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Views of Muslim women in Turin on Italy's far right: a story of struggles and hope



By Khadija Tirha

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Introduction

President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella appointed Giorgia Meloni as Italy's new Prime Minister on the evening of Friday, 21 October 2022, officially tasking her with forming the new government and making her the country's first far-right leader since Benito Mussolini. Giorgia Meloni is the first woman to hold the position of Prime Minister of Italy, leading what will be the first far-right government since World War II. Her appointment represents a historic change for the eurozone's third-largest economy and for Fratelli d'Italia, the country's traditionally right-wing party, which she leads, which has never been in government before. The far right has won a solid majority in both houses of the Italian Parliament. A concrete change in the country's leadership is now expected from the new government.

According to official Italian statistics, there are approximately 2.7 million Muslims in Italy, representing 4.9% of Italy's resident population. This number includes nearly one million Italian citizens by birth or naturalisation, but most are residents with foreign citizenship¹.

How important are Islam, Muslims and religion in general in the public and political debate in Italy? More specifically, to what extent have issues related to Muslims and Islam, particularly the role of religion in public life, become divisive electoral issues? When it comes to religious and cultural disputes, Italy is a paradigm case for two reasons. First, the Vatican and entrenched Catholic culture play a crucial role in national politics. Second, there have been relatively few opportunities for right-wing populist mobilisation since Italy did not experience significant immigration until the 1990s, meaning that citizens and politicians found themselves "unprepared" to manage such mobilisations. Italy's geographic location has further fostered xenophobic rhetoric portraying the recent arrival of refugees on its shores as an "uncontrolled situation" or even an "invasion".

Public controversies over the secular/religious divide have long been present in Italian politics. These controversies include, for example, debates over end-of-life care, religious education in schools, mosque construction and Muslim dress.² As an emblematic example, ten years before the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack, the original cartoons of Muhammad published in the *Jyllands-Posten* were reprinted by several Italian newspapers, including *La*

¹Source: Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS. Based on data from the United Nations, Eurostat, Ministero dell'Interno, Istat, Miur, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, World Bank, InfoCamere, Mef, Ministero della Giustizia and Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali.

²Castelli Gattinara, P. (2017). Framing exclusion in the public sphere: Far-right mobilisation and the debate on Charlie Hebdo in Italy, *South European Society and Politics*, 22(3), 345-364.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/jm2r1Xx2hJk3g97dnqEj/full>.

Padania, the official newspaper of the Lega Nord far-right political party, and traditional newspapers such as La Stampa and La Repubblica³. In the eyes of Lega Nord propagandists and other far-right parties, the theology of Islam and its practitioners represent a growing threat to contemporary Italian identity and tradition. Muslims are generally portrayed as dangerous and compared to terrorists, and their religion and culture are described as the opposite of Italian/Western values. Something approaching "moral panic" has been created around this issue.

With the establishment of the new government led by the anti-Islam, anti-migration Lega and the populist Five Star Movement, there is now an increasing sense of insecurity among Muslim communities across Italy. As in other parts of Europe, violent attacks on European territory in recent years, said to have been carried out in the name of Islam, have affected Italians' perceptions of the country's Muslim communities, although none have been carried out in Italy. According to the Pew Research Center, Italy is second only to Hungary when it comes to negative perceptions of Muslims in Europe, with 69% of Italians having an unfavourable view of Muslims in their country.⁴

There is a willingness to modernise on the part of right-wing parties, which are eager to show themselves in the vanguard to gain support while pursuing conservative policies. For example, as Jennifer Guerra points out in her article in *The Vision*⁵, Matteo Salvini, the current Minister of Infrastructure and Transport, practically only talks about gender-based violence when a foreign or foreign-born person commits the crime, saying he wants to protect "our culture and our women."⁶ The emphasis on protecting women is thus being used instrumentally by a traditionally masculinist party, with the aggravating factor of excluding non-Italian women.

