The Netherlands
KADIR CANATAN

The discussion about the position of religious leaders was already ongoing in the Netherlands before 11 September. After the attacks on the US, relations between Muslims and non-Muslims came under further pressure. The media, followed by the Dutch government and social organizations, began assiduously looking for the representatives and spokespeople of the Muslims. The result was the rolling of Rolodexes with outdated or randomly gathered contacts.

It is remarkable that the Dutch government is interested in Islamic organizations as partners, not in the Muslims themselves. In these difficult times the structural problems of Dutch Islam resurface on the national political scene: the lack of a representativeness and leadership for both Muslims and the government, the function and position of imams, and the creation of a Dutch training programme for imams that would provide replacements for the so-called commuter or import imams. Meanwhile, the Dutch government makes major mistakes in times of crisis, placing increased pressure on relations and endangering the integration process of Muslims.

In the public debate on Islam the media plays an important role. Good news, like the unambiguous joint statement of national organizations strongly condemning the attacks, attracts little attention. The interest is focused mainly on more dramatic incidents and views, such as the celebration of the 11 September attacks by Moroccan youths in a rural town and the circulation of a ‘hate calendar’ among Muslim students. As it appeared, both cases were outright fabrications, but the damage had been done. Moreover, individual Muslims making strong statements came to the fore and the media suggested that the silent majority of the imams currently working in the Netherlands are far from meeting current standards, not only are imams’ working conditions poor, their status as migrants is weak. When an imam has a conflict with his employer (usually the board of the mosque), he risks being sent back immediately to his country of origin. It is clearly not the imam but rather the board members of the mosque association who are in charge.

Imams in the Netherlands are also confronted with another problem in relation to their tasks. An imam is expected to not only lead prayer services but also exert a negative influence on the imams; their competences, in particular the young, are too often presented as a solution. The most important motivation for such a programme is that future imams would gain knowledge of the Dutch language and society. But that is not all. There are two other motives, which equally imply a more all-encompassing vision of the future of Islam in the Netherlands and can at the very least count on broad support. The first motive is that of the emergence of a ‘Dutch Islam’, i.e., an interpretation of Islamic religious doctrine and ethics that fit this situation of a religious minority in a strongly secularized society. The second reflects the idea that foreign-trained imams would exert a negative influence on the integration of Muslims in Dutch society.

Modernization and alienation

Modernization has brought about a crisis in Muslim intellectual life, which is not easily solved. In very broad lines, we can distinguish two types of intellectuals in contemporary Islamic society. The first is the Westernized intellectual, who is oriented towards the West and has to a large degree distanced himself from his religious and cultural heritage. Most of these intellectuals are academy leaders, in particular the young, are too.

Dealing with this problem, an imam training programme in the Netherlands is often presented as a solution. The most important motivation for such a programme is that future imams would gain knowledge of the Dutch language and society. But that is not all. There are two other motives, which equally imply a more all-encompassing vision of the future of Islam in the Netherlands and can at the very least count on broad support. The first motive is that of the emergence of a ‘Dutch Islam’, i.e., an interpretation of Islamic religious doctrine and ethics that fit this situation of a religious minority in a strongly secularized society. The second reflects the idea that foreign-trained imams would exert a negative influence on the integration of Muslims in Dutch society.