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# The political representation of Muslims in Brussels

*La représentation politique des musulmans à Bruxelles*

*Politieke vertegenwoordiging van moslims in Brussel*

**Fatima Zibouh**

Translator: Jane Corrigan

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Compared with other major European cities, the Brussels-Capital Region has a unique configuration in terms of the political representation of elected representatives descended from diverse ethnocultural groups, and in particular Muslim elected representatives. Nearly one out of five members of the Parliament of the Brussels-Capital Region is of Muslim origin. This is all the more unique given that, for the first time in Brussels and in the entire European Union, one of the seats in the Brussels Parliament is held by a Muslim member who wears a headscarf (Mahinur Ozdemir). The present article is based on documentary work as well as an empirical approach carried out using interviews which were conducted with Brussels MPs and community stakeholders mobilised before the elections as well as an ethnographic observation of the election campaign. Its objective is to understand the explanatory factors regarding this political representation which is quite unusual in Europe, by formulating the hypothesis of the deciding influence of institutional parameters combined with the demographic evolution and community mobilisation of Muslims in Brussels.

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## Introduction

1. Compared with other major European cities, the Brussels-Capital Region has a unique configuration in terms of the political representation of elected representatives descended from diverse ethnocultural groups, and in particular Muslim elected representatives. Nearly one out of five members of the Parliament of the Brussels-Capital Region is of Muslim origin. This is all the more unique given that, for the first time in Brussels and in the entire European Union, one of the seats in the Brussels Parliament is held by a Muslim member who wears a headscarf (Mahinur Ozdemir).
2. This political representation lies within the scope of a city where more than 50% of the inhabitants are foreigners or of foreign origin. It is, however, difficult to have precise figures regarding the number of Muslims in the capital. Nevertheless, their presence is significant enough – especially in certain municipalities of Brussels – to have a relative impact on electoral results.
3. The objective of this article is to understand the explanatory factors regarding this political representation which is quite unusual in Europe, by formulating the hypothesis of the deciding influence of institutional parameters combined with the demographic evolution and community mobilisation of Muslims.
4. Political participation covers a large scope including different modes of individual or collective action. This article is aimed at examining the political participation of Muslims – in the conventional sense<sup>1</sup> (Mayer & Perrineau, 1992) – in the Brussels Region, and more precisely its political representation through the examination of the evolution of the electoral behaviour of Belgian Muslim citizens and elected representatives in the Brussels regional elections. We shall not discuss the political representation of Muslim elected representatives at municipal level (deputy mayors and municipal councillors) in order to focus more on the mandates of regional members.

5. The present article is based on documentary work as well as an empirical approach carried out using interviews which were conducted with Brussels MPs and community stakeholders mobilised before the elections as well as an ethnographic observation of the election campaign, and will examine this question in five parts. Firstly, an evaluation of the literature on the political participation of Muslims in Belgium will be carried out, underlining the gaps in terms of work dedicated to this specific question. Secondly, given the sensitive nature of this subject, we shall explain the process of racialisation of the Muslim identity and define what is meant by the term 'Muslim'. Thirdly, we shall examine the different trends in the voting behaviour of Muslims, in France and in Belgium, via the question of the existence of a possible 'Muslim vote'. Fourthly, we shall study the evolution of the political representation of Muslim elected representatives in the capital by making a quantitative analysis since the creation of the Brussels-Capital Region. Fifthly, we shall present explanatory factors enabling a better understanding of the special character of the political representation of Muslim MPs in the Brussels Region. Finally, we shall conclude with a few recommendations, taking into consideration a prospective dimension of the political participation of Muslims in Brussels.

### 1. Evaluation of the literature on the political participation of Muslims in Belgium

6. The academic literature in the area of the political participation of people of foreign origin in Belgium began in the 1990s. By focusing on the relationship between ethnic group and political authority, Martiniello (1992) was among the first in Belgium to question the role played by political stakeholders in the integration of ethnic communities. Work regarding political participation in Belgium was then carried out by taking into consideration foreign origin in general (Martiniello, 1998; Lambert, 1999; Réa, 2002; Jacobs, Martiniello, Réa, 2002; Jacobs, Boussetta, Réa, Martiniello, Swyngedouw, 2006; Réa, Jacobs, Teney,

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<sup>1</sup> More precisely, this refers to forms of political participation centred on elections (voting, running, making a campaign, etc.). For a more complete definition of political participation, see E. Van Haute, 2009.

