

Imam Larbi Kechat freed in France

by Odile Mojon

Among the 26 Algerian citizens assigned to a forced residence at Folembay (about 75 miles from Paris) by French Interior Minister Charles Pasqua, 20 have been expelled to Burkina Faso and six have been freed, but assigned to various fixed residences in France. Among them, the most notorious case is that of Imam Larbi Kechat, one of the most respected figures among the 3 million Muslims in France.

On Aug. 10, Larbi Kechat of the Adda-Wa mosque in Paris was arrested following a ministerial decree of expulsion accusing him of propaganda against the West and sympathy for the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). He and the others were apparently considered by the Interior Ministry as a threat to state security.

The arrests began after the murder, in Algiers, of three French citizens by the Islamist Action Group (IAG), part of a long escalation of tension between France and Algeria. This situation has led Paris to take measures such as closing down the French high school of Algiers and imposing a visa requirement for Algerians coming to France. The visas can no longer be delivered by the French consulate in Algeria but only in the French city of Nantes, which means that only those who have good connections and money will be able to leave Algeria.

In this situation, the arrest of individuals supposedly linked to the FIS is more a maneuver to propitiate the French electorate, in a pre-presidential election period, than a security measure. The arrest of Larbi Kechat, considered even by the Paris daily *Le Monde* to be an "imam above suspicion" who is preaching moderation and openmindedness, has raised many questions. Deeply involved in the Islamic-Christian dialogue and a regular guest on "Knowledge of Islam," a Sunday TV program, he has always clearly rejected Islamic fundamentalism. Hence, many articles in prominent newspapers (including Catholic press) stressed the incongruity of his arrest. Important intellectuals, priests, and ministers intervened to request his freedom.

If we take into account that Larbi Kechat is a very influential man—his mosque is France's biggest and attracts up to 5,000 believers toward a moderate, orthodox Islam—two hypotheses are to be considered. The first was developed by the weekly *Nouvel Observateur*. According to some Muslim circles, the government of Algeria asked for his arrest, although the imam, an Algerian citizen, has refused to align

himself with the "official" Algerian earthly powers. The second hypothesis is that in the current paranoid mood of the French population on the Algerian situation and toward Islam, any policy that claims to increase security would be welcomed. If the arrest of Larbi Kechat had been followed by violence of any kind, this would have created the perfect pretext to repress it through police operations. If successful, such a move would have boosted Pasqua's credibility, who is building himself up as a potential presidential candidate.

Far-fetched? One source informed *EIR* that at the Friday prayer following Larbi Kechat's arrest, a stranger started shouting inflammatory slogans. Only the intervention of a couple of individuals kept the incident from degenerating into violence. However, the striking fact was the presence of a man with a camera, apparently waiting for something. Some "exotic" scenes maybe?

The problem for Pasqua is that the whole operation is tainted with dubious motives at a time when the legality of the arrest and "forced residence" procedure are coming under scrutiny. In this case, Pasqua revived a little-known law—last used during the 1950s Algerian war—to justify his actions. And now 20 foreigners have been sent to Burkina Faso without any judicial procedure.

Although Larbi Kechat is assigned to a forced residence in the 19th district of Paris (probably a face-saving measure for the government), the situation remains tense within a Muslim community which is now, in numbers, the second largest religion after Catholicism. Most people live in the suburbs of big cities—Marseille, Lyon, Lille, Paris—where violent incidents have taken place following many *bavures* (accidental police killings of young foreigners). Drugs, unemployment, illiteracy, and no future is the common fate for young Africans and *Beurs* (second generation immigrants from the Maghreb, born and raised in France).

The British hand

But whoever looks behind the scenes will find the British hand trying to stir up chaos. This operation is targeting both countries for destabilization, playing on both the extremists in the Islamic movement and the French "laicists" who are prone to anti-religious feelings. Two "Islamic" events, filled with inflammatory speeches against France, recently took place in England (on Aug. 7 in Wembley, and Aug. 28 in Sheffield) under the protection of British police. Observers contrast the atmosphere at these events with the moderation of interviews given to French media by Sudanese religious leader Hassan Al Turabi.

The danger is that the French government and elites will be distracted from an West-East and North-South pro-development approach, into a policy of repression in Algeria and against the Islamic community in France. Men like Larbi Kechat are among the most crucial to avoid such chaos. It is good news that he is now free, but it is worrisome that he is forbidden to travel beyond Paris.