

OMAR MOHAMMAD-AMEEN AHMAD HAZAYMEH

MUSLIM REPRESENTATION IN EUROPEAN PARLIAMENTS IN THE
XXIST CENTURY: SOCIETAL INTEGRATION OR POLITICAL
NECESSITY?

Omar Mohammad-Ameen Ahmad Hazaymeh

Al-Balqa Applied University, Al-Huson University College, Jordan.

Email: omar1972@bau.edu.jo

Abstract: This research examines Muslim parliamentary representation in Europe, both as a means of integration and a necessity for ensuring rights. Political participation strengthens citizenship and helps change stereotypes about Muslims, but it is also necessary to protect their rights in light of the rise of far-right rhetoric. Despite the progress made, many challenges remain that hinder Muslims from reaching decision-making positions, such as populism, symbolic representation, and internal divisions. To address these challenges, the research emphasizes the importance of building informed Muslim leaders, adopting comprehensive political platforms, and forming alliances to enhance political influence. The research concludes that the future of Muslim political representation depends on overcoming obstacles through genuine integration, building support networks, and reshaping public discourse to ensure effective political participation that serves the interests of Muslims and society as a whole.

Key words: Political representation, Muslims in Europe, social integration, political rights, European parliaments, far-right discourse, citizenship, political parties, discrimination, political influence.

1. Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed fundamental shifts in the demographic structure of European societies, most notably the increasing numbers of Muslims as a result of immigration and natural reproduction, making them an integral part of the social, economic, and political fabric of these countries. With this numerical increase, fundamental questions have emerged about the position of Muslims in the European political landscape, the extent of their integration into legislative and executive institutions, and the extent of their influence on decision-making. It has become imperative to ask: Is the representation of Muslims in European parliaments a manifestation of their integration into host societies, or is it an urgent necessity to guarantee their political and social rights, given the rise of populist and far-right trends in some countries?

The issue of political representation of Muslims in European parliaments is not merely a theoretical issue related to political participation. Rather, it touches upon the core of the relationship between the state and its citizens of different origins, revealing the extent to which Western democracies are able to accommodate cultural and religious diversity. In many European countries, democracy is viewed as a system based on equal rights and duties, without discrimination based on race, religion, or cultural background. However, the reality indicates that Muslims in Europe face significant challenges in this context, ranging from political and social marginalization, difficulty accessing leadership positions, and limited influence in the decision-making process (Geurts & Spierings, 2025).

Nevertheless, Muslims have made remarkable progress in the European political landscape in recent decades, with a number of Muslim figures reaching national parliaments and even ministerial positions in some countries, such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the Netherlands (Oskooii & Dana, 2018; Svens, 2017). However, the question remains about the effectiveness of this representation: Is it merely symbolic, reflecting a formal pluralism with no real impact, or is it capable of realizing the interests of Muslims and protecting their rights in the face of discrimination and the challenges they face?

Discussing this issue requires addressing Muslim representation in European parliaments, in terms of its historical development, the extent to which it reflects the promotion of genuine Muslim integration into their European societies, and the challenges they face in this area. It also requires examining the roles Muslim MPs can play in advocating for Muslim causes as active citizens, rather than as a marginalized minority, and in promoting the values of pluralism and democracy. It also highlights the obstacles preventing more effective political representation for

Muslims in light of the rise of populist movements targeting minorities, including Muslims.

Ultimately, this research aims not only to provide an analytical picture of the reality of Muslim political representation in European parliaments, but also to offer a critical perspective on the effectiveness of this representation and the extent to which it contributes to strengthening the principles of democracy and pluralism, ensuring the rights of all citizens regardless of their religious and cultural backgrounds.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Historical Context of Muslim Representation in European Parliaments

Muslim representation in European parliaments is a relatively recent phenomenon, rooted in the history of mass immigration to Europe in the 20th century. However, it has only gained political momentum in recent decades. Although Muslim communities have existed in some European countries for centuries, their political representation only became apparent after Muslim communities became an integral part of the social and economic structure of these countries (Aktürk & Katliarou, 2021; Hughes, 2016). Muslim representation in European parliaments has gone through several stages, influenced by the historical, political, and economic transformations that Europe has witnessed, as well as by the relationship between European societies and their religious minorities (Lestari et al., 2024).