Delwit, 2010) or a specific national origin: Italian (Martiniello, 1992), Moroccan (Bousetta, 2001), Turkish (Manço and Manço, 1992), sub-Saharan (Kagné, 2001) and north African (Zibouh, 2010).

7. However, as regards the study of the political participation of Muslims in particular, there are few in-depth analyses of the question, whereas the situation in Belgium is quite unique with respect to this political stake (Zibouh, 2011). These gaps could be explained among others by the Belgian francophone national context, which is strongly influenced by the French republican tradition which tends to erase the ethnocultural differences of people, whereas in Flanders,<sup>2</sup> the Netherlands or English-speaking countries, cultural or religious diversity is recognised more easily (Jacobs and Réa, 2005). In the Netherlands, for some time now they have spoken of the '*Political participation and identities of Muslims in non-Muslim states*' (Shadid and Van Koningsveld, 1996). In the literature from English-speaking countries, it has also been easier to speak of '*Muslims' Place in the American Public Square*' (Bukhari, Nyang, Ahmad, Esposito, 2004) and '*Muslims in Westerns Politics*' (Sinno, 2009). Recently in France, there have been a few surveys regarding the voting behaviour of Muslims (Dargent, 2003; 2010; Brouard, Tiberj, 2005). In Belgium, more specific analyses have been conducted with respect to the cooperation between Muslims and local authorities in a municipality of Brussels (Manço, Kanmaz, 2005), the challenge of the Muslim vote (Sandri, De Decker, 2008) and the role played by the political leadership of Muslims in the management of Islam at local level (Torrekens, 2009).

## 2. The process of racialisation of the Muslim identity

8. Generally speaking, many works exist on various subjects with a direct or indirect link with Islam in Belgium, but Muslims in Belgium have not been the object of quantitative, systematic and in-depth studies. Furthermore, the lack of official data related to religious belonging makes it difficult to establish representative quotas and samples to study the Muslim community in Belgium.

9. In this framework, it is still difficult to speak of the political participation of Muslims. However, in what is said by politicians and in the news as well as in academic literature, we can identify an evolution in the denomination of people with a Moroccan, Turkish or Pakistani background, who are considered more and more as Muslims in the sociological sense of the term. Generally speaking, otherness is no longer defined as Arab, Moroccan or Turkish, but rather according to an assigned Muslim identity. We have thus witnessed a process of racialisation of the term Muslim in current public debates (Fassin & Fassin, 2006), although the perfectly rigorous demonstration of this hypothesis remains to be carried out.

10. Despite this categorisation, one must avoid making improper generalisations when studying certain groups of individuals, by not essentialising the different forms of belonging which have unchanging traits. The Muslim community is far from forming a monolithic group, due to its ethnic, socioeconomic, linguistic and cultural diversity, among others.

11. The ethnographic observations made during the election campaigns show that the claims of Muslims do not necessarily concern common political stances, yet there are certain shared themes such as the fight against discrimination.

12. Even if there is a risk of essentialising people of Muslim ancestry or who are from Muslim countries (Kateb, 2004), we have chosen not to use the definition of the term Muslim in a strictly religious sense only,

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that there are not many studies on the political participation of Muslims in Flanders either. This should certainly be considered in the Belgian historical and political context which has an influence on the difficulties to isolate religious and linguistic variables in censuses and surveys.

but rather to have a more general sociological interpretation. Therefore, the term 'Muslim' will not necessarily be defined as an identity which is exclusively religious. We take up the suggestion by A. H. Sinno (2009), who applies the term Muslim to elected representatives who define themselves as being Muslim by faith, and/or who have at least one parent who is Muslim by faith, and/or who belong to a group which is considered as being traditionally Muslim: *'I do not consider "Muslim" to necessarily indicate a religious identity, but an identity that may have religious, racial, political, or cultural dimensions. (...). I therefore consider a parliamentarian to be Muslim if he or she is Muslim by faith or has at least one parent who is Muslim by faith or belongs to a group that is traditionally Muslim'* (Sinno, 2009: 70). Secularised or agnostic Muslims, or even atheists of Muslim culture,<sup>3</sup> will therefore be included in this categorisation.

