

French National Assembly makes denial of the Armenian genocide a punishable offence

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18 October 2006

The decision by the French National Assembly to make denial of the genocide of Armenians in 1915 a punishable offence is a reactionary provocation.

The prohibition primarily serves domestic purposes. In line with the ongoing campaign against Islam, this latest ban uses religious and ethnic issues to divert attention from increasing social tensions. The new bill does absolutely nothing to help explain one of the darkest chapters in the history of the last century. Quite the contrary, the intrusion by criminal law into historical debate is an attack on free speech and actually obstructs the clarification of historical questions.

The law, which was passed by the National Assembly last Thursday by 106 votes to 19, threatens those who deny the genocide of Armenians during the Ottoman empire with one year in prison and a fine of 45,000 euros. The new law supplements a law unanimously passed by the National Assembly in 2001, which officially recognised the genocide conducted against the Armenians.

The new law was introduced by the main opposition party, the Socialist Party. Forty Socialist deputies voted in favour of the bill with two voting against. The law was also supported by the French Stalinist Communist Party (PCF).

The Gaullist government rejected the law on the basis of foreign policy considerations. But the governing UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) cleared the way for the law by freeing its deputies from party discipline and recommending non-participation at the vote. In the event, 49 UMP deputies, led by former minister Patrick Devedjian, who is of Armenian origin, voted for the new bill with 17 voting against. The vast majority of the Assembly's 577 deputies did not attend the vote.

In order to become law the bill has to be agreed by the second chamber, the Senate. It is up to the government to decide if and when it introduces the bill into the Senate

and it may well be the case that this will never happen. Nevertheless, the vote by the National Assembly has already had significant consequences.

Reaction has been particularly pronounced in Turkey, which has its own law making the opposite claim, i.e., affirmation of the genocide of 1915, a punishable offence. The extreme-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) had organized demonstrations against the French bill even before the vote was taken. Other organizations have called for a boycott on French goods and the Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan has threatened to retaliate with economic sanctions, including calling off a planned French-Turkish armaments deal, and a ban on French bids to construct a nuclear power plant.

Significantly opposition movements and representatives of the Armenian community in Turkey have also condemned the French law. They fear that it plays into the hands of right-wing, nationalist forces and could provoke repressive measures against the Armenian people. They are also opposed to the fact that France wants to enforce recognition of the Armenian genocide with the same measures Turkey is utilising denying it—i.e., penal law.

“How can we in future argue against laws that forbid us to talk about a genocide if France, for its part, now does the same thing? That is completely irrational,” commented Hrant Dink, publisher of the Armenian Turkish weekly *Argos*. Dink, who was condemned to six months in prison on probation last year over the Armenian question, and currently faces renewed repression over the issue, has even threatened to go to France and, contrary to his own opinion, deny the genocide in defiance of the new law.

Another Armenian journalist, Etyen Mahcupyan, from the daily paper *Zaman*, sees a danger that the tenuous discussion begun in Turkey over the Armenia question could be jeopardised by the French law. For the first time ever a congress has been held in Istanbul to publicly

discuss the Armenian question. Mahcupyan warned: “The action of the French parliament brings the Turkish population nearer to the state, which can then manipulate them more easily.”

Prominent historians in France have also expressed their vehement opposition to the law. In a statement entitled “Freedom for history” they condemned the law as an attack on the “freedom of expression.” The law served to reduce “teachers once more to the status of hostages.”

The French government and the European Commission have expressed objections to the law because they fear a deterioration of relations with Turkey. There is much at stake for French businesses. Should Erdogan stick to his threat then orders of up to 14 billion euros are at risk. Additional losses could be recorded by the French supermarket chain Carrefour, which has a substantial share of the market in Turkey, as well as the auto concern Renault, which has a big factory near Istanbul.

Nevertheless, all this has not prevented the National Assembly from passing a law that punishes undesirable opinions on an event which took place 90 years ago and in which France played no substantial role.

The only other similar law in France is one which forbids any denial of the Holocaust, in which the French Vichy regime did play an important role. Other crimes with much more immediate relevance—such as the torture and massacres carried out by French colonialism in Algeria and Indochina—are not subject to legal sanction and are occasionally officially denied.

Just last winter, when the government sought to pass a law emphasising the “positive role” of French colonial policy in school textbooks, the Socialist Party argued that parliament had no right to issue laws dealing with history and that politicians could not determine historical issues. Now they have thrown this principle overboard and are doing the same themselves.

The principal aim of the new law is to garner electoral support. Both Ségol ène Royal and Nicolas Sarkozy, the probable candidates of the Socialist Party and the UMP for the presidential elections next year, have declared their support for the new law. Both candidates are seeking to win support from the approximately half million Armenians living in France, the majority of whom back the law.

However there is more at stake than the Armenian electorate. The new law is also aimed against Turkey’s plans to join the European Union. President Chirac led the way in this respect 10 days ago when, during an official trip to the Armenian capital of Yerevan, he declared that

Turkey must recognize the genocide of the Armenians before being accepted into the European Union—a condition that the European Union does not require.

Right-wing politicians throughout Europe have used agitation against Turkish membership in the European Union as a means of mobilising backward layers of the electorate. In a similar manner to the current campaign being waged against immigrants and Muslims this question is being exploited to encourage xenophobia and divert social fears and tension away from the ruling elite. While Conservative politicians generally argue for the “defence of the Christian civilisation,” French socialists are using the Armenian question for the same purpose.

The fact that the French Socialist Party has undertaken such an initiative with the active support of the Communist Party speaks volumes over the extent of the decline of these organizations. Unable to provide any sort of answer to the growing social crisis, they are both playing the card of xenophobia.

The officer’s daughter Ségol ène Royal, who has been systematically groomed by the media as the Socialist presidential candidate, has sought on a number of occasions to outflank her UMP rival Nicolas Sarkozy on the right—for example with her appeal to entrust the army with the education of rebellious young people. She has now gone even further with her advocacy of the Armenian law.

As usual the Communist Party is seeking to shout even louder. Communist deputy Frédéric Dutoit praised the new law before the National Assembly as an “immense progress for the Armenian cause and for humanity as a whole.” He then threatened, “It is a first step, others must follow.” The newspaper *La Marseillaise*, which has close links to the PCF, celebrated the “prohibition of denial” as an “expression of respect for universal values.” In the world of the French Stalinists censorship remains the highest form of freedom!

Following a series of strike movements and revolts in recent years directed at both Gaullist and Socialist Party-led governments, the Socialist and Communist parties are prepared to go to any lengths to prevent a further intensification of social protest.



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