Before discussing modern Muslim political representation, it is important to note the presence of ancient Muslim communities in Europe, such as the Muslims of Andalusia in Spain, the Tatars in Eastern Europe and Russia, and the Bosniaks in the Balkans (Górak-Sosnowska, 2011). Although these communities enjoyed periods of political and cultural prosperity at certain historical points, they were also subject to persecution and marginalization, particularly after the fall of Andalusia in the fifteenth century and the subsequent wars in the Balkans (Lozanova, 1993). However, these groups were not part of the modern European parliamentary political landscape, as their political participation remained limited or subject to undemocratic regimes (Kopanski, 2009).

After World War II, large waves of immigration from Islamic countries to Europe began, particularly from the colonies of Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Belgium. The need for labor to rebuild European economies after the war brought hundreds of thousands of Muslim immigrants, who settled in major cities and began to form stable communities (Hansen, 2003). However, this wave of immigration was not accompanied by political representation for Muslims, as they were viewed as mere

migrant workers rather than as citizens participating in political life (Lucassen, 2019).

At this stage, Muslim immigrants did not enjoy equal political rights with European citizens, as they faced restrictions on citizenship and electoral rights, preventing them from entering national parliaments (Fekete, 2008). However, over time, Muslims began to acquire European citizenship, especially second- and third-generation immigrants born and raised in Europe, and became eligible to participate in political life (Ghata, 2023).

In the 1970s and 1980s, Muslim communities in Europe began to recognize the importance of political representation as a means of claiming rights and combating discrimination (Koenig, 2007). With the emergence of human rights and minority advocacy movements in Europe, Muslims began demanding their civil and political rights, taking advantage of the democratic transformations witnessed in many European countries (Cesari, 2004).

During this period, some Muslim politicians began to appear on the political scene, but to a very limited extent, often supporting leftist and liberal parties that were more open to immigrant and minority issues. Although the number of Muslim representatives in European parliaments was very small, this period marked the beginning of Muslim integration into European political life.

The 1990s witnessed a significant increase in the number of Muslim representatives in European parliaments, particularly in countries such as Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Germany (Warner & Wenner, 2006). Several factors contributed to this development, including demographic changes. As the Muslim population in Europe grew, they gained electoral weight in some regions, prompting political parties to focus on winning their votes (Klausen & Sinno, 2009). In addition, legal amendments, as some countries adopted laws allowing greater participation of minorities in the political process, such as easier granting of citizenship, helped increase the number of Muslim voters. The rise of identity and citizenship issues also made Muslims realize the need for political representation that defends their rights and reflects their aspirations.

In Britain, Muslims of Pakistani and Indian origins were able to win parliamentary seats through the Labour Party (Peace, 2015; Lewis, 2002), while in France, several Muslim MPs were elected thanks to their involvement in socialist parties (Kuru, 2008; Bouyarden & Nielsen, 2013). In the Netherlands and Belgium, Muslims have begun to form their own political blocs, although they remain weak compared to traditional parties (De Raedt, 2004; Ruiter, 2023).

With the onset of the twenty-first century, the number of Muslim MPs in European parliaments has increased significantly. However, they have faced new challenges, most notably the rise of right-wing populist movements promoting anti-Muslim rhetoric and the escalation of laws targeting Islamic practices such as the hijab and niqab. In some countries,

this has made it more difficult for Muslims to run for political office, with some Muslim candidates subjected to media smear campaigns due to their religious backgrounds.

However, some Muslims have achieved significant successes, with several being elected to ministerial positions, such as the appointment of Sadiq Khan as the first Muslim mayor of London in 2016, and the election of Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar to the US Congress, which has encouraged European parties to attract more Muslim candidates (Kostić, 2024).