### 3. studies of the electoral behaviour of Muslims

13. An analysis of the political participation of candidates and Muslim elected representatives on the political scene without an understanding of the voting behaviour of electors would not allow an in-depth examination of the transformations in the political configuration of representative authorities. This type of approach involves examining the question of the vote conditioned by community belonging and, more precisely, in this case of the 'Muslim vote', which implies that a Muslim elector would vote for a Muslim candidate or that a group of Muslims would urge people to vote for a Muslim or non-Muslim candidate. Here we may detect the danger of social determinism (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, Gaudet, 1944: 27)<sup>4</sup> and the essentialisation of the act of voting which reduces the motivations of electors to the assertion of their religious identity. In reality, ethnicity or religiosity should only be considered as

variables similar to others such as voting according to geographic proximity, age or gender, for example.

#### 3.1. Studies on the electoral behaviour of French Muslims

14. Research on the political behaviour of Muslims is relatively recent and not very well developed in Belgium. In France, however, Muxel (1988) examined the question of the weight of the religious variable among young people from an immigrant background. Jocelyne Cesari (2001) also corroborated the hypothesis of the left-wing vote of French Muslims.

15. One of the first studies which truly examined the voting behaviour of French citizens of Muslim faith via an extensive survey (Dargent 2003) shows that these electors are more interested in politics and vote left wing. Furthermore, based on CEVIPOF data<sup>5</sup> from large samples – representative of registered electors and selected according to quotas – Dargent (2009) shows that during the second round of the French presidential elections in 2007, this firm attachment to the left meant that 95% of Muslims voted for Ségolène Royal compared with 5% for Nicolas Sarkozy.

16. By means of an extensive survey conducted in 2005 based on a large sample which was representative of French people of north African, African and Turkish origin, Brouard and Tiberj (2005) also highlighted the massive left-wing vote of Muslims.

#### 3.2. Studies on the electoral behaviour of Belgian Muslims

17. What is the situation in Belgium and, more specifically, in Brussels? During the 2004 regional elections, CEVIPOF conducted an extensive survey at the exit of polling stations in order to study the voting behaviour of Belgians. This study is quite interesting given the fact that it also examined the vote of electors of Muslim faith (who described themselves as such in the questionnaire) in this framework. The results

<sup>3</sup> 'Those who identified themselves as non-religious Muslims indicated that Islam is more of a cultural identity and that their ethnic minority identity is more important to them than being "Muslim". One councillor described herself as a "cultural Muslim"' (Sinno, 2009: 116).

<sup>4</sup> According to the Columbia school, one of the most determining variables in electoral choice is religious belonging.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.cevipof.com/PEF/2007/PEF2007.htm#p3>

thus showed that 45.7% of the Muslim electorate voted for the Socialist Party, 13.3% for the MR and 7.1% for the CDH (Sandri, De Decker, 2008: 44).

18. The same study was repeated for the 2007 legislative elections. Of the 2,807 people interviewed randomly, 1,319 lived in Brussels. Although the questionnaire was used on the eve of federal elections, the results from the Brussels Region were isolated. Some interesting information may be drawn from this survey. Firstly, the percentage of respondents who declared that they were of Muslim faith is estimated to be 11.8% (compared with 3.8% in Wallonia). Secondly, generally speaking, the firm attachment to the left of citizens of Muslim faith was confirmed. Thus, at the 2007 legislative elections, 42.3% of Muslims residing in Brussels voted for the Socialist Party, 16.7% for the Centre Démocrate Humaniste, 14.7% for the Mouvement Réformateur and 12.2% for Ecolo. The Socialist Party therefore accounts for a large section of the Muslim electorate. Thirdly, according to this survey, whether or not Belgian citizens of Muslim faith practise their religion does not have a strong impact on their voting behaviour. Fourthly, the variable related to religious belonging or practice is not enough to explain the vote of the Muslim electorate. Other determining factors related to an often relatively low socioprofessional status, age (more than half of the Muslims interviewed were under age 34) and level of education (lower than the average of the other groups) may also explain the firm attachment to the left (Sandri, De Decker, 2008).

