

Hollande's discrimination problem

The French president tries to address widespread hiring bias against Muslims, whose support he desperately needs.

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PARIS — Of all the reforms promised by François Hollande during his 2012 presidential campaign, pledge 30.2 — “to fight against discrimination in housing and hiring” — is one he might like to see forgotten.

But for people like Nasir, a 45-year-old job-seeker who voted for Hollande in 2012, the promise is impossible to forget. In fact, Nasir said it comes to mind every time he receives a rejection letter from a potential employer or, as is more often the case, no response at all. He cannot help but think that his bad luck might have something to do with his Arabic-sounding name and his Muslim background.

“When you have done everything right, completed all the paperwork and passed all the tests, and you still don’t get a call back, of course you think of discrimination,” said Nasir, who has been unemployed for the past eight months, after an unsuccessful meeting with an adviser at a job placement center in northern Paris.

“Some guys change their name on their CV to ‘Robert’ or ‘Daniel.’ I understand why,” said Nasir, who asked that his surname not be published because he feared it would further damage his chances for employment.

Until recently, such feelings of discrimination were bound to remain vague and unsubstantiated. The French Constitution forbids the collection of ethnic or religious statistics, and most studies using indirect methods to measure discrimination are on such a small scale that the results do not provide a definitive picture.

But that has changed with the publication of a new long-term study into hiring discrimination based on religious factors. The results show that such discrimination is widespread.

According to the study, which was funded by the Institut Montaigne think tank and is the most extensive of its kind to be carried out in France, practising Muslim job applicants in France are only half as likely to get a call back from a recruiter as

Catholic ones presenting similar qualifications. Jews are 30 percent less likely to receive a call back than Catholics.

Even when Muslim candidates present outstanding qualifications and job experience, they still suffer high discrimination with a call-back rate of just 13.2 percent versus 24.8 percent for Catholics. And male Muslims suffer far greater discrimination than females, the study showed.

“There are deep-seated stereotypes at work in these decisions,” said Marie-Anne Valfort, an economist who carried out the study by sending out more than 6,000 falsified CVs to companies from various sectors. “Studies show that Muslim men are associated with machistic behavior and are seen to have a complex relationship with authority.”

Taken together with other studies, the results make France the worst offender in terms of discrimination against people of North African, Middle Eastern or Turkish descent among 14 countries, of which 11 are European, the study’s authors said.

“We weren’t expecting the results to show quite such clear discrimination against Muslim candidates,” said Valfort. “Previous studies hinted at a problem but weren’t carried out on a large enough scale, and the results were usually published in academic journals so the public never heard about them.”

Hollande playing catch-up

This time, with a presidential election less than two years away, the results are hard to ignore.

Hollande’s government has not commented publicly on Valfort’s study but he and Prime Minister Manuel Valls have started a subtle campaign of damage control which appears to be geared at regaining the trust of minority populations that massively backed the Socialist leader in the 2012 election campaign.

Hollande, who has so far failed to lower an unemployment rate stuck above 10 percent, paid a visit last month to a startup incubator in La Courneuve, a tough suburb of Paris, that was marred by booing from the crowd.

Valls followed up with another trip to Les Mureaux, an area northwest of Paris, during which he promised, among other pledges, that the government would conduct “testing” operations to measure discrimination in companies with more than 1,000 employees, in addition to plans to promote social diversity in France’s elite ENA school of administration.

“I am not here to reclaim the banlieues,” Valls said. “I am here to touch base on the choices we announced at the start of the year ... to fight against segregation, in other words the social, ethnic and territorial apartheid that affects a large part of our country, to fight against discrimination and to fight against the problem of radicalization.”

Valls said the testing operation, which was originally meant to cover any company with more than 300 workers, would lead to a public debate and a “dialogue” with the companies concerned in order to assess their hiring practices.

Although no coercive measures are planned for firms that fail blind CV tests (the government wants each firm to name a “diversity agent”), the government will allow victims of discrimination to group together and attack offenders legally in class-action lawsuits.

The political reasoning behind such measures is clear. In 2012, thanks to his promises on discrimination and another pledge, never fulfilled, to allow immigrants to vote in local elections, Hollande won strong support from French Muslim voters, an electorate that accounts for an estimated 7.5 percent of the total population, according to a 2010 Pew study. More than 90 percent chose Hollande, helping to swing the election in his favor over outgoing president Nicolas Sarkozy.

A French problem

But will Valls’ measures work to change the lives of job-seekers like Nasir?

The government’s track record in fighting prejudice is poor: Over the summer, it abandoned a previous anti-discrimination plan built up around the idea of “blind CVs,” which forced companies to consider job candidates without knowing their names or addresses.

Activists pointed out that recruiters could simply wait until they met candidates for job interviews to start discriminating, and were never held accountable anyway for the diversity of their hiring pool.

Under current plans, companies will be tested via a method similar to the one used for Valfort’s study. But even if recruiters are found guilty of discrimination, they will face no coercive measures to get them to clean up their acts, barring individual lawsuits.

While workers will now be able to band together and sue an employer they suspect of discrimination, the Catch-22 of not being able to prove their claims by pointing to ethnic or religious statistics means that legal condemnations for hiring discrimination are likely to remain an extreme rarity in France.

“The French tradition of Republican egalitarianism means that we are poorly equipped to deal with this problem,” said Philippe Doucet, a Socialist MP who is one of the rare members of parliament to have spoken out in favor of ethnic statistics. “At least our side recognizes that discrimination is a problem; the Right prefers to pretend that it doesn’t exist.”

For Valfort, however, simply acknowledging there is a problem is pointless if nothing meaningful is done to address it.

“Every few years, this problem is brought to the attention of politicians, who all rush to agree that it’s very serious,” she said. “But it never is.”