Today, Muslims have a presence in most European parliaments, but it remains limited compared to their overall population. In some countries, such as Britain, France, and Germany, there are dozens of Muslim MPs, but in others, such as Italy and Denmark, representation remains weak due to cultural and political barriers. Despite this, the political role of Muslims in Europe is growing stronger, especially with the growing awareness among new generations of the importance of political participation, and with the emergence of initiatives calling for Muslim political empowerment and increased participation in mainstream parties. As these trends continue, we may see broader Muslim representation in the European political landscape in the future, which will contribute to strengthening the values of pluralism and democracy on the continent.

The historical context of Muslim representation in European parliaments shows a long journey from marginalization to participation, as Muslims have transitioned from being politically unrepresented immigrants to becoming MPs and political leaders in some European countries. However, challenges remain. Achieving more equitable and effective representation of Muslims in Europe requires overcoming political and social obstacles and enhancing Muslim communities' awareness of the importance of integration into the democratic process.

3. Political Representation of Muslims: Between Integration and Necessity

3.1 Parliamentary Representation as a Means of Social Integration

Political representation of Muslims in European parliaments is an important indicator of their integration into the societies in which they live. Political participation is not only a democratic right; it is also a means of embodying national belonging and promoting effective participation in public life. Over recent decades, Muslims in many European countries have begun to enter the political arena, whether through traditional parties or by forming political parties and blocs that represent their interests and express their aspirations (Lage & Locchi, 2020; Nielsen, 2013). This presence has contributed to reshaping the public debate about the

place of Muslims in society and opened new horizons for dialogue and interaction between different groups.

The integration of Muslims into European politics faces various challenges, some of which are related to internal factors related to Muslim communities themselves, while others are due to external factors related to host societies and their policies toward minorities (Statham & Tillie, 2018). On the one hand, some Muslim communities in Europe still suffer from internal generational divisions. First-generation immigrants adopt a more conservative approach to politics, while second- and third-generation immigrants see political participation as essential to ensuring their rights and strengthening their presence in society. On the other hand, some European political parties still view Muslims as a marginal group or potential voters, without giving them an active role in policymaking and decision-making (Norris & Inglehart, 2012).

However, the participation of Muslims in European parliaments has helped break many of the stereotypes that had previously prevailed about them. Citizens have come to view Muslims not only as an immigrant community, but as an integral part of society, capable of assuming political responsibilities and contributing to the future of the countries in which they live. Representation of Muslims in legislative institutions also helps highlight their issues and find solutions to the problems they face, such as discrimination in the labor market, the rights of Muslim women, religious freedom, and education.

On the other hand, the presence of Muslim representatives in parliaments has helped open channels of dialogue between Muslim communities and European governments, leading to improved relations between the two parties and promoting values of tolerance and multiculturalism. These representatives also serve as bridges between their communities and government officials, helping to amplify the voice of Muslims and demand their rights within legal and constitutional frameworks.

However, it is impossible to discuss the political representation of Muslims without mentioning the obstacles they face, including the rise of far-right rhetoric, which seeks to portray Muslims as a threat to national identity and European values (Froio, 2018). This rhetoric has created significant challenges for Muslim politicians, who are subjected to media smear campaigns and attempts to exclude them from the political scene. However, political will and a growing awareness of the importance of political participation are encouraging more Muslims to participate in elections and compete for parliamentary seats.

In short, it can be argued that Muslim political representation in Europe is not merely a means to advance private interests, but rather a step toward achieving genuine integration into society, based on equal citizenship and effective participation in decision-making. By continuing

this trend, Muslims can contribute to promoting the values of democracy and human rights, and building more inclusive and diverse societies.

3.2 Parliamentary Representation as a Necessity to Guarantee Rights

While some view Muslim political representation in European parliaments as a means of social integration, another viewpoint argues that such representation is not merely an option, but rather a necessity to guarantee the rights and protect the gains Muslims have achieved after decades of social and political struggle (Cinalli, 2017). In light of the rise of far-right movements in Europe and the increase in discriminatory policies against Muslims, the presence of political representatives who represent their issues and protect their rights has become imperative to maintain pluralism and balance in European societies.