19. Without isolating the religious variable, the voting intentions at the 2007 federal elections of secondary school students in Brussels from an immigrant background were also studied (Teney, Jacobs, 2009) by establishing the possible electoral particularities of these new electors. A large quantitative survey among 1,283 students, which took their origin into consideration, showed a tendency for young people of Moroccan and Turkish origin to vote for the Socialist Party.

20. Generally speaking, all of these surveys – both French and Belgian – show that the degree of religious practice is not a determining variable in the Muslim vote. However, socioeconomic status plays a more determining role. This being the case, it would be useful to elaborate extensive surveys which would take the strictly religious dimension into

account, by integrating the variable which consists in knowing whether a Muslim elector would vote for a candidate based on his or her Muslim faith.

### 3.3. *Studies on the 'Muslim vote' in particular?*

21. While there is less interest in the question of the Catholic vote in the area of political research, it is interesting to note that the question of the Muslim vote is becoming part of the public debate. However, the observation of certain practices leads one to think that the role played by the particularity of this type of vote is much less than what one might imagine. The observation of certain electoral choices of Muslim citizens tends to be focused on themes related to the fight against discrimination rather than on the Muslim character of candidates.

22. The hypothesis regarding the practice of the preferential vote via the ethnic (or Muslim) vote could explain the high level of political representation of Muslim elected representatives. This explanatory element would not be enough on its own, however, otherwise the results of the successive failures of Muslim religious parties would be paradoxical. The explanatory factors are discussed in the last part of this article, but above all it should be underlined that voting is an individual act influenced by several parameters, and that the electoral weight of the political party of candidates also constitutes an important dimension in the voter's choice.

#### 4. Quantitative approach regarding the evolution of the political representation of Muslims in the brussels region

23. In order to have a general idea of the political representation of Muslim MPs in the Brussels-Capital Region, it is useful to develop a quantitative approach to allow a better understanding of the evolution. Given the lack of official data which take into consideration ethnic, cultural and religious affiliations, Muslim elected representatives are first identified according to an onomastic approach. But a name does not necessarily indicate a belonging to a group or an affiliation of any type, especially since Islam does not concern only Turkish or Moroccan immigrants. Identification is also based on the self-definition of elected representatives as being Muslim or of Muslim culture, as well as on the direct or indirect activation of the reference to Islam in their speeches and their electoral practice. The patronymic approach is therefore combined with a biographical analysis of Brussels regional MPs. Based on this methodology, we obtain the following estimates:

24. This table presents the five elections held at regional level since the creation of the Brussels-Capital Region (BCR). The political parties

Elections	PS	MR	CDH	ECOLO	SPA-SPIRIT	Total	% of the total number of seats
1989	0	0	0	0	0	0	0%
1995	3	0	0	1	0	4	5,3%
1999	4	2	0	2	1	9	12%
2004	13	2	1	0	1	17	19,1%
2009	11	1	3	2	1	19	21,3%

Table 1. Muslim MPs in the Brussels-Capital Region (1989-2009)

presented are those which had at least one Muslim MP during these five terms, who was either French- or Dutch-speaking.

25. Furthermore, only the people who were members of the Brussels Parliament are considered here. Some of them were not elected directly, but ended up having seats as deputies. Others were elected but did not have seats due to the allocation of executive mandates or a change in their parliamentary function involving other plenary assemblies such as the Senate. Furthermore, some of them left their party during the mandate. Beyond these individual considerations, this table presents all of the Muslim MPs who had a seat in the Brussels Parliament, either for a short or a long period of time.

26. Finally, the percentage of the total number of seats in the Parliament of the BCR was calculated on an evolving basis, due to the increase in the number of seats (75 until 1999 and 89 since 2004).

27. Based on these figures, it is interesting to note that the number of Muslim MPs in the Parliament of the BCR rose from 0% in 1989 to 21.3%, i.e. more than one Brussels MP out of five. The 2004 elections represented a true turning point linked to the changes in the electoral code as well as to other factors which we shall discuss below. The more significant presence of this category of elected representatives in the Socialist Party should also be noted. This being the case, it is important to put this number into perspective, considering the general score of the party, which made a true breakthrough in the 2004 elections. Certain personal victories are inevitably related to the size of the parties which these candidates belong to (Bousetta, 1998). Furthermore, certain observers did not hesitate to establish a correlation between this victory and the presence of several candidates of foreign origin on the list of the Socialist Party. Although there was a slight decrease in this tendency within the Socialist Party for the 2009 elections, a greater mix was observed for the electoral lists of the other political parties, which could explain the general increase in the number of Muslim MPs.