This study uses storytelling techniques to highlight the perspectives and thoughts of three Italian Muslim women based in northern Italy on Italian far-right parties. These women represent three different paths that intersect when it comes to spirituality, social activism, representation and intercultural dialogue. The women are cultural mediators, students, social workers and activists. Their stories provide different perspectives of a little-known Italy made up of sacrifices, work, study, struggles and discrimination, but also achievements, hope and the desire for change. While focusing on a small number of Muslim women has allowed an in-depth exploration of the topic with each of them, it has reduced the opportunity to expand on the issues discussed. This project could be greatly enhanced by further exploring issues concerning the Muslim female component of Italian society, which is often overlooked.

³Ibid.

⁴Lipka, M. (2017). Muslims and Islam: Key findings in the U.S. and around the world. 9 August. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>.

⁵Guerra, J. (2019). Come l'estrema destra sta usando il femminismo per giustificare il razzismo. 31 December. <https://thevision.com/attualita/estrema-destra-femminismo-razzismo/>.

⁶Crippa, M. (2020). Difendere soltanto "le nostre donne" e non tutte le donne: un brutto tic. 30 June. <https://www.ilfoglio.it/politica/2020/06/30/news/difendere-soltanto-le-nostre-donne-e-non-tutte-le-donne-un-brutto-tic-321581/>.

The women's experiences and their voices offer a glimpse of an Italy living through a historical phase in which the leading party, on the centenary of the March on Rome⁷, is a political force that has the tricolour flame as its symbol and roots in fascism, and whose leader comes from that history and reflects those ideals.

Samara, a tireless dreamer and future social justice lawyer

Samara is a young, 27-year-old woman and a Law graduate from the University of Turin. She is passionate about law, politics and social justice. She has a strong sense of civic duty that led her to pursue her dream of becoming a lawyer in Italy. Her interview was held in her favourite Savoy café in Turin, in the heart of the city. Egyptian by birth and an Italian citizen, Samara grew up here. Her life is dedicated to education, laws, social justice, women's empowerment and volunteer work. Samara appears very confident and ambitious. From the moment we start talking about far-right parties in Italy, she launches into a monologue about the problems and consequences of the rise of right-wing parties in Italy, leaving out her own migration history.

“We, as Muslims, are part of a religious minority. It is normal to feel concerned about being a minority. As many reports and statistics show, there are varying degrees of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia that are prevalent in Italian society and on social media.

Having a lack of religious literacy has damaged our society because it has turned the Catholic tradition of tolerance into a more ethnocentric and parochial identity, one that is fearful of immigrants. As we well know, far-right parties do not really have a specific religious agenda or explicit faith mantra, but they do have an electorate grounded in the Catholic tradition and often perceive non-Catholic religions, in this case, we are talking about the Islamic religion, as a dangerous threat to their identity.

A clear example is the quote from our Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, "I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother... I am a Christian." This quote is one of Meloni's most popular rallying quotes. It went viral on social media and has even been turned into a rap song. Giorgia Meloni is known for her far-right positions and the fascist roots of her party. Although she tries to position herself in the centre, Meloni is also known for her Eurosceptic, Islamophobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric.

However, although Giorgia Meloni denies being a fascist, she clings to the Mussolini-era slogan "God, country, family." Moreover, her party, Fratelli d'Italia, continues to use a logo with a flame that harks back to fascists. There are Mussolini sympathisers in the party who are sometimes caught giving the fascist salute, and some local officials still have Mussolini memorabilia in their offices.

⁷The March on Rome was an organised mass demonstration and a coup d'état in October 1922 which resulted in Benito Mussolini's National Fascist Party (PNF) ascending to power in the Kingdom of Italy.

The rise of far-right groups has been caused by the facilitation of discrimination, hate speech and hate crimes, making the path to an updated model of religious freedom in Italy more difficult. This may be especially harmful to us Muslims, whose situation is particularly delicate given our lack of formal religious legal status.

