When a Muslim was not allowed to buy a house

A few weeks ago, Austria’s conservative-far-right coalition government collapsed after a corruption scandal. Its term in office was dominated by several controversial and specifically anti-Muslim policies. This itself was not a surprise given the anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant politics of the far-right Freedom Party, a constituent in the coalition.

The fall of the government, however, does not mean that racism and Islamophobia have been defeated. The most recent example of Islamophobia is the case of a Palestinian family. Abu El Hosna wanted to buy a house in Weikendorf, a small village in Lower Austria, but he was not given permission.

Problems, real and imagined

According to Johann Zimmermann, the village’s Mayor, the denial of permission was because “the different cultural spheres of the Islamic and the Western worlds share very different values, customs and practices”. Several people, including the potential neighbours of the Palestinian family, agreed with Mr. Zimmermann’s views.

However, many, including some Austrians who have lived for decades in the village, were shocked. The village lies near Vienna, Austria’s capital and a leading metropolis, and also next to the Slovakian border. Some locals claimed that racism or Islamophobia were not the “real problems” here.

Austrian daily Der Standard quoted a local as pointing out that residents or officials in the village did not have any problem with the Turkish families who moved in several years ago. The proportion of foreigners in Weikendorf is about 10%, which is also the State average.

It is obvious that not all the people living in Weikendorf have a racist bent of mind. However, there are increasing number of racist incidents in Austria targeting minorities and immigrants.

“Whatever happened behind the curtains, one thing should be clear: a Muslim family was not allowed to buy a house, and this is certainly a scandal. What would people say if they were not Muslim but Jewish, Hindu or Sikh?” asked Maryam Mohammadi, a 23-year-old student living in Vienna.

Mr. Hosna’s family embodied several images that some Austrians have come to consider as those of “enemies”. It was a Muslim-Arab family. Further, its members were refugees without Austrian citizenship, linked to their Palestinian background. The family was heavily attacked on social media. Many people supported what they believed was the “right decision” by Mayor Zimmermann. To them, the family “looked suspicious”.

This hostility towards the ‘Muslim enemy’ appears in many other places in Austria these days. A recent study by Vienna-based Initiative of Anti-Discriminatory Education revealed that Islamophobia appears to be the most common form of discrimination in Austrian schools and universities. Among the 260 cases examined, 122 could be linked to Islamophobia.

Often, Muslim girls and women who wore headscarves were the targets. “As a Muslim, I feel more and more uncomfortable in Austria. I don’t want to identify myself or our whole religious group as victims because, in fact, I’m tired of it. But the situation here just becomes worse. As long as our mothers and our aunts were cleaners, no one had problems with their headscarves. But after they become teachers or lawyers, they are being targeted,” pointed out Samir, a worker in Innsbruck, who didn’t want to share his full name.

These developments are deeply tied to the rightward shift the country’s politics has taken in the last few years.

However, Austria had a different past dating back to the imperial time when religions peacefully and respectfully co-existed. The country recognised Islam as part of its public law and officially accepted it in 1912. Back then, Emperor Franz Joseph passed the “Islam Law” that ensured a modicum of self determination to the Muslims living in his Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The Emperor’s policy was not just open-minded, but also practical, since many Bosnian Muslims lived in the kingdom at that time and also fought for it.

What is happening in today’s Austria could make Franz Joseph turn in his grave.