28. Based on these data, how can we evaluate the level of representation of Muslim electors? According to Pitkin (1972), political representation must be a 'mirror' of the different groups and movements which

make up society. In this respect, Marques Pereira and Nolasco (2001:28) propose three basic elements to define a 'mirror representation' of the different groups which make up society: firstly, institutional instruments specifying the social composition of the different groups which make up the electorate; secondly, a political will on behalf of the electorate to vote for candidates who are like them; and thirdly, a diversified political representation on the electoral lists. The authors also add a system of proportional representation in order to favour political representation which mirrors society.

29. In this perspective, the body of elected representatives must be representative of the different political and sociological characteristics of the electorate. Martiniello (1998) defines political representation as being '*statistically correct when the percentage of elected representatives of immigrant origin reflects the percentage of the population of foreign origin in the electorate*'. Given the lack of reliable estimates regarding the size of the Muslim community in the Brussels-Capital Region, it is difficult to evaluate its representation. Let us also mention the fact that a proportion of the Muslim community does not have the right to vote.

30. We shall not analyse the different profiles of its members, yet we must mention the significant diversity which exists in this category. In terms of religious practice, this includes everything from regular visits to the mosque to atheism and agnosticism. The profiles are also quite varied in terms of academic capital and careers. The mobilised fields of action are also very different and are far from being representative of a unified group in terms of specific claims.

31. Finally, let us mention that for the first time since the 2004 Brussels regional elections, two socialist elected representatives of Muslim culture were given government positions at regional and community level. Furthermore, these mandates were renewed following the 2009 elections. These were Fadila Laanan, minister for Culture, Audiovisual and Youth of the French-speaking Community (the competence for youth was replaced in 2009 by Health and Equal Opportunities) and Emir Kir, with the function of Brussels State Secretary for Public Cleansing and Monuments and Sites (modified in 2009 to be included within the remit of Public Cleansing and Urbanism) and minister for Social Action, Fam-

ily and Sports (widened in 2009 to become Professional Training, Culture, School Transport and International Relations).

## **5. The explanatory factors of the political representation of Muslims in the Brussels Region**

32. Our quantitative approach shows that the Brussels-Capital Region has a relatively significant political representation of elected representatives from diverse backgrounds compared with the Flemish and Walloon Regions, as well as with other European cities. The combination of a certain number of institutional and demographic parameters as well as common structuring might explain this particularity.

### *5.1. Institutional factors*

33. Firstly, Belgium makes use of a system of proportional representation for voting, which allows a more faithful representation of the different movements which make up the electorate compared with majority voting systems.

34. A second important factor which contributes to the emergence of Muslim elected representatives is related to the weighting by half of the devolutive effect of the top box. The effects of this new measure were able to be measured effectively for the 2000 municipal elections and the 2004 Brussels regional elections, which were marked by a greater representation of elected representatives from diverse backgrounds.

35. Thirdly, the laws on nationality (1984, 1991, 1998 and 2000) have allowed more than 200,000 naturalisations since 1989 (Deboosere et al., 2009) in the Brussels-Capital Region alone. The change of nationality has of course given these people the right to vote.

36. Finally, the factor related to the obligation to vote in Belgium has often been omitted from the explanatory elements which allow an understanding of the special political configuration of people from an immigrant background in Brussels. Several studies show that disadvantaged people are often the ones who do not vote. The fact that voting is obligatory in Belgium allows these people from an immigrant back-



ground – who are often in disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions – to vote, with a financial penalty if they fail to do so.

37. But all of these factors are defined by the federal legislator and apply to the three regions. They therefore do not explain the specific situation in Brussels. It is therefore necessary to question the influence of demographic factors and community structuring.

