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Founder and Publisher
YOUSUF S. AL-ALYAN

Editor-in-Chief
ABD AL-RAHMAN AL-ALYAN

EDITORIAL : 24833199-24833358-24833432
 ADVERTISING : 24835616/7
 FAX : 24835620/1
 CIRCULATION : 24833199 Extn. 163
 ACCOUNTS : 24835619
 COMMERCIAL : 24835618

P.O.Box 1301 Safat, 13014 Kuwait.
 E MAIL : info@kuwaittimes.net
 Website: www.kuwaittimes.net



Focus

VOTERS UNDECIDED, DISAPPOINTED DAYS BEFORE FRENCH VOTE

French far-right leader Marine Le Pen is too extreme, but centrist Emmanuel Macron is too young. Conservative Francois Fillon cannot be trusted, Socialist Benoit Hamon is the establishment, and Communist-backed radical Jean-Luc Melenchon, too risky. Just a week before the French cast their first votes for the next president, this is how the many undecided voters view this year's cast of candidates: with abject disappointment.

Marc Jaurena lives in the northeastern city of Metz but drives nearly an hour to work in Luxembourg, 63 km away. "For me, working in Luxembourg, my job will be directly impacted by a Marine Le Pen election," Jaurena said, as the far-right leader has pledged that, if elected, she will pull France out of the euro currency and hold a referendum on whether the country should leave the EU. The 34-year-old Jaurena said he has also been scandalized by the fake jobs scandals that have embroiled not only Le Pen, but also Fillon.

Fillon's campaign has been rocked by multiple scandals over expenses and conflicts of interest, including allegations that he gave his wife suspected fake jobs as a parliamentary assistant, for which she was paid a total of A680,000 (\$725,000). As for Le Pen, the European Parliament has accused her far-right National Front (FN) of using funds allotted for parliamentary assistants to pay staff for party work in France. She has dismissed the investigation into FN's expenses, saying it is a plot to derail her campaign bid. Jaurena is also unmoved by the ethos of the Communist-backed eurosceptic Melenchon, and by what he called Macron's "brainwashing". "I know who I won't vote for, but I don't know who I'll vote for," he said.

'Rocked by scandals'

He is among the nearly 40 percent of voters who have yet to decide which way they'll vote - or even if they'll show up at an election day next Sunday. "This election is unusual. The campaign is rocked by scandals," political scientist Richard Kleinschmager told AFP. "The situation has become too complex to get people engaged". Voters' indecision has reinforced the uncertainty of this year's two-round presidential election, in which four candidates - Le Pen, Macron, Melenchon and Fillon - are neck-and-neck for the first round of voting on April 23. Polls give each between 19 and 23 percent of votes. The top two candidates from that vote will go forward to the second-round run-off on May 7.

"For me, it's unclear," said 41-year-old Fabrice Blanchard, a commercial agent in Lorraine. "Macron, we don't know if he is of the right or the left". As for Hamon, "he is from the outgoing government," which has been marked by high unemployment and low growth. Only 17 percent of voters questioned in an Ipsos poll in February gave high marks to France's democratic system.

'Outraged by scandals'

In the western city of Rennes, Pierre, 28, voted for the then president Nicolas Sarkozy in 2012, but he is leaning towards Macron this time around, "because he's young". But for retired teacher Jeannette, 77, who is among the undecided voters, said Macron is "too young". "Undecided voters are a feature of this election," Kleinschmager said. "Voters from the two major parties have been thoroughly weakened. Francoise, the daughter of a former mayor in the eastern province of Franche-Comte, said she would have voted for Fillon "if there hadn't been the scandals".

"Honesty in life and in politics, it's essential," the 54-year-old pharmaceutical worker said. "My father was mayor of a town, and when I made copies at city hall, he took out money to pay for them. So then when we see the Fillon family... I am outraged by the scandals".

There is a danger in having so many undecided voters at this late stage, said Kleinschmager. "The danger is when we don't know what to hold on to," he said. "So we grab a lottery ticket while telling ourselves 'why not'. That lottery ticket is Marine Le Pen". An Ipsos poll for the daily Le Monde out Friday showed Macron and Le Pen - who have been neck-and-neck for weeks at the head of the pack - on 22 percent for the first round. — AFP

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REFUGEES BRING ITALY VILLAGE BACK TO LIFE

In the foothills of the Aspromonte mountains in southern Italy, the silence of a once-dying village is broken by the laughter of a small group of refugees. Tiny Sant'Alessio has been welcoming families and vulnerable migrants here for three years in a project which not only provides humanitarian assistance but brings with it invaluable economic and social benefits. Over the years the village has dwindled to only 330 inhabitants, many of them elderly. The steep cobbled streets are deserted and most windows are shuttered, residents having left over the years for better work opportunities in Turin, Milan or as far away as Australia.

In an attempt to reverse the trend, however, since 2014 the council has been renting eight of these empty flats to house up to 35 migrants at a time as part of the national SPRAR network (Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees). Everything is done to help the newcomers get back on their feet, from Italian lessons to legal, medical and psychological assistance, vocational training and social activities such as gardening, cooking and dancing classes.

The village is currently home to an Iraqi Kurdish family, a Gambian couple with a baby and young people from Ghana, Nigeria, Mali and Senegal. There is a special project for the most vulnerable, including HIV-positive people, diabetics, victims of prostitution networks, a deaf and dumb couple, and a young woman whose toddler son was shot dead in Libya and husband is feared drowned.

