

France: The anti-Muslim campaign and the phony debate on secularism

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Facing an acute social crisis in immigrant suburbs, compounded by the explosive effect of the Iraq war on Muslim public opinion, the government of Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin is seeking to control and intimidate French Muslims.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has already written of the Raffarin government's reactionary security laws, with draconian prison sentences and fines for various petty or invented crimes. These measures are meant to justify a police crackdown on inhabitants of poor neighborhoods. [See New powers proposed for French police, The budget and penal reform in France: an acceleration of reaction].

In addition, Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy led a 2002 campaign to set up a French Muslim Council (Conseil Français du Culte Musulman—CFCM). In an Interior Ministry chateau at Nainville-les-Roches on December 20, 2002, three large Muslim associations—the Paris Mosque, the National Federation of French Muslims (FNMF) and the Union of French Muslim Organisations (UOIF)—negotiated with Sarkozy the framework and establishment of the CFCM.

As a government press release indicated, ruling circles viewed the council as an expedient means for controlling the growing Muslim population: “The creation of the CFCM aims to give French Islam representatives and to give the French government a natural partner in dialog. [It seeks] to transform French Islam's clandestine character, which is a source of radicalisation.”

The CFCM's stage-managed character suggests that the government never viewed it as anything other than a way of manipulating the Muslim community. Sarkozy nominated large numbers of CFCM officials—at least 25 percent by the government's own admission, although certain Muslim organisations claim the figure is higher. The “elected” positions, however, were not to be elected by popular vote in the Muslim community, but rather by “representatives” of each mosque or place of worship.

Sarkozy gave the CFCM's three highest positions (president/spokesman and the two vice-presidential positions) to the heads of the three associations with whom he had held the December 20 negotiations. Some within in the French political establishment view even this rigged council as a potential political threat. In particular, there are concerns that the UOIF's fundamentalist links might make it difficult to control. These concerns were reinforced after the UOIF began to win considerable support in CFCM elections held last April and May.

On April 19, Sarkozy spoke to an audience of several thousand at the UOIF's 20th Annual Meeting in Le Bourget, a northern suburb of Paris. After initially receiving applause for asserting that Muslims had the right to practice their religion like any other French citizens, he was loudly booed for insisting that Muslim women pose for identity photographs without wearing their headscarves.

Subsequently, broad political circles have mounted an anti-Muslim press campaign, most notably against headscarves in the public schools. Since a campaign along openly anti-immigrant lines would provoke popular opposition, the promoters of the current agitation have conducted it under

the banner of “secularism,” a term derived from the anti-Church social struggles of 19th-century France. Headscarves in governmental facilities, they claim, violate the 1905 law separating the state from religion.

The statement of François Baroin in the May 24 issue of *Le Figaro* magazine is fairly typical. Baroin, a representative of the ruling conservative UMP (Union for a Popular Majority) party, assembled a report on “secularism” at the request of Prime Minister Raffarin.

He declared, “To respond to the shock of April 21, 2002 [when neo-fascist candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen defeated the Socialist Party candidate Lionel Jospin in the first round of the presidential election, going on to face the UMP's Jacques Chirac in the second round], our country must reaffirm its values. Fighting against democratic fissuring, against social exclusion and identity politics now takes the form of restoring the secular project in its humanist and political dimensions.” He went on to propose banning headscarves in the public schools and monitoring the spread of Islamic fundamentalism.

This justification for such a ban is ludicrous on its face. The crisis of political perspective in France that resulted in the April 2002 Le Pen vote cannot be resolved by attacking Le Pen's favorite scapegoats. This policy will only boost illusions in Le Pen and legitimise his demagoguery.

The proposed ban also rests on an obvious contradiction: the principle of separation of church and state, originally designed to safeguard freedom of conscience and religion, is being invoked to justify limiting religious freedom. This false and ahistorical view of the secularist tradition at times takes darkly humorous forms, as when the president of the Senate, Christian Poncelet (UMP), refused to let a veiled woman into the Senate chamber. His chief of staff, Alain Méar, defended Poncelet's behavior to *Le Monde*, claiming that, by virtue of its secular character, the Senate was a “sacred space.”