Muslims in Europe face numerous legal and social challenges related to their religious and civil rights, such as the freedom to wear the hijab in schools and workplaces, the right to build mosques and Islamic centers, and their rights to education and employment without discrimination (Rohe, 2020). Through parliamentary representation, Muslims can defend these rights and counter attempts to restrict them, whether by enacting legislation that protects religious freedoms or by exerting political pressure to reject laws that directly or indirectly target them.

A prominent example of this is the ongoing debate over laws banning the hijab and niqab in some European countries, such as France and Belgium (Zempi, 2019). Without Muslim representatives in parliament, it has been difficult to challenge these laws or even amend them to respect Muslim rights. Similarly, the debate over the inclusion of Islamic education in school curricula or the allocation of spaces for religious practice in public spaces cannot be effectively conducted without politicians capable of representing the Muslim perspective on these issues.

Furthermore, the rise of Islamophobic discourse in some European media and politics makes it essential to have Muslim representatives defend their image and counter narratives that link Islam to terrorism and extremism (Sheehi, 2010; Jackson, 2017). The absence of a Muslim voice in parliaments leaves room for right-wing parties to shape public opinion based on distorted and inaccurate perceptions of Muslims, which can lead to discriminatory policies and arbitrary measures against them.

The role of Muslim representatives is not limited to defending religious rights alone; it extends to various social and economic issues that concern Muslims and other citizens alike. Through their presence in parliaments, Muslim politicians can work to improve the conditions of marginalized groups, combat discrimination in the labor market, and ensure equal opportunities in education and health. They can also contribute to

the development of policies that ensure a more just and equitable integration of Muslims into society, without compromising their religious and cultural identity.

However, this representation faces significant challenges, including attempts to exclude Muslim politicians from high positions, questioning their loyalty to their European countries, or accusing them of working to “Islamize” the societies in which they live. Some parties also place obstacles to the candidacy of Muslims on their lists, fearing the loss of votes from anti-immigrant voters. However, insisting on political participation and forming alliances with democratic forces and human rights organizations can help Muslims overcome these obstacles and ensure more effective representation in the future.

In conclusion, it can be argued that the political representation of Muslims in European parliaments is no longer merely a symbolic matter, but rather a necessity for ensuring rights and equality, given a political environment that sometimes tends toward restricting religious freedoms and discriminating against minorities. By strengthening their political presence, Muslims in Europe can not only defend their rights but also contribute to building more just and inclusive societies that respect the values of democracy and cultural and religious diversity.

4. Challenges Facing Muslim Political Representation in Europe

Although recent decades have witnessed significant progress in the level of Muslim political participation in Europe, with an increasing number of Muslim politicians reaching parliaments, local councils, and even government positions, many challenges remain that hinder effective Muslim political representation, rendering their participation unstable or limited in impact. These challenges include political, social, and cultural factors that intertwine to create a complex environment for Muslims seeking to integrate into the European political landscape. Prominent among these challenges are the rise of populist and far-right rhetoric, symbolic representation that does not give Muslims real influence, and internal divisions that hinder the formation of a unified political voice.

4.1 The Rise of Populism and the Far Right: Restricting Muslim Political Participation

One of the most prominent challenges facing Muslims in Europe is the rise of populist and far-right rhetoric, which seeks to portray Muslims as “foreigners” or a threat to European values and culture. Many far-right parties have exploited issues of immigration and terrorism to demonize Muslims and portray them as an imminent threat to security and stability (Boyer, 2019; Abbas, 2019). Through this rhetoric, the far-right seeks to

undermine any attempts to empower Muslims politically by creating a hostile environment for them, making it difficult for them to run for elections or gain sufficient popular support.