'Humane and humanitarian'
 "Our mission is both humane and humanitarian, that's the most important

thing," said Stefano Calabro, a 43-year-old police officer who has been mayor of Sant'Alessio since 2009. "But there is a significant economic benefit too." The state allocates up to A45 (\$47) a day for each migrant, most of which goes to the organizers to cover costs. The project has created full or part-time jobs in Sant'Alessio for 16 people including seven locals - from social workers to Italian teachers and cultural mediators.

And it has prevented the closure of the village's basic services - a bar, small supermarket, doctor's surgery and pharmacy. With funds to spend on services, the coun-

ty has been able to open a small gym open to all residents and upkeep a lush sports field overlooking the valley, where migrants regularly challenge the team from a nearby drug rehabilitation center. After six months to a year here, some of the refugees managed to find work in the region, others headed elsewhere.

Ghanaian Salifu, 23, decided to stay on and has been living off odd jobs like helping with manual work in the fields. Sant'Alessio may not offer bright lights or much in the way of career opportunities, but a cheerful Salifu says "we're not going anywhere". After months in Sicily's notori-

ous, overcrowded Mineo camp, just small things like quick doctor appointments here seem a luxury.

Vast areas depopulated

Sitting in the sunshine and watching the world go by from his front garden, 89-year old Antonio Sacca - who spent 54 years working in a Turin factory before returning home - says he likes his new neighbors. "They behave well. They live independent lives but often lend a helping hand," he said. Bar owner and widow Celestina Borrello, 73, whose son left years ago to find work in Belgium, says "the village was emptying, so if there's a little movement now, it's a good thing". "We know what it means to leave our land," she adds.

The project has been such a success that Coopisa, the association behind it, is opening others in four villages nearby. And there is another benefit: those that join the SPRAR network and take in small numbers of refugees are guaranteed not to have to host an emergency reception center, such as the one in the nearby ski-town of Gamberio, where 120 migrants are massed in a hotel. With just 26,000 places available, the network is only a small part of Italy's reception system, which hosts more than 176,000 people.

While most are housed in large groups, often angering or frustrating local communities, this dusty village is seen as a quiet triumph. "Sant'Alessio has been our prototype," said Coopisa head Luigi De Filippo, who points out there is scope for the project to go across Italy and beyond. "There are vast areas affected by the same depopulation in northern Italy and elsewhere in Europe." — AFP



A resident looks at a group of migrants walking in a street of Sant'Alessio in Aspromonte, a small village of 330 inhabitants in Calabria, southern Italy, on April 6, 2017. — AFP

'ISLAMIC' KINDERGARTENS CAUSE STIR IN AUSTRIA

A debate is raging in Austria after a study suggested that Islamic kindergartens in Vienna were helping to create "parallel societies" or even produce the dangerous homegrown radicals of the future. According to its author, Ednan Aslan, a Turkish-born Austrian professor at Vienna University, some 10,000 children aged two to six attend around 150 Muslim preschools, teaching the Holy Quran much like Christian ones do with Bible studies.

At least a quarter are backed by groups propagating archconservative strains of Islam like Salafism, or organizations that see religion not just as a private matter but integral to politics and society, Aslan believes. "Parents are sending their kids to establishments that ensure they are in a Muslim setting and learn a few suras (chapters from the Quran)," Aslan, a respected researcher into Islamic education, told AFP. "But they are unaware that they are shutting them off from a multicultural society," he said.

The study, published last year, has been jumped on by critics of immigration - not least the far-right Freedom Party - in the wake of attacks such as Paris and Brussels perpetrated by Muslims who grew up in Europe.

Undercover

But many reject Aslan's findings, questioning its methodology. The magazine Biber, which writes for and about minorities, sent a veiled Muslim reporter undercover posing as a mother looking for a place for her son at 14 Muslim kindergartens. She found no evidence to back up Aslan's suggestions that they were churning out "little Salafists" or that things like the children singing - frowned upon by ultra-strict Muslims - were banned. But around a third were according to the magazine "problematic", "cutting off or isolating children" from mainstream society. It also voiced concerns about the "openness" of some staff and the level of German spoken.

Vienna City Hall has since sought to calm the situation by commissioning an in-depth study involving a six-strong research team which will be published later this year. But the first problem is establishing how many Islamic kindergartens there are. Vienna has 842 registered kindergartens, 100 of them Catholic-run and 13 Protestant, but the number of Muslim ones is not known. Part of the reason is that there has been an explosion in the number that are pri-

vately run, stretching the ability of the authorities to keep tabs and allowing some to operate under the radar.

City of immigrants

Vienna is home to 1.8 million people, half of whom have a parent born abroad or who were born abroad themselves. Ever since it was the capital of a vast empire, it has been a magnet for outsiders, not all of them always welcome. "But what is new in recent years has been the religious aspect of the debate about integration," said Thomas Schmidinger, political scientist and Islam specialist at Vienna University.

Austria, a nation of 8.7 million people, has received more than 130,000 asylum applications since 2015 following the onset of the European Union's biggest migration crisis since World War II. The Freedom Party is riding high in

the polls. Surveys suggest that public attitudes to Muslims have hardened. Attacks on migrant shelters soared last year. The ruling centrist coalition has moved to the right with plans to ban full-face veils in public and oblige migrants to sign an "integration contract".

Organizations representing Austria's 700,000-strong Muslim population say that in this context, Aslan's flawed report has only fanned the flames. "This study feeds populism and forces Muslims to justify themselves constantly," said Murat Gurol from newly created pressure group the Muslim Civil Society Network. The 45-year-old IT worker said he sent his own son to a Muslim kindergarten in order to learn "the values of solidarity, humanity and responsibility". As a child he went to a Christian preschool, and "I don't see why that should be allowed for one religion and not for another," he said. — AFP



A family relaxes near the Islam Centre of Vienna on April 14, 2017 in Vienna. —AFP