The “secular” anti-headscarf campaign has rallied increasingly wide support from both wings of established French politics. Raffarin, several government officials (Local Liberties Minister Patrick Devedjian, UMP spokesman Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres, Education Minister Luc Ferry), and majority party lawmakers (Baroin, Eric Raoult, and National Assembly president Jean-Louis Debré) have all come out in favor of a law against wearing headscarves in the public schools.

On the opposition side, Laurent Fabius, head of the Socialist Party's (PS's) “free-market” wing, told the party's May 19 Dijon Congress that “ostentatious religious signs have no place...in the public space—and thus, first of all, in the public schools.” Former Socialist Party culture minister Jack Lang has also come out in favour of a law banning “all exterior signs of religious membership” on the grounds that it would help stop the spread of Islamic fundamentalism.

The national secretary of the French Communist Party (PCF), Marie-George Buffet, also came out in opposition to “wearing Muslim veils in school” and called for “firm respect for secularism,” according to an April 30 report in the Communist newspaper *l'Humanité*.

The decision by prominent representatives of the major parties of

established French politics to lend support to this racist initiative does not flow solely, or even principally, from individual and subjective prejudices. More basically, the French ruling elite, committed to ever-deepening social attacks on the working class, has no alternative to offer oppressed immigrants to counter the growth of essentially reactionary tendencies such as Islamic fundamentalism. The only option that remains is police repression, which will only further alienate the Muslim community and bolster the prestige of the fundamentalists.

The growth of Muslim organisations with fundamentalist ties is itself bound up with the betrayal of the working class by the Socialist Party (PS) and Communist Party (PCF). Both parties have for years been moving to the right and adapting themselves to the policies of the right-wing parties. Immigrants, who traditionally looked to the workers' movement to defend their rights and living conditions, found themselves without any political defenders.

Islamist organisations, most notably the UOIF, began to grow rapidly in the 1980s, as the PS and PCF in the government of François Mitterrand ditched the last vestiges of their reformist programs and adopted capitalist austerity as their platform. Local PS and PCF officials participated in anti-immigrant campaigns.

Most notably, in February 1981, Robert Hue (who was until recently the general secretary of the PCF, but was then mayor of the Paris suburb Montigny-les-Vitrolles) marched at the head of a racist mob that surrounded the home of a Moroccan family, forcing them to barricade themselves inside their house.

Even though its ostensible target is the French Muslim community, the "secularist" campaign is ultimately directed against the entire working class. It serves to lend the Raffarin government a left-sounding slogan on the issue of public education, even as Raffarin rides roughshod over opposition from teachers and students and implements a decentralisation plan that will mark a major step in dismantling the national education system. Having cut pensions and withheld the pay of striking teachers, the government is trying to disorient teachers, and, more broadly, the entire working population, by pushing the notion that the defence of political freedom and the secular 1905 law requires a suspicious or hostile attitude towards Muslims.

The presentation of the 1905 law by supporters of the current "secularist" campaign falsifies the social and historical meaning of that democratic measure. Secularism, as understood by those who fought for it at the time of the Third Republic of the late 19th century, was not a chauvinist slogan. It was bound up with the recognition that the Catholic Church was one of the key institutional supports of social reaction, and that the interests of working people demanded that the Church be kept away from state power and the schools. This conception was intimately bound up with the social struggles of the last 30 years of the 19th century and informed by the active participation of the socialist movement.

The world's first workers' government, the 1871 Paris Commune, proclaimed the separation of church and state. The previous government of Napoleon III had provoked a war with Prussia and lost disastrously. The Prussians captured the emperor, and the French government, having fled south, landed in Versailles. The defence of Paris was left to its inhabitants. The city's population, armed to defend the city, overthrew the Versailles government's representatives, proclaiming the Commune in March of 1871.

On the question of church and state, the Commune decreed: "Since the first of the principles of the French Republic is liberty; Since liberty of conscience is first among liberties; Since subsidising religion is unethical, as it imposes on citizens against their own beliefs; Since, in fact, the clergy has been the accomplice of the monarchy's crimes against liberty, [... ecclesiastical goods will be] put at the disposal of the Nation." It also banned religious symbols and prayers from the schools.

