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From Italy to Iran, voters hand the church a mandate on Islam

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 12, 2009 All Things Catholic

Early summer is campaign season in various corners of the world, including parliamentary races last week in the European Union and in Lebanon and today's hotly contested presidential race in Iran. Taking stock of it all, a grand irony emerges: While moderates appear to be gaining ground in the Islamic world, hardliners are on the march across the Old Continent.

Obviously the Catholic church wasn't a party to these contests, but voters from Italy to Iran may have unwittingly handed Catholicism a mandate anyway: To prevent new hostility in Europe from derailing the long-awaited rise of the Islamic center.

In news-ticker fashion, here's the rundown. The pro-Western "March 14 coalition" scored a decisive victory in Lebanon's parliamentary vote last Sunday. While it wasn't yet clear at press time how things would shake out in Iran, reform-minded challenger Mir-Hossein Mousavi was giving President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad a run for his money. Meanwhile in Europe, traditional center-right parties got the most votes, but the biggest gains came on the far right. In the Netherlands, the anti-Islamic Freedom Party of Geert Wilders, who once called the Qur'an "fascist," finished a strong second. Like-minded parties did well in Britain, Italy, Austria, Hungary, Slovakia, Finland and Denmark, blending skepticism about the EU with an anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim message.

Politics is a complicated business, so these results can't be read entirely as a referendum on the "clash of civilizations." Ahmadinejad's problems may have as much to do with the economy as his hard-line stance on the West, and gains for the far-right in Europe are related to the implosion of traditional center-left parties. Yet the fact remains that just when some Islamic societies are flirting with reform, Europe is handing a megaphone to figures such as Nick Griffin, leader of the British National Party, who recently said: "This is a Christian country and Islam is not welcome, because Islam and Christianity, Islam and democracy, Islam and women's rights do not mix."

Ironically, Wilders and Griffin may well be Osama bin Laden's favorite members of the European Parliament. Hawks on both sides of the relationship between Islam and the West have long enjoyed a weird symbiosis, depending upon one another to validate their views. (Case in point: America's leading critic of Islam, Daniel Pipes, recently said that if he had a vote in Iran he'd back Ahmadinejad, because "I prefer an enemy ... who wakes people up.") Obama may not be much help to Muslim extremists, but a European Parliament in which Wilders and Griffin are major players will be good for business.

The crucial question, however, is how mainstream Muslims will see them. Are they the inevitable but largely marginal byproduct of an open society, or the leading edge of a deep anti-Muslim animus on the European right? If the latter perception prevails, it could be a powerful card for Islamic radicals to play, both in Europe and in Muslim societies struggling to decide which road to take.

That's where the Catholic church enters the picture. Surveying the European landscape, Catholicism looms as virtually the only institution with both strong credibility on the cultural right and a clear record of outreach to

Muslims. Mainline Protestants and Anglicans are equally committed to dialogue with Islam, but many conservatives regard them as morally and spiritually adrift. Meanwhile there's a growing "theo-con" contingent interested in reviving Europe's Christian roots, but much of that energy is fueled by anti-Islamic anxiety. Catholicism is about the only actor capable of walking and chewing gum at the same time, meaning defending the continent's identity and also making room for Islam.

In particular, Pope Benedict XVI seems to get what many would-be defenders of Christendom apparently don't: In a Europe in which Christianity is destined to be a "creative minority," beating back the wolf at the door in the form of hyper-secularization is going to require help from Muslims.

To be sure, the church can't snap its fingers and make somebody like Wilders change his tune, in part because the European far right can be every bit as anti-clerical as the extreme left. (Umberto Bossi of Italy's Northern League once famously called for denying public funding to the church, saying it simply lines the pockets of "monsignors, cardinals and various rackets.") Yet the pope and other Catholic leaders do have considerable political capital, and how they spend it could make a critical difference.

That "spending" might involve four points:

1. Excluding xenophobia from a Christian "politics of identity": Pope Benedict XVI is probably the only figure in Europe who can single-handedly prevent Christian identity from being defined in terms of hostility to Islam. Although it's facile to put things like this, I'll say it anyway: There's an "only Nixon could go to China" dynamic, in that Benedict XVI's commitment to Christian identity is so far beyond question that any attempt to style him as "Ahmadinejad's pope" seems ridiculous -- especially because the pontiff has repeatedly challenged Muslims to reject violence and to embrace religious freedom. Yet he has also worked out a vision of an "alliance of civilizations" between Christians and Muslims capable of pulling the rhetorical rug out from under the demagogues.

2. Promoting the integration of Muslim immigrants: Demographers say Muslims may reach between 15 and 25 percent of the European population, and the Catholic church has significant resources to promote their integration. Aside from the obvious social justice reasons for doing so, it will be difficult to demand that Muslim societies protect religious minorities if Western nations aren't perceived as doing the same. The church can also offer European conservatives a solid political logic for promoting the economic and social advancement of Muslims. Today most European Muslims vote with the left because they're scared of the right, but it doesn't have to stay that way. A European Muslim middle class could be powerfully attracted to center-right parties that defend traditional morality and a strong role for religion in public life. To be honest, a devout Muslim has precious little in common with, say, Zapatero's ultra-secular Socialist regime in Spain, beyond the immediate appeal of softer immigration policies and government hand-outs. To some extent this future is now in Germany, where reportedly a small but growing number of Muslims are becoming Christian Democrats.

3. Mobilizing resources to end the Israeli/Palestinian conflict: Politically, the biggest headline from the pope's Middle East trip was his support for the two-state solution and his criticism of the Israeli security wall in the West Bank. If those statements can be translated into creative Christian activism, it could prove an important component in cajoling the various parties into serious negotiations. The Obama administration seems to be gearing up to engage the conflict, and Catholic leaders in Europe can help make sure their governments join that effort. While there's no magic bullet to eradicate Islamic radicalism, achieving a just solution to the Israeli/Palestinian problem would come pretty close.

4. Outreach to Shi'a Muslims: Shi'ites are only about 20 percent of the global Muslim population, but they're a majority in the critical Persian Gulf region. Iranian writer Vali Nasr argues that Shi'a Islam and Catholicism enjoy a natural affinity that other branches of the two faiths don't share. Similarities include: A strong emphasis on clerical authority; a theology of sacrifice and atonement; holy days, pilgrimages, and healing shrines; and

strongly emotional forms of popular devotion. Whoever wins the presidential race in Iran, both Europe and the United States are committed to trying to rebuild lines of communication. Catholic leaders could make a decisive contribution, because any dialogue with Iran that ignores the spiritual and theological dimension is doomed to be incomplete.

Every so often, the Catholic church is dealt a set of cards that allow it to make a crucial difference in the world. Without realizing it, voters may have shuffled the deck in precisely that fashion in the last couple of weeks, and one hopes the church's opinion-makers play their hand wisely.

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