In many cases, the far-right resorts to intensive media campaigns that directly target Muslim politicians, accusing them of loyalty to foreign states or parties, or of attempting to impose an “Islamic agenda” on European societies. These campaigns contribute to the growth of Islamophobia and make Muslims more reluctant to engage in politics for fear of threats or harassment. Some European countries have also witnessed legislative attempts aimed at limiting the participation of Muslims in public life, such as imposing restrictions on religious symbols in government institutions or imposing prohibitive conditions on parties or candidates that focus on minority issues (Yilmaz, 2016).

In addition, right-wing parties not only create a hostile environment against Muslims, but also seek to pressure traditional parties to prevent them from supporting or nominating Muslims for influential political positions. This reduces opportunities for Muslims to engage in politics, and their representation in legislative institutions is weak or limited to specific figures promoted as mere symbolic figures.

4.2 Symbolic Representation: Limited Role and Conditional Influence

Despite the increasing number of Muslim politicians in Europe, many of them lack real influence in decision-making. In some cases, traditional parties resort to nominating Muslims on their lists solely to win the votes of Muslim communities, without offering them leadership roles or enabling them to truly influence public policy (Silver, 2019). This is known as “token representation,” whereby the presence of Muslims in parliament or local councils becomes merely a formality designed to present the parties as open and multicultural, without truly empowering them.

This phenomenon is most evident in some liberal or left-wing parties, which claim to support diversity and inclusiveness, but in reality, do not give Muslim politicians the opportunity to advance in party positions or participate in important decision-making (Haddad & Golson, 2007). Indeed, some elected Muslims find themselves forced to adopt policies that do not necessarily reflect the aspirations of Muslim communities, in order to ensure their continued presence in parties and avoid political or media pressure.

This symbolic representation can do more harm than good, as it creates the false impression that Muslims are politically represented, when in reality, they lack the capacity to effectively advocate for their causes. It also frustrates Muslim voters who feel their votes are being used for partisan gain, without any real change being achieved on the ground.

To address this challenge, Muslims in Europe need to work to build strong political leaders within parties capable of enforcing their political agendas and contributing to decision-making. Pressuring parties to grant Muslims leadership positions and supporting candidates who genuinely represent the concerns of Muslim communities can help overcome the problem of symbolic representation.

4.3 Internal Divisions: Weakness of a Unified Political Voice

Muslim communities in Europe face another challenge: internal divisions. Their diverse ethnic and sectarian affiliations make it difficult to unify their political ranks (Ayoob & Lussier, 2020). Muslims in Europe come from diverse backgrounds, including Arabs, Turks, Pakistanis, Africans, and others, and each group has its own political and social priorities, which may differ from those of others (Hellyer, 2009).

In addition, sectarian divisions among Muslims (Sunnis and Shiites, for example) may play a role in fragmenting political power, leading to the absence of a unified vision that enhances the community's political influence as a whole. There are also differences in views on how to address political issues, with some tending to join traditional parties, while others prefer to form their own parties representing Muslims only, which may lead to fragmentation rather than unification.

Another related challenge is the lack of strong political institutions or organizations that unite Muslims under one umbrella and guide them toward common political goals (Roy, 1994). While some minorities in Europe have strong lobby organizations, Muslims still lack effective institutions that can systematically influence public policy.

To overcome this challenge, it is essential for Muslim communities to build strong alliances within society, whether with other minority groups or with parties that actively embrace their causes. Developing political strategies aimed at unifying Muslim voices around specific issues, such as combating discrimination and promoting religious freedom, can help enhance their political influence.

Despite the political obstacles facing Muslims in Europe, change is still possible through collective action and strategic planning. The rise of populism and the far right can be countered by raising political awareness and combating hate speech, while the problem of token representation can be overcome by demanding more equitable and fair representation within political parties. Internal divisions can be addressed by promoting dialogue among various Muslim groups and working to build a unified vision that ensures stronger and more influential representation.

The challenges facing Muslims in Europe are not simple, but they are not insurmountable. By insisting on active political participation, building strong alliances, and developing political leaders capable of effectively representing Muslims, the Muslim community can achieve a more influ-

ential presence in political life, contributing to the promotion of values of citizenship and integration, and the protection of rights and freedoms in European societies.

