

Rioting Unlikely in Germany, Say Experts

France is facing the worst racial unrest in decades. Could the same happen in Germany, home to a large immigrant population which has been spared violence so far? Experts are skeptical. In a ninth night of rioting which saw violence spread to towns beyond the French capital, rioters torched hundreds of vehicles in impoverished suburbs of northeastern Paris as France grappled with the worst race riots in decades that have made headlines around the world.

Amid the charred wreckage and mounting anger over what is seen as the government's slow response, many in France are trying to come up with an explanation.

Those allegedly responsible -- groups of young Muslim men of largely North African and black African origin -- have said that they are protesting economic misery, racial discrimination and provocative policing.

But while some blame the government's recent hardline law-and-order policies, others see the root of the problem in broken promises by the French government to its immigrant communities: The French integration model insists that all citizens are equal before the state, but some say cultural minorities are being left without a voice.

In Germany, on the other hand, immigrants have so far lacked any sense of entitlement. Unlike France, Britain or the Netherlands, Berlin has only recently opened up citizenship and loosened naturalization laws.

Some say this might be one of the reasons why similar riots have not taken place in Germany so far. The country is home to Europe's second-largest Muslim population -- an estimated 3.7 million -- after France and has a two-million-strong Turkish minority.

The only thing in Germany that even comes close to the kind of violence raging in France currently, is the traditional Labor Day demonstration in Berlin that often ends in cars being set ablaze and clashes between the police and youth.

"Immigrants (in Germany) still feel like guests," said Ruud Koopmans, a sociology professor at Amsterdam's Vrije Universiteit, who previously worked at Berlin's Center for Social Research. "Turks still see themselves to a large extent as Turks and not Germans. Only once they start seeing themselves as (citizens), they start making demands on the society in which they live."

Koopmans added that violence among immigrants in Germany is actually more common than in France, but still tends to be related to conflicts in their countries of origins. He named aggression between Turks and Kurds and between different ethnic groups from the former Yugoslavia as examples. "In France, you find almost no political violence that is related to homeland violence," Koopmans said, adding that he expects the situation in Germany to change as more immigrants start to feel like citizens of

Germany. "Only then will they start making demands and there will be an increase in the kind of conflicts that you seen in France," he said.

Others disagreed, saying that since immigrant ghettos like the ones in France, Britain or the Netherlands didn't exist in Germany, riots were less likely to happen.

"We don't have these closed clusters of immigrants," said Klaus J. Bade, who directs the Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies at Osnabrück University. Immigrant-dominated neighborhoods such as Berlin's Kreuzberg and Neukölln are undoubtedly social hot spots, but Bade pointed out that they were still far from being ghettos. "I don't see any parallel societies developing there," Bade said. "These are relatively mixed areas."

But he added that Germans had to realize that they would have to shoulder major costs in the long run if they do not improve existing integration programs. Bade said Germany should set up a three-tier system of intergration: Helping those willing to come to Germany learn the language before they arrive, supporting them once they've immigrated and looking after those who have failed to get on their feet once they're in the country. "That costs a lot of money, but if we don't do it, we'll pay for it dearly in the long run," he said.

Mathis Winkler