Unlike the supporters of today's "secularism" campaign, the armed

population of Paris did not seek to target particular ethnic groups. It was an explicitly internationalist movement, making a German worker, Leo Frankel, minister of labour and placing two Poles, J. Dabrowski and W. Wróblewski, in important military positions. It justified its nomination of foreigners to official positions by stating that "the flag of the Commune is the flag of the World Republic." It melted down the Victory Column on Paris's Vendôme Square, cast from the cannons of foreign armies captured by Napoleon Bonaparte, on the grounds that it was an incitement to national hatred.

The Third Republic was proclaimed on the grave of the Commune, which the Versailles government put down by bombarding and occupying Paris, and then executing over 20,000 of the Commune's supporters. In the 1880s, the wealthy bourgeois layers that held power under the Third Republic responded to popular pressure by secularising various state institutions previously run by the Church (hospitals and graveyards in 1881; elementary schools in 1882), eliminating public prayers at government functions (1884), and re-establishing the right to divorce (1884).

The 1905 law was passed in the wake of the Dreyfus affair, a defining political event of turn-of-the-century France. Officials in the heavily Catholic upper reaches of the army staff framed a Jewish officer, Alfred Dreyfus, on charges of spying for Germany, and sentenced him in 1894 to lifetime solitary confinement on a desert island.

The Catholic Church, its newspapers and many of its priests attacked Dreyfus as a spy and Jew. After a long campaign by intellectuals and socialists, Dreyfus's sentence was repealed in 1900. France's highest appeals court fully cleared Dreyfus of all charges and reinstated him to his former rank in 1906. The French army continued to consider Dreyfus to be guilty. Only in 1995 did army officials officially recognise that the French army had falsely accused Dreyfus.

Public revulsion against the Catholic Church's role in the Dreyfus affair and its links to reactionary army circles, as well as a rising tide of strikes and working-class militancy, favoured the passage of the 1905 law, which officially separated the French state from religion.

The French right wing's attempt to pervert the heritage of French secular struggles is all the more cynical given the ruling conservative UMP party's extensive links to monarchist and right-wing Catholic elements. Some of its leading figures came from the Droite Libérale (DL) party, including such high government officials as Raffarin and Sarkozy. The DL's historical roots lie in the anti-secularist movements of the early 20th century.

Le Figaro's interview with Marcel Gauchet, head of the School for Advanced Studies in Social Science (EHESS), demonstrates the lack of commitment to the separation of church and state of today's ruling-class "secularists." Gauchet said: "A particular secularism is moribund: the virulent and anti-clerical secularism inherited from the Third Republic... Religion has simply increased its visibility in the public arena... I am therefore calling for a demanding but calm secularism." He expressed his hope that his "new" variety of secularism would help provide a sense of French national identity.

Such conceptions, framed in the republican language that has been used to justify the Raffarin government's entire law-and-order campaign, have gained a certain hearing, or at least toleration, amongst sections of the French population.

Sections of the trade union bureaucracy and their associates in the French "far left" have also thrown their weight behind the "secularism" campaign, as they did the previous anti-headscarf campaigns of 1989 and 1994, when they supported teachers who refused to lecture to a veiled student. Force Ouvrière (FO), the trade union close to the PT (Workers' Party), has given backhanded support to the "secularism" drive by issuing a June 25 statement calling for the total defence of the 1905 law, without mentioning either its perversion by right-wing circles or the question of

immigrants' rights and conditions. Nor did it mention the controversy's role in chasing the question of pension cuts from newspaper headlines. The nationalist orientation of the trade union bureaucracy leaves it with no other perspective than serving as cheerleader of a racist government campaign.

The current "secularist" campaign demonstrates that none of the established forces of French politics are capable of defending the separation of church and state and combating the growing influence of Islamic fundamentalism in immigrant areas. The established "left" parties and the trade unions have either openly or tacitly joined the right in a racist distortion of the secularist heritage. They are left, in the final analysis, with no other means of political persuasion than police repression.

The fight against reactionary religious tendencies—Christian, Jewish and Muslim fundamentalist—and defence of social conditions and democratic rights can be undertaken only by an independent political movement of the working class that appeals to all sections of the working population on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.



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