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HEAD TOPICS

Animal slaughter law brings Muslims, Jews together in Belgium

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With the help of a U.S. legal fund, a group of community organizations aims to overturn the law that bans the practices required for halal and kosher meat.

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But a new law in the Flanders region of Belgium bans the practices required for both halal and kosher meat. That has meant such products have become harder to find and more expensive in recent months.

With the help of an American legal fund, a group of Muslim and Jewish organizations have taken legal action and hope to overturn the new law. The Belgian Constitutional Court heard their arguments in January and is expected to rule on the case within weeks.

"Jews and Muslims are vulnerable minorities in Belgium and this decision stigmatizes these minority groups," said Joos Roets, the lead council for the Executive of Muslims in Belgium, and the Belgian Coordination Committee of Islamic Institutions, two organizations involved in the lawsuit.

Halal meat is difficult to find at outlets like Aswak Souss in Brussels since a new law requiring pre-stunning of animals came into effect.

"There used to be lines at the cashiers, now they are almost empty.

People would come for meat and leave with all sorts of other things," he said.

Antwerp is home to one of the largest Jewish ultra-Orthodox populations in Europe.

"If it stays this way it will be a big problem, but hopefully it won't take long for the law to be thrown out," butcher Chaim Goldberg, 32, said.

"Time and again, the Jewish community is told by senior E.U. officials that there is no Europe without the Jews. These bans undermine those statements and put Jewish life at risk," Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, president of the Conference of European Rabbis, said in a statement.

The Jewish community's legal efforts have been assisted and partially funded by the New York City-based Lawfare Project, a legal fund and civil rights organization that works around the world.

Despite the strong objections of both minority communities, the politician who introduced the legislation in Flanders insists that religion shouldn't exempt anyone from the country's laws.

Though the law makes ritual observance harder, members of both the Jewish and Muslim communities have no immediate plans to leave Belgium.

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