France Faces a Colonial Legacy: What Makes Someone French?

By CRAIG S. SMITH

PARIS, Nov. 10 — Semou Diouf, holding a pipe in one hand and a cigarette in the other, stood amid the noisy games of checkers and cards in the dingy ground-floor common room of a crowded tenement building and pondered the question of why he feels French.

"I was born in Senegal when it was part of France," he said before putting the pipe in his mouth. "I speak French, my wife is French and I was educated in France." The problem, he added after pulling the pipe out of his mouth again, "is that I don't think I'm French."

That, in a nutshell, is what lies at the heart of the unrest that has swept France in the past two weeks: millions of French citizens, whether immigrants or the offspring of immigrants, feel rejected by traditional French society, which has resisted adjusting a vision of itself forged in fires of the French Revolution. The concept of French identity remains rooted deep in the country's centuries-old culture, and a significant portion of the population has yet to accept the increasingly multiethnic makeup of the nation. Put simply, being French, for many people, remains a baguette-and-beret affair.

Though many countries aspire to ensure equality among their citizens and fall short, the case is complicated in France by a secular ideal that refuses to recognize ethnic and religious differences in the public domain. All citizens are French, end of story, the government insists, a lofty position that, nonetheless, has allowed discrimination to thrive.

France's Constitution guarantees equality to all, but that has long been interpreted to mean that ethnic or religious differences are not the purview of the state. The result is that no one looks at such differences to track growing inequalities and so discrimination is easy to hide.

"People have it in their head that surveying by race or religion is bad, it's dirty, it's something reserved for Americans and that we shouldn't do it here," said Yazid Sabeg, the only prominent Frenchman of Arab descent at the head of a publicly listed French company. "But without statistics to look at, how can we measure the problem or record its progress?"

Mr. Sabeg was born in Algeria when it was French territory and moved to France with his family as an infant. His father worked as a laborer and later a mechanic to put him through a Jesuit boarding school, and he went on to earn a Ph.D. at the Sorbonne.

He scoffs at the notion of a French identity based on what he believes is a fiction of equal rights and France's refusal to engage in debate about the gap between ideals and reality.

"France doesn't know how to manage diversity," he said. "It doesn't want to accept the consequences of a multiethnic society."

French leaders admit failings but insist they are working to bring equality to all citizens and have embarked on a public debate about what it means to be French. But that debate is still bounded by fidelity to ideals of the Republic. President Jacques Chirac told reporters at the Elysée Palace Thursday that the government "hasn't been fast enough" because "no matter what our origins, we are all children of the Republic."

Further to the political right, the debate has taken on another cast: the far-right National Front party released a doctored video on its Web site this week that showed Paris in flames. "Immigration, explosion in the suburbs... Le Pen warned you," the banner over the video reads, referring to the party's patriarch, Jean-Marie Le Pen.

The idea behind France's republican ideal was that by officially ignoring ethnic differences in favor of a transcendent French identity, the country would avoid the stratification of society that existed before the French Revolution or the fragmentation that it now sees in multicultural models like the United States. But the French model, never updated, has failed, critics say. "France always talks about avoiding ghettoization, but it has already happened," Mr. Sabeg said, adding that people are separated in the housing projects, in their schools and in their heads.

The country's colonial legacy has only deepened that alienation. Rachid Arhab, one of the only well-
A nation clings to an idea of itself first forged in the French Revolution.

Mr. Arhab himself is a study in the country's ambivalence toward what it means to be French. He was born in Algeria when the country was French territory and so was born French. He moved to France as an infant, but lost his French citizenship when he was 8 in the wake of the Algerian war — like many French from Algeria, his parents didn't understand that they had to apply to retain their citizenship in France. Mr. Arhab didn't become a French citizen again until 1992. Yet he said, "I feel profoundly French."

But even the language of identity has its barbs. Mr. Arhab said that when he heard people refer to him as French "of Algerian origin," it carries with it the subtext that he is not really French.

He said earlier generations like himself have had it easier than the frustrated youths in the housing projects today, because his generation had closer ties to their homelands. "When someone says to me, 'you're not French,' I can take refuge in my origins," he said, "but the young can't do that."

Most second-generation Muslim immigrants are generally no more observant than young French Catholics. But the legacy of discrimination creates the conditions for young people who feel neither French nor North African to seek an identity in Islam — often anti-Western, political Islam.

"I've known discrimination all of my life," Mr. Sabeg said, adding that the prejudices only grew stronger the more prominent he became. In 1991, he led a group of investors in taking over CS Communication and Systèmes, a publicly listed company that he now runs. When he applied to the government to become a defense contractor, a ministry official told him, "You're called Sabeg, that's a problem for us," meaning that he was of Algerian descent.

Rumors soon began circulating that he was an Algerian spy. It took him three years to win his first contract from the Defense Ministry, though government contracts now count for a third of his business. He never found out who was behind the rumors. "It's like a snake, you see the tail as it disappears, but never the head," Mr. Sabeg said, adding that the rumors continue.

So far, the government's efforts to reach out to minority ethnic youth have been half-hearted, constrained by the republican ideals that have turned affirmative action into a taboo. But private efforts are beginning, skirting the rules.

Karim Zeribi, a former soccer player and political adviser, said a study he carried out earlier this year found that résumés sent out with traditionally French names got responses 50 times higher than those with North African or African names. In the wake of the study, Mr. Zeribi established an agency in April called Act for Citizenship, which canvasses minority neighborhoods for qualified job candidates and markets them to corporations.

"We want to create a network for these people where there is none," Mr. Zeribi said. Still, he said, his young candidates are regularly asked if they are practicing Muslims when they are interviewed for jobs.