

Mahama Tawat

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Multiculturalism: Is Denmark a den of intolerance and Sweden a land of political correctness?

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The recent ban on the wearing of full-face veils in Denmark is evidence of that country's unease with multiculturalism, a feeling shared by some other European nations who have adopted similar legislation. Sweden, meanwhile, has largely stayed true to its policy of

*multiculturalism. **Mahama Tawat** compares Danish and Swedish policies towards immigrant communities, tracing the clear difference between the two that has emerged over time while also sounding a note of caution against exaggerating the difference.*



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In 2006, Denmark made global headlines with the Cartoon Controversy ignited by depictions of the Prophet Muhammad in the newspaper JyllandsPosten. As riots erupted throughout the Muslim world, the Danish authorities refused to intervene in the matter as requested by a delegation of ambassadors from Muslim countries.

That year, in a book titled *Beyond Stereotypes: Immigrants and Integration in Denmark and Sweden*, the Swedish political scientist Bo Petersson stated that “in Sweden the image prevails of Denmark as a den of intolerance, racism, and xenophobia, whereas Sweden is depicted in Denmark as a land of multiculturalism and political

correctness, where people's real opinions about immigration and integration are not allowed to be articulated." His co-editor, the Danish historian Ulf Hedetoft, meanwhile asked how academics could better "understand the relationship between traditional divergence and a possibly greater actual convergence between Denmark and Sweden".

The debate has since lost some of its intensity, but its terms remain the same. After Angela Merkel and David Cameron declared its end respectively in **Germany** and **Great Britain**, Sweden now stands as the last stronghold of multiculturalism. Even so, there are signs of erosion. Meanwhile, the cumulative effects of successive government policies – with the far-right Danish People's Party as power broker – has seemingly made Denmark a **beacon of assimilation**.

Sweden and Denmark are a comparative dream. In more ways than not, they are similar. As the historian Sten Berglund **wrote**, there are few countries in the world which display the same degree of similarity between them as the Scandinavian countries. Their history is intertwined, having been part of the same empire over the course of many centuries. They share the same socio-cultural heritage, including language closeness and Lutheranism. Most notably, Denmark and Sweden epitomise the modern welfare state, or what Esping-Andersen called the "**Social Democratic**" model, with its universal access to welfare provisions.

Their political systems are a cocktail of constitutional monarchy, parliamentary democracy and consensual politics. After World War II they pioneered Nordic internationalism, a political tradition which favours the UN as the framework of solution for international conflicts and makes development aid to poor countries a significant objective. Both are major trade exporters and technological innovators, and are richer today than at any time in their history. In the **2016 Global Innovation Index** and the **2016-17 Global Competitiveness Index**,

Sweden ranked 2nd and 6th respectively while Denmark ranked 8th and 12th.

The multicultural question is where this common trajectory diverges. Broadly speaking, multiculturalism is defined as the equal recognition of cultures in contrast to assimilation which gives predilection to the majority culture. Sweden formally adopted multiculturalism in the mid-70s. It was argued that the multiplicity of cultures was necessary for the well-being of minority communities, but also for enriching the national Swedish culture.

While Denmark monitored what Sweden was doing, as both countries were legally required to inform each other on cultural policy development, it did not adopt such a policy. Yet in the absence of a formal policy, there was conjecture that Denmark's policy was also multiculturalist. It is not until the late 1990s that the divergence with Sweden became apparent and Danish policy was established as assimilation. But, as Charlotte Hamburger **stated then**, 'it is not enough to say that Danish integration policy is assimilation, one must know which kind of policy it is'.

In a systematic comparison of both countries' immigrant cultural policies as expressed by their respective ministries in charge of culture from 1960, I found that, in essence, Swedish policy has amounted to the celebration of difference, the idea that immigrants' happiness depends on the possibility of enjoying their cultures (cultural embeddedness) and that ethnocultural diversity is enriching for the majority culture. To this end, the Swedish government has encouraged and funded immigrant cultural associations since the 1970s but more so in the 1980s. In the 2000s, it implemented diversity plans throughout state cultural institutions and in 2006 declared a Year of Multiculturalism whereby all state institutions including embassies abroad were to showcase multiculturalism. However, Sweden also enforced a liberal minimum. That is, it prohibited cultural practices that it judged

particularly illiberal or abhorrent such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and honour crimes. Following the murder of Fadime Sahindal, a Kurdish-Swede, by her father who objected to her marriage with an ethnic Swede, the government took radical measures against honour crimes and FGM, criminalising them even if they were committed abroad by Swedish residents.

By contrast, Danish policy has amounted to toleration with its main characteristics of (1) preference for the majority culture, (2) the avoidance of any form of coercion and (3) privatization, or the possibility for immigrants to practice their culture in the private sphere. Concretely, successive Danish governments have favoured the national culture in the public sphere, emphasising the Danish language and Christianity as its pillar. In 2005, as Sweden launched its Year of Multiculturalism, the Danish government published a Canon of the Danish Culture including a selection of the best works of art every Dane needed to know. This assimilationist bent was also apparent during the Cartoon Controversy – it chose the freedom of expression of the majority over the accusation of blasphemy by the minority. In 2016, a new canon highlighting social values such as support for the welfare state, individual freedom and trust was published by the ministry in charge of culture. Yet on no occasion has the government resorted to violence against immigrants, despite pressure towards restrictionism exerted by the far-right Danish People's Party which, unlike its Swedish counterpart the Swedish Democrats, has had a greater policy impact. Unless they infringed the liberal minimum, immigrants were free to practice their cultures in the privacy of their homes.

In conclusion, Sweden and Denmark are divergent in their approach to immigrant cultural accommodation. The former is willing to accommodate immigrants' cultures in the public sphere, the latter is not while also avoiding any form of coercion. They are, however, convergent in that they have drawn the same red lines against FGM, honour crimes,

sexism and homophobia. Thus, the image that some Swedes may have of Denmark as a den of intolerance, and some Danes of Sweden as a land of political correctness, are a distortion of reality.

About the author



Mahama Tawat is a research associate at the Malmö Institute for the Study of Migration, Diversity and Welfare, Malmö University, Sweden. He also lectures at the Higher School of Economics in Russia. His research currently focus on the multilevel governance of the 2015 refugee crisis by the EU and its multilateral partners (Turkey and the African Union) and the immigrant cultural policies of Nordic countries. His research has been published in journals such as *Governance* and the *International Journal of Cultural Policy*. t: [@MahamaTawat](#)

Note: This piece gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Religion and Global Society blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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