For example, during the election campaign, the current Minister of Infrastructure and Transport, Matteo Salvini, said he would close mosques and not allow new ones to open. This may or may not have been propaganda. What we know for sure is that there are no clear-cut regulations for places of worship. The law remains vague, and each municipality interprets it in its own way. So we will see what happens!

My greatest aspiration and the dream that I have cherished since childhood is to be a social justice lawyer. My mission is to assist people who need the law on their side and fight injustices and inequalities in Italy. I will do my best to make this country more inclusive, and no far-right party can stop my will to pursue my goals.”

Jane: A strong commitment to activism and voluntary work

Moroccan by birth and an Italian citizen, Jane was born and raised in Italy by Moroccan parents who came to Italy in the mid-1980s. A professional social worker, she is the cultural mediator for one girl. She is 31 years old, and a Social Work and Social Policies graduate from the University of Turin. She is passionate about volunteering, social activism, intercultural dialogue and global citizenship education. Her interview was conducted in a small garden near her apartment. We talked in Italian and Moroccan about her migration experience, addressing many issues related to the multicultural aspects of her family. During our interview, we discussed many aspects of her life as a Muslim woman in depth. Jane talked without stopping about her struggles.

“In Italy, Muslim women who recently immigrated generally share the same difficulties as all immigrants: a lack of knowledge of the Italian language, a lack of recognition of qualifications issued by foreign countries and a lack of contacts and unfamiliarity with institutions.

Discriminations like these are sometimes difficult to intercept, especially at work. Even if they are manifested in common policies, such as "I will hire you if you remove your headscarf," it is very difficult to prove discrimination in court due to a lack of written evidence. Discrimination, however, rarely has a single cause. In most cases, discrimination is due to a variety of factors such as gender, religion, ethnicity, social class, nationality and the number of years of residence in the country. Instead of fighting these forms of discrimination, far-right parties fuel them as part of anti-migrant campaigns.

Despite all this, in recent years, I have witnessed a significant change, with Muslim women standing out for their activism at the social, political and cultural levels. Why? Because there is a strong desire to redeem themselves and become front-line protagonists and agents of change in a community where they feel they belong. At the same time, however, I am deeply

disappointed with politics, which does not take into consideration the children of immigrants and has not developed youth policies that facilitate the involvement of second-generation youth. The policies developed for the children of immigrants have not addressed the issue of citizenship and often criminalise the entire Islamic world.”

Jane is an outspoken woman who is open to criticism of politics and her community. And as for the future of Italy, she is quite hopeful. She concluded the interview by saying, "We, as Muslims, expect a lot from a government that promises to represent all Italians. We are Italians. We love this country, and we respect our Constitution. We expect our government to implement the Constitution, especially religious freedom."

Raisa: From Tunisia to Turin: A Mediterranean identity

The last interview was in Valentino Park, Turin, with the youngest woman I've ever interviewed. Raisa arrived on time, elegant and smiling, after finishing classes at the university on an autumn afternoon. Raisa is an Italian citizen, born in Tunisia and raised in Turin. She is the daughter of Moroccan parents who came to Italy in the late 1980s. She is 23 years old. She enrolled at the university in 2019 before the pandemic began and is currently studying Languages and Culture for Tourism. She speaks in a strong Piedmont accent.

"I am a 23-year-old girl from Italy of North African descent. I like to consider myself Mediterranean because I feel I belong to a culture that is in between. In reality, the Mediterranean has been and continues to be capable of producing values, symbols, colours, flavours, architecture, languages and sensibilities that are unsuspectingly sympathetic and harmonious despite the disparity in histories and despite the presence of conflicts: from Spain to Greece, Morocco to Lebanon, Malta to Albania. My parents always taught me how valuable it is to be connected to our homeland and culture without ever exaggerating."

Despite her youth, I asked Raisa to talk about her views on politics in Italy and what she thinks about right-wing parties. She gave a very detailed explanation of how she became interested in politics.

"I have always been interested in politics, especially since the pandemic when I began to follow the political dynamics and debate closely and during the last election.

