

# Turbulent Times for Multicultural Societies: **Gap** between **Cultures** in the Netherlands **Widens** Drastically

by Anne Lunenburg



## Thousands

of Australian youths chasing and attacking fellow Australians with Middle Eastern features; French North-Africans expressing their frustrations through the use of violence in the suburbs of various French cities; Great Britain struggling against heightened racial tensions between British youth and British people of South-Asian descent. The list continues as multicultural societies face turmoil. Up next: The Netherlands?

After two years of being away from the Netherlands, I decided in November 2005 that it was time to visit family and friends in my home country. I was asked by my other friends: What do you miss the most about the Netherlands, besides

your family and friends there? Without giving it much thought, I responded: Indonesian *nasi goreng*, Dutch meatballs, Turkish bread, and Moroccan tea with cookies. I could not help but revisit this very casual and friendly conversation that made me realize that the dishes and delicacies I miss are symbolic of the Netherlands that I know of and to which I am accustomed. Not only do my family and friends come from culturally diverse backgrounds, even my tongue is multicultural.

This is, of course, not strange considering that Lelystad, the environment that educated and nurtured me, is a multicultural city where I shared a class with children from diverse

backgrounds, ranging from Moroccan, Turkish, Iranian, to Surinam, and from Indonesian to Dutch. As young students, we were brought together in celebration of the *Eid Ul-Fitr* (the end of the Ramadan) and Christmas, among other events, and we shared one another's traditions and food. Growing up, I did not give this multicultural mingling at school much thought, nor did I even ponder on the fact that my mother is Dutch, my father, an Indonesian of European descent. The languages I use at home are Dutch and Indonesian, or a mixture of both. The same counts for the food on the table.

But on my return to my country that November, I was greatly disappointed to see the Netherlands plagued with religious and ethnic tension and intolerance. The gap today between the

*Vrij Nederland*, a Dutch opinion magazine, I stumbled upon an article that reaffirmed my strongest suspicions shortly after the outbreak of the riots in France. Indeed, we in the Netherlands are approaching potential violence. According to the article, a number of human resources personnel working in various Dutch companies revealed the unjust "unwritten policies" that appear to have been institutionalised by their respective companies in the selection of potential employees. The article said that applications submitted by people with Muslim or Muslim-sounding names were immediately rejected without even undergoing the regular and standard process of application review and evaluation.

The Netherlands is home to one million Muslims of various cultural backgrounds (the total population of the Netherlands is 16 million), who have been generalised and stigmatised by an extremely paranoid world that could not explain where and why things have gone awry, or possibly, refuses to acknowledge the root causes of violence, inequalities, and inequities. Dutch Muslims, similar to the general Muslim population worldwide, suffer religious and hate propaganda that had gained much fervor since the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Europe, home to a huge Muslim population, is approaching trying times. The Netherlands is not excluded.

At the home front, while our Dutch Muslims struggle against the social stigma that has intensified over the years, the recent brutal murder of Theo van Gogh, a Dutch moviemaker and producer who released a movie that critiqued Islam, did nothing but escalate

---

My country has long prided itself as open and tolerant to all people, regardless of culture, creed, and sex. But . . .

Dutch and the Dutch people with foreign backgrounds had never been wider. Anxieties over the possibility of riots and rebellion taking place in the Netherlands, similar to that of Australia and France, grow by the day. The time bomb is ticking. There is now much to fear in a country like the Netherlands.

My country has long prided itself as open and tolerant to all people, regardless of culture, creed, and sex. But leaving through the November 2005 issue of the

Dutch parliament member Ayaan Hirsi Ali, for example, is a staunch neo-liberal advocating for Western norms and values. Her radical positions are best manifested by her arguments and the kind of language that she uses, especially when talking about Muslims.

---

the anger against Muslims. With van Gogh assassinated by a Moroccan boy who felt that his religion was under attack, the event was packaged as a validation of what characterises a Muslim, at least to those who were ignorant enough to generalise the Muslim population and had no idea whatsoever that the practice of Islam varies from state to state, from group to group, and from individual to individual. To Islam detractors, this does not matter—all Muslims are cruel, barbaric and violent.

Furthermore, the current political debates in the Netherlands continue to contribute largely to intensifying religious and ethnic dissent. Dutch parliament member Ayaan Hirsi Ali, for example, is a staunch neo-liberal advocating for Western norms and values. Her radical positions are best manifested by her arguments and the kind of language that she uses, especially when talking about Muslims. As a Somali refugee, Ayaan Hirsi Ali is deeply traumatised and scarred by her personal

experiences in Somalia, particularly how she, as a young woman, had to undergo the inhumane practice of female genital mutilation (FGM).

In the past years, Ayaan Hirsi Ali—a self-proclaimed spokesperson for and defender of Muslim women—has evolved into an influential parliamentarian and is known and commended for her lobbying efforts on injustices against women, particularly on the focal issue of FGM. Although she has won many supporters in this arena, the Dutch population is divided on the issue of her perceptions and opinions of Islam in the Netherlands. Critical of what she once referred to as a “backward” religion, she has managed to box Islam, and, consequently, the entire Dutch Muslim population, regardless of their differences in practices and traditions.

To illustrate the rationale behind the division in support of the Dutch population for a woman victimised by society, besides the fact of her provocatively calling the prophet Mohamed a “pervert,” prominent Dutch feminist Anja Meulenbelt wrote:

Aayan Hirsi Ali does not substantially contribute to any groundbreaking changes within Islam and the Muslim communities with the way she packages most of her arguments. Traditional women cannot identify themselves with her western, anti-religious, neo-liberalist, individualistic, and ‘enlightened’ radical view on Islam, which only strengthens

and validates the perceptions of the anti-Islam population of the Netherlands.

According to Anja, Muslim women do find spaces to combine feminism with the teachings of Islam. But, unfortunately, the voices of these progressive women are silenced by more influential people such as parliamentarians and the mainstream media.

Instead of building bridges and addressing inequalities and inequities at all levels, parliamentarians and politicians like Ayaan Hirsi Ali have done nothing but widen the gap between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Many multicultural societies believe that they are models of tolerance and social equality. But are they truly what they claim themselves to be? As an optimist

privileged to have grown up in and benefited from an environment that is culturally diverse, I would like to say yes. However, as events unfold before my eyes, I see more and more multicultural societies taking a perilous path to chaos.

The disenfranchised, the oppressed, and the marginalised will stand up united and strong, and all forms of state violence will be met with equal wrath and hatred. This spiral of violence will continue unless civil society and the social movements come together to simultaneously counter our states as well as attempt to temper the brewing resentments and vindications of the oppressed.

---

*Anne Lunenburg is a Dutch freelance journalist who has a passion for multiculturalism. He recently interned at the Asian Migrant Centre in Hong Kong.*

---