on July 15, 2004, the House of Representatives adopted a law drafted by Minister of Justice in charge of Religious Affairs Laurette Onkelinx (Socialist, francophone) which obliges Belgium's Muslim community against their will to reelect all the members of its Assembly and its Executive despite their recognition by the state as its official interlocutor. The royal decree provides for the creation of a commission which will organize the elections.

The Muslim community of Belgium complains about the state's discriminatory policy towards them, and rightly so because never would the Belgian state dare treat the other recognized religions in that way.

Another policy of the Belgian state towards immigrants' religions is also questionable. In 1998, the Parliament adopted the Law Regarding the Establishment of an Information and Advice Centre and an Administrative Coordination Agency for the Fight Against Harmful Sectarian Organizations. In this regard, it must be noted that religions from India, Japan, Brazil, Nigeria and other African countries, mainly practiced by immigrants but also by Belgian converts, are suspected of being harmful cults and targeted as such by the state's religious policy although these countries have been hospitable to our Western religions.

The reciprocity principle must not always be beneficial to the West. Globalization and freedom of movement contribute to the heterogeneity of our once homogeneous Western societies, to cultural and religious diversity. States must be tolerant and adapt to this new reality, instead of harassing minority religious groups rooted in other countries and other cultures. The Belgian state which organized the last OSCE Conference on Tolerance and the Fight against Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination in Brussels a few weeks ago should now translate its nice words about tolerance and non-discrimination into concrete actions.