### 5.2. Demographic factors

38. The Brussels-Capital Region is characterised by quite exceptional diversity and multilingualism, in that more than half of the population are foreign or of foreign origin. Furthermore, certain areas of the capital have a high concentration of Muslim populations, in particular of Moroccan and Turkish origin. This concentration has an impact on the geographical distribution of votes and is therefore a determining element in understanding the political representation of Muslim elected representatives.

39. Generally speaking, we do not have reliable figures regarding the Muslim population in Brussels. The last census in 2001 was only able to take into consideration the nationality of origin of the population, and not religious belonging. Some indications do however provide approximations. Manço and Kanmaz (2004) estimate the Muslim population in the Brussels Region to be 162,000 – i.e. 39% of the total number of Muslims in Belgium – and therefore 16.5% of the total population of Brussels.<sup>6</sup>

40. Furthermore, sociologist Jan Hertogen recently published figures which were much debated. According to him, there are 235,782 Muslims living in Brussels, i.e. close to 22%<sup>7</sup> of the population of Brussels. The debate which followed this announcement illustrates the challenge of clear scientific and methodological criteria.

41. When dealing with such a sensitive subject, a rigorous statistical policy should be developed by means of a major survey, with a large enough and random representative sample. But generally speaking, the

abovementioned figures allow us to assume a more or less balanced political representation in the Parliament of the Brussels-Capital Region, in terms of the number of Muslim electors.

### 5.3. Factors related to community mobilisation

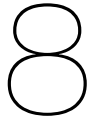
42. In addition to institutional and demographic factors, one must also question the role played by the collective action of this category of the electorate in political participation, in particular through community mobilisation which is particularly concentrated in the Brussels Region (Jacobs, Phalet & Swyngedouw, 2004; Lambert 2004).

43. As an example, Torrekens (2007) refined the analysis of this demographic concentration at a more local level, by examining the presence of Muslim associations in certain neighbourhoods of Brussels. She showed that two thirds of Muslim and cultural associations are concentrated in Schaerbeek, Molenbeek and Brussels City.

44. Furthermore, studies (Jacobs, Phalet and Swyngedouw 2006) show that there are differences in the community involvement of people of Moroccan and Turkish origin. It appears to be more pronounced and better structured among the latter. This could be one of the reasons for the favourable results of candidates of Turkish origin. Let us mention that during the last elections, the second highest score of the Socialist Party was obtained by a candidate of Turkish origin, Emir Kir, just after that of the Minister-President of the Brussels-Capital Region, Charles Picqué. This clearly indicates the importance of taking into account the diversity within this category of the population when referring to the community or political mobilisation of the Muslim community. The absence of leadership and strong community structures in the Muslim community therefore explains why collective action and, more precisely, the influence of the structuring community of the latter are not the major factors in the political participation of Muslim elected representatives in the Brussels Region.

<sup>6</sup> Despite the methodological note explaining the approach, these figures may however be criticised given the lack of precise data provided by the authors.

<sup>7</sup> The detailed figures may be obtained online on Jan Hertogen's website at <http://www.npdata.be/> (consulted on 13 December 2010).



#### 5.4. Effect of the interaction between explanatory factors

45. What could explain the particularity of the Brussels-Capital Region given that it is not the only city which experiences significant population growth and relatively significant community mobilisation of immigrant populations, and that the institutional mechanisms apply throughout the country? The answer lies mainly in the interaction between these different explanatory factors, which, together, result in this unique political representation of Muslims in the Belgian capital. But the particularity of Brussels lies above all in the structures of political opportunities and in its formal institutional dimension (Giugni, 1995), or more precisely the 'structures of opportunities for political participation' (Martiniello, 1997) mobilised by people from an immigrant background. In this respect, Maxwell (2010) illustrates the importance of the influence of national or regional institutions on political participation. As institutions become more open to the political mobilisation of people from an immigrant background, political participation gets stronger. He thus explains that in the French case, the Republican framework discourages the political mobilisation of minorities. In this context, minorities have less opportunities to build networks which may mobilise participation despite socio-economic disadvantages. The characteristics of the political and social context in Brussels which we have discussed, together with community mobilisation, allow a better understanding of how all of these factors – which are explained above – determine the access of certain groups to formal and state levels of authority. Furthermore, it is important to underline the role played by political parties<sup>8</sup> with respect to a relatively new electorate, which consists in including Muslim candidates on the electoral lists in order to win the most votes, in particular in certain neighbourhoods of Brussels.

