

A FRAGILE FRENCH REPUBLIC

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Comparison of Indian Constitutional System with that of other Countries - Parliamentary & Presidential Systems of Governance

The [recent series of terrorist attacks](#) have come at the worst possible time for France. For months, the country has been struggling with a surge in COVID-19 cases. [The recent lockdown](#), with its onerous paperwork requirements and sharp restrictions on everyday life, has been greeted with a weary shrug by most French people. This time, they know what to expect.

It is much the same with the spectre of terrorism, which has been around for far longer than COVID-19. The French have become grimly accustomed to watching news reports about [attacks committed against French citizens](#) in the name of Islam.

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Even the media carousel has become familiar. There is footage of the crime scene, cordoned off, with the flashing lights of police cars and ambulances. This is followed by a brief period of uncertainty about the cause or the perpetrators, usually accompanied by the sombre faces of politicians. Finally, as information starts to trickle out, the emotions flood in, the chat shows light up, and the public pronouncements begin.

Yet, despite the predictable storyline, all but the most cynical observers were taken aback by the [assassination of the schoolteacher Samuel Paty](#). Ambushed and beheaded on October 16, 2020 in a leafy, genteel distant suburb of Paris, Paty stood accused by his assailant of having violated the long-standing Muslim tradition that prohibits representations of the Prophet Muhammad.

The attacker was an 18-year-old Chechen refugee who lived 80 kilometres from the scene of the attack. He had heard on social media that Paty had shown in class some of the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, which were published by the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in 2011 and 2012.

More than five years after the first, [devastating attack on Charlie Hebdo's office in January 2015](#) — and with the perpetrators currently standing trial — Paty's assassination was designed to shock the French public and produce a reaction across the Muslim world by reigniting a culture war that had begun to fade in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis.

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But the symbolism went further than spectacular violence. Paty was a history and geography teacher in a French state school. His job, like mine, was to teach young people about the importance of the past. He was leading a class on free speech. By all accounts, he was careful and sensitive in the way he presented his material, including the cartoons in *Charlie Hebdo*. He was doing what every good teacher does: pushing his students to think differently about the world around them.

Paty, then, was anything but exceptional. Every person who has attended a French school in the past century or more has had a history and geography teacher like him. He was — quite literally — a symbol of the everyday life of France.

The powerful reaction to Paty's assassination was not simply a reflection of the fact that everyone could identify with him. It also had to do with his profession. Since the start of the Third

Republic in 1870, teachers have been at the forefront of the French state's mission to unify its diverse population.

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In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, state school teachers were responsible for converting young people in rural France away from the heavy hand of Catholic dogma, and they spearheaded efforts to “educate” and “civilise” indigenous peoples in the French colonies. In recent decades, teachers have been charged with trying to “integrate” France's myriad ethnic minority communities. They are seen — and often see themselves — as engines of social unity in a notoriously divided country.

Of the many things that teachers are expected to do, one of the most important is to embody the principles of *laïcité*. Often translated as ‘secularism’, *laïcité* is better understood as a project of social cohesion and a key component of French citizenship. It encompasses not simply the formal separation of Church and State, but also the evacuation of religious values from the public space and their replacement with secular values such as liberty, equality, and fraternity.

Traditionally, teachers have seen *laïcité* as a progressive idea. But its meaning in contemporary France no longer always matches the lofty principles that underpin it. Indeed, for many people today, *laïcité* is mainly about Islam.

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This reflects France's recent history. The decolonisation of the French colonies in Africa in the 1950s and 1960s brought the problem of Islam into sharp focus, as the French tried and failed to manage Muslims in unprecedented numbers. Subsequently, France was the site of violence that spilled over from the Algerian Civil War in the 1990s. Around the same time, it also experienced a series of public controversies over the wearing of the hijab in state schools and other public places, often spurred on by a far-right party committed to the stigmatisation of immigrants and Muslims.

These factors hardened attitudes towards both Islam and *laïcité*. While it once was a bulwark against Catholic obscurantism, *laïcité* also came to be used as a rhetorical tool against French Muslims. France thereafter became a prime target in the new wave of global Islamist violence that took off in the early 2010s.

So how should France respond to the ongoing threat of terrorist attacks in the name of Islam?

One way would be to compromise. This would involve acknowledging that *laïcité* alone cannot fix the country's social and political problems. It would also require the French state to recognise that France has — almost without realising it — become part of the Muslim world. It cannot stand apart from conflicts over religious practice that have affected countries with much larger Muslim populations, from Morocco to Indonesia.

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Another way would be to double down on French “values”. This is the path that President Emmanuel Macron has chosen. He and his cabinet have spent a lot of time in recent weeks emphasising the importance of *laïcité* and denouncing all those who are seen to threaten it. In the light of the most recent attack on a church in Nice — committed by a young Tunisian man who seems to have travelled to France for this express purpose — such a defensive posture makes sense.

But Mr. Macron's strategy is a risky one. For a start, it is almost guaranteed to elicit a hostile response from leaders of Muslim-majority countries, many of whom are keen to find an international issue that can distract from their own domestic problems.

More than that, however, the continuous invocation of *laïcité* risks eroding its meaning. Since the late 19th century, *laïcité* has been used to integrate different social and religious minorities into the national community, but it has taken on a more exclusionary and anti-Muslim quality in recent years. Paradoxically, this has made it hard for the very people whose job it is to teach these values — people like the late Samuel Paty. In his case, a genuine commitment to freedom of expression — an essential part of *laïcité* — was manipulated by his attacker to make it appear as if he was intent on pursuing an anti-Muslim agenda.

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So, while it might seem like a good strategy to use the idea of *laïcité* as a shield against an amorphous Muslim threat, the danger is that this will strip it of its most positive elements and render it useless as an instrument of social integration. That, more than any terror attack, would be a tragedy for all French people — Muslim or not.

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