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Anti-Muslim feelings propel right wing in Europe

By Anthony Faiola

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On the heels of elections that stunned many in this famously progressive land, Kent Ekeroth and his peers marched through the castle-like parliament doors this month on a mission to combat what they call Sweden's greatest problem: Muslim immigration.

The 20 Swedish Democrats - the first national lawmakers from a party initially spawned in the 1980s by white supremacists - are working to impose a moratorium on new mosques, ban the shroud-like coverings worn by some conservative Muslim women and largely halt immigration from predominantly Muslim nations.

Alarm over the anti-immigrant wave intensified recently as authorities warned "dark-skinned" residents in the southern city of Malmo that one or more snipers are targeting immigrants, killing one and wounding eight in 15 separate shootings this year.

The rise to office of the Swedish Democrats in September's elections touched off a heated debate in this country, home of the Nobel Prize and known as the "conscience of the world" for aiding refugees and pioneering laws for women's equality and gay rights. Yet even here, the Swedish Democrats made it into the Rikstag by tapping into a surge of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment sweeping across many nations in Western Europe, propelling right-wing and nationalist parties to their biggest gains in years.

"The Swedish are tired of walking around in their own neighborhoods and feeling like they're in [Saudi Arabia](#)," said Ekeroth, an intense 30-year-old and founder of the new

Anti-Islamic Fund, which promotes criticism of radical Islam. "It is time for the Swedish to be comfortable again in their own country."

At the same time, resentment is brewing in nations like Sweden over a rising tide of Muslim immigrants and the reluctance of some to adopt local customs, testing the limits of tolerance in some of the world's most open-minded societies.

Unlike in the United States, where Latinos dominate the immigration debate, European angst is increasingly focused on waves of Muslims - Turks, Iraqis, Somalis and others - who have become the hottest-button issue in recent elections. In Austria this month, the far-right Freedom Party made massive gains in regional elections after an anti-immigrant campaign that included a "Bye Bye Mosque" Internet game. It allowed players to target virtual minarets in elegant Vienna and pastoral Alpine villages with a single word: "stop."

With climbing unemployment rates and painful spending cuts in the aftermath of the economic crisis, even mainstream leaders of the center right, including [France's](#) President Nicolas Sarkozy, are noting the growing anti-immigration undercurrent. Through measures including a ban on the full-length veils worn by conservative Muslim women, critics say, Sarkozy is seeking the support of the far-right backers of Jean-Marie Le Pen, the French nationalist who made a strong presidential bid in 2002.

Last week, German Chancellor Angela Merkel issued her toughest line yet on immigrants. For weeks, Merkel has condemned Thilo Sarrazin, a former Central Bank board member turned folk hero in [Germany](#) who penned a shocking bestseller arguing that Turkish and Kurdish immigrants are genetically inferior.

But the book also ignited a debate in Germany over the unwillingness of many immigrants - particularly Muslims - to integrate. Merkel last week appeared to side with immigration critics, saying at a party conference that Germany's experiment to build a "multicultural" nation had "failed, absolutely failed."

The long-liberal lands of Scandinavia and the Netherlands are also seeing a nationalist party renaissance. Last week, a conservative Dutch government came to power with the support of the anti-Islamic party of Geert Wilders, who is standing trial on a charge of inciting racial hatred against Muslims. In exchange for his support, Wilders extracted promises that the new government would take dramatic steps to curb immigration and follow the French in banning full-length Muslim veils.

In recent months, right-wing and nationalist parties have also consolidated or are now poised to expand their power in Denmark, Norway and Finland.

Farther south, Italy's Northern League - which is already part of the government's ruling coalition and has opposed the construction of a mosque in Milan - won key victories in Venice and Piedmont last March.

"In many parts of Europe, the debate over immigration and Islam are now the same thing," said Lisa Bjurwald, an author and journalist based in Stockholm who has written about Muslim immigration.

Influx

touches

nerve

The number of immigrants in Sweden rose from 58,000 in 2000 to 102,000 last year, including refugees from Somalia and [Iraq](#). Last year, 1.3 million people out of Sweden's population of 9.3 million were foreign-born.

The influx has touched a nerve in communities like Almgarden, a blue-collar suburb of cement-block apartment buildings and well-tended green parks outside Malmo in the Swedish south.

Tensions are running high in this traditionally more-conservative part of Sweden. Police are more frequently clashing with Muslim youths in one immigrant neighborhood; during a riot last year, dozens of angry teens torched cars and broke shop windows.

After the shootings in Malmo, authorities warned immigrants to be extra vigilant. Police have not revealed details about suspects, saying only that they are looking for at least one male and that the crimes appear to be racially motivated.

The case has echoes of the "Laser Man" shootings here in the 1990s that took place around the time another far-right party briefly managed to enter the Swedish parliament. Starting in summer 1991, John Ausonius - known as Laser Man for his rifle's red-laser targeting system - shot 11 immigrants, killing one, before being caught and sentenced to life in prison in 1994.

The Swedish Democrats earned only 2 percent of the vote in liberal Stockholm but 35 percent in Almgarden.

"It isn't racist to want to preserve your culture," said Leif Johansson, a 64-year-old carpenter. "I'm open to immigration, but these people come without a thought to integration, no interest in learning Swedish or being part of Swedish society."

Indeed, the Swedish Democrats, like more and more nationalist parties in Europe, have tried to go mainstream, purging former white supremacists and neo-Nazis.

Ekeroth, for instance, has a Jewish mother and strongly backs [Israel](#). In addition, he said the Swedish Democrats no longer oppose gay rights, and he cites instances of gay-bashing committed by Muslims in Sweden to bolster his party's position on immigration. The party doubled its support from the last elections to almost 6 percent of the vote in September, allowing it to sit in parliament for the first time.

The Swedish Democrats are denounced as xenophobes by the ruling center-right coalition, which has vowed not to cooperate with their agenda. Nevertheless, even the government is rethinking parts of Sweden's immigration policy, among the most liberal in the world.

Voting from fear

While there have long been vocal anti-immigrant groups in Sweden, most Swedes in recent decades have embraced "multiculturalism," or the notion that immigrants have the right to preserve their language, customs and values.

But with a recent poll showing that 73 percent of Swedes consider the lack of integration a problem, the government is set to announce a new measure in December that would compel more immigrants to learn Swedish.

In addition, one of the major coalition parties is supporting a more limited ban on full-length Muslim veils in schools and this month came out against a panel recommendation that all major religions should be given equal time in lesson plans, saying Christianity should maintain a special status in Swedish schools.

In Stockholm's predominantly immigrant neighborhood of Rinkeby, the mood in the kebab houses and coffee shops is still one of shock at the success of the Swedish Democrats.

But Alma Adan, a 32-year-old Somali immigrant and youth counselor, said the Muslim community should also look inward. New immigrants, she said, should settle across Sweden, not just in neighborhoods like Rinkeby, and learn Swedish. Through workshops and counseling, she is trying to help young Muslims - including those who rioted in her neighborhood this summer, burning down a school building and setting cars on fire - feel more at home in their adopted homeland.

"That vote was about fear," she said, referring to support for the Swedish Democrats. "Fear among Swedes that their country is being taken away from them. But it is up to us to show them that this is not the case."