What emerged from the 2022 general election held on 25 September is quite interesting and made me reflect on the result that the winning party achieved in Italy. The majority of young people, who are between 18 and 34 years of age, did not vote for Meloni's far-right party, which only got the third highest number of votes with 15%. In the other two age groups, however, Meloni's party was the most popular. It achieved 27% of the vote in the 35 to 54 age group and 25% among voters over 55. Young people favoured the Five Star Movement.⁸

⁸ The Five Star Movement (M5S) is a political party in Italy. Its leader and president is Giuseppe Conte, Prime Minister of Italy from 2018 until 2021. The M5S was founded on 4 October 2009 by Beppe Grillo, a comedian and blogger, and Gianroberto Casaleggio, a web strategist.

However, it seems that Giorgia Meloni's victory was the result of the choices of older people. The percentage of young people who vote is far less than the percentage of older people. It appears that the strong abstention noted by the polls as over 50%, against a general average of 36%, was accurate.

Many young people (not all, of course) do not feel represented by any of the main political forces running for election because they speak little about young people and to young people, except when campaigning. Moreover, there is a perception that even when they talk about issues that interest and concern youth, such as work, income, the environment and civil rights, they do so in an instrumental way.

I, personally, try to draw attention to rights. If I ask to be respected and not attacked because I am Muslim, then I certainly must recognise the rights of others too, but I also expect the same from them towards me. Knowledge of law and regulations is crucial. When you know your rights and duties, you become a more aware citizen and more willing to enforce everyone's rights.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research aimed to enhance and highlight the views of Muslim women in Turin on Italy's far right. Our journey began with Samara, a tireless dreamer who wants to become a social justice lawyer. According to her, the absence of religious literacy is a detriment to Italian society, and a legal status that can facilitate the religious freedom of the Muslim community in Italy is needed. Then there was Jane, a woman with a strong commitment to activism and volunteering. As a Muslim woman, she expressed concerns about discrimination against Muslim women, and she expects the Italian government to respect all religious minorities under the Constitution. Then, we concluded with Raisa, a young Mediterranean woman from Tunisia. She spoke about youth abstention and how important it is to have knowledge of law and regulations.

As an Italian Muslim woman, my view on far-right parties is not so different from that of Samara, Jane and Raisa. If we want to change things, the first step is recognising the problem and the danger that far-right parties pose to the entire Italian community, in particular religious minorities who are struggling to make their voices heard and claim their rights. Secondly, I believe it is crucial for Italy to recognise Islamophobia as a specific form of discrimination and violence that affects Muslim women disproportionately over Muslim men. Investigating this phenomenon would also provide clear data to encourage policymakers and associations to take action. Finally, increased solidarity, on the part of feminist realities, with Muslim women would contribute to the realisation that the impact of far-right policies has negative effects throughout the Italian community, not just on Muslim women.

About the Author

Khadija is an Afro-European young youth worker. She is passionate about diversity and inclusion, intercultural dialogue & interfaith dialogue, global citizenship education, interfaith dialogue, intercultural dialogue, women's empowerment. Khadija holds a double Master's degree in International Relations of the Mena Region and Comparative Analysis of Mediterranean Societies between University of Turin and the School of Governance and Economics (EGE Rabat) in 2020.

A passion for international cooperation since her university years has led her to join different international organisations dealing with solidarity and international cooperation, youth advocacy, peace building, intercultural dialogue, global citizenship education. In 2017, she was awarded an international award as a "Young European Volunteer 2017" recognised by the Italian federation FOCSIV (Federation of Christian Organizations for International Volunteer Service). She is a youth delegate at the Council of Europe, a peacebuilder in IDove Community (Interfaith dialogue on Violent Extremism) and ACWAY Movement and a Young Change-Maker MEM (Middle East Mediterranean) Summer Summit. She is also part of the World Economic Forum's Global Shapers Community. Recently She was selected as a «Center for Women, Faith & Leadership Hybrid Fellow 2022» at The Institute for Global Engagement (IGE) in the US."

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