5. Conclusion

In light of the rapid developments taking place in the political landscape in Europe, the issue of Muslim political representation emerges as a pivotal issue that reflects the nature of the relationship between minorities and host communities. Political participation does not simply mean integration into the democratic system; it goes beyond that to include a means of ensuring rights and active participation in decision-making. However, the path towards true and fair Muslim representation remains fraught with challenges, as political, social, and cultural factors intersect to create obstacles to achieving equal participation that ensures the interests of the Muslim community are reflected in public policies. In this context, it becomes imperative to overcome existing obstacles by adopting effective strategies that enhance the presence of Muslims in the European political landscape. This presence must not be merely a symbolic image used by some political forces to achieve electoral gains or to present a cosmetic discourse about pluralism without having a substantive impact on reality.

Working to enhance Muslim political representation in Europe must be supported by a clear vision that transcends the traditional nature of electoral participation and aims to build a real political force capable of influence. Instead of Muslims being merely voters oscillating between political parties that may outwardly support them but in essence do not provide them with effective representation, we must work to establish Muslim leaders who possess the capacity for political negotiation and effective participation in decision-making. This can only be achieved through genuine investment in the training of Muslim political cadres and the development of a political awareness that transcends momentary reactions to the development of sustainable projects aimed at achieving long-term gains. Furthermore, moving beyond rhetoric that relies on begging for recognition or focusing solely on identity issues, and toward adopting political platforms that reflect the needs of society as a whole, not just Muslim communities, will be a crucial factor in achieving genuine political integration that enhances Muslims' status as active citizens, not as a minority seeking only to protect its own rights.

On the other hand, overcoming the marginalization suffered by some Muslim politicians in traditional parties requires a redoubled effort to break the constraints that prevent them from reaching decision-making positions. Rather than remaining confined to symbolic roles or marginal seats, efforts should be made to empower them in leadership positions

within major parties. Their presence should not be merely a means of attracting Muslim voters, but rather a natural extension of their presence as a fundamental component of European societies. Building support networks within political and media institutions will also be essential to overcoming the obstacles imposed by the rise of the far right. Distortion and exclusionary campaigns can only be countered by possessing media and political tools that enable Muslims to defend themselves and highlight their positive role in the societies to which they belong.

In this context, the internal unity of Muslim communities in Europe is a key element in achieving more effective political representation. Overcoming the ethnic and sectarian divisions that hinder the formation of a strong political lobby requires reconsidering the community's political organization methods, focusing on common issues of concern to all Muslims, regardless of their backgrounds. By building strong alliances not only among Muslims themselves, but also with other groups facing similar challenges, greater influence can be achieved in the political process. Forming united fronts will be more effective than relying on individual initiatives that lack strategic depth.

However, success in achieving effective political representation depends not only on Muslims themselves; it also requires a change in the general perception within European societies of their political participation. Without overcoming the prevailing stereotypes that portray Muslims as a separate bloc or an alien element, the greatest challenge facing them will remain proving that they are an integral part of the political and social landscape, and that their participation is not a threat but rather an enrichment of democratic diversity. This requires a joint effort between Muslim politicians, media institutions, and civil society to change the public discourse and present a new vision that highlights the contribution of Muslims to the development of European societies, not only from the perspective of rights and demands, but also through the positive roles they can play in politics, the economy, and culture.

In conclusion, it can be argued that the challenges facing Muslims in the European political arena are not merely immediate obstacles, but rather part of larger dynamics that reflect existing tensions within Western societies regarding identity, belonging, and citizenship. However, confronting these challenges should not be based on a defensive stance, but rather be part of an integrated strategy that seeks to reshape the relationship between Muslims and the European political community on more balanced and just foundations. The political future of Muslims in Europe will not be determined solely by their responses to existing challenges, but rather by their ability to forge new paths that enable them to be not only representatives of themselves, but also active in shaping the future of the societies in which they live.

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