#### Conclusion

46. This article has provided a review of the evolution of the political participation of Muslims in the Parliament of the Brussels-Capital Region. We have tried to understand the voting behaviour of Muslim citizens by examining a series of studies which have taken into consideration the different variables which explain the vote by this category of the population. We notice that the results are not always sufficient given that they are centred on one or more particular dimensions of voting behaviour. The challenge would be to develop studies which would make use of several variables: ethnic origin, choice based on conviction or philosophy, gender, age, level of education, socioeconomic status and place of residence.

47. In this perspective, we have noticed that quantitative analyses have become crucial in order to obtain reliable data on the Muslim community of Brussels and Belgium. This is all the more true as the same group asks the most questions about interculturality in the public debate. These data would also allow the prejudices which exist with respect to this minority to be overcome. These tools are also absolutely essential in order to allow a better evaluation of public policies.

48. As regards the political will of Muslim electors, we must differentiate between the mobilisations and community structures of people of Moroccan origin and those of Turkish origin. Our ethnographic observations show that among people of Moroccan origin, there is a lack of true community organisation which would have enough influence to define voting directives. Among those of Turkish origin, however, these modes of community action are relatively efficient, in particular as regards supporting a candidate. Nevertheless, there is no trace of any memorandums with claims specific to the Muslim community. Despite the lack of a strong community structuring of Muslims (with differences according to origin), the political representation of Muslims is ensured thanks to other institutional mechanisms as well as the diversity of the profiles of candidates on the electoral lists of certain political parties.

<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note that certain leading lights of the liberal party (MR) attribute the electoral failure of the 2009 and 2010 elections to the fact that candidates from diverse backgrounds were not taken into consideration enough. See the interview by Olivier Maingain: '*Le MR doit s'ouvrir aux candidats issus de l'immigration*', *La Dernière Heure*, 15 June 2010.

49. Generally speaking, in this article we have tried to illustrate the importance of political opportunity structures favouring the political participation of Muslims. In Belgium and in Brussels in particular, these political opportunity structures are more favourable to the emergence of Muslim political representatives, and generally speaking, to those from diverse backgrounds. Nevertheless, the institutional factors would not have exclusive effects if we did not consider the demographic realities as well as the community density of the Brussels Region. With equal mobilisation, institutional political contexts increase or reduce the chances of success of certain collective mobilisations. Nevertheless, these political opportunity structures in Belgium should not underestimate the role played by the political stakeholders as well as by the electorate. On the contrary, the interaction between institutional and demographic factors, urban realities as well as social stakeholders and, to a lesser extent, the mobilisation of community networks can explain the political representation of elected representatives from diverse backgrounds in the Brussels Region.

50. In this perspective of 'mirror representation', it is useful to bear in mind that more than a quarter of the population of Brussels (26%) does not have Belgian nationality or the right to vote, given that only nationals are allowed to vote in the Brussels regional elections. Even if the question is currently not on the political agenda, it would be useful to revive the debate on extending the right to vote to include the regional elections, in order to ensure the representation of a significant part of the population of Brussels.

51. A prospective approach to this political participation which takes into consideration the demographic evolution of the population of Brussels allows us to assume that the political representation of Muslim elected representatives will become a bigger stake, even if it maintains a certain stability. We must bear in mind that the most disadvantaged municipalities in the capital have the highest growth rates (Deboosere, Willaert, 2005), in particular Molenbeek and Saint-Josse, and that 25% of youths in Brussels are of Muslim origin (Bousetta, Maréchal 2003), and will therefore represent an electorate which cannot be ignored for the next legislatures.

52. In the years to come, however, the true debate will not be about the number of Muslim MPs in the Parliament of the Brussels-Capital Region, but rather about examining how the latter will uphold the interests of the entire population of Brussels, while using their difference to the benefit of neighbourhoods or categories of the population which are disadvantaged and strongly affected by discrimination. The political participation of Muslims is far from being a threat to social cohesion, and instead reinforces democratic principles by allowing individuals who have been kept in the background of political institutions for so long to be true stakeholders in political decision making.

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