France: Socialist Party feminist joins Sarkozy's cabinet

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5 July 2007

Right-wing French president Nicolas Sarkozy has recruited prominent Socialist Party members and women from an immigrant background into his government in order to provide a veneer of "humanitarian interventionism" for its drive towards militarism abroad and pro-business policies at home.

The most prominent defection from the Socialist Party is the Minister for Foreign Affairs Bernard Kouchner, best known as the founder of *Médecins Sans Frontières* (Doctors Without Borders). However, the biggest shock, especially for immigrant workers and youth, came with the defection of the country's best-known feminist activist, Fadela Amara. She has accepted the post of Secretary of State for Town Policy.

Amara, aged 43 and from a working class Algerian family, was an elected Socialist Party town councillor in Clermont-Ferrand. She is known as the founder of the *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* (Neither Prostitutes, Nor Submissive) association, launched in 2003 on a wave of popular revulsion over the death by torching of Sohane Benziane, a young immigrant girl, at the hands of a would-be boyfriend.

Amara's agreement to work under the Minister for Housing and Town Planning, Christine Boutin, a notorious anti-abortionist, has left many of those who looked up to her as a defender of the rights of working class women angry and bewildered. Boutin was nominated as a Pontifical Consultant for the Family by Pope Jean Paul II.

Amara's acceptance of a position in Sarkozy's government drew criticism from Mohamed Mechmache, president of the AC Le Feu association of voluntary social workers, who said, "We don't rely on this sort of person supported by one or another of the political apparatuses...We are not fools." He accused *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* (NPNS) of "stigmatising and caricaturing certain categories of the population", a reference to young men on the housing projects.

Mimouna Hadjam, the spokesman for the Africa 93 voluntary association, said that Amara's decision was "connected to a choice of career more than political conviction... How could Fadela sanction the actions of this government which is destined to be particularly repressive on immigration and especially family regroupment?"

Amara claims to stand for "the hard won liberty of women to decide what they do with their own bodies... and the struggle against all forms of Islamic fundamentalism and obscurantism." Commenting on her decision to take the job, she said, "I hesitated a bit because I'm a woman of the left and I take responsibility for that. But I said yes, because my fight goes beyond the political divisions and because there is urgency. I want to take the controls in order to transform life in the neighbourhoods."

In 1983, she had participated in the *Marche des Beurs* (March of the *Beurs*—a slang word for French-born Arab youth) from Marseilles, organised by the Socialist Party and other left parties and groups. Protesting against racism, the social conditions of the urban council estates and police discrimination and repression, it ended in a demonstration of some 60,000 in Paris on December 3.

President François Mitterrand received the leaders of the march and granted 10-year work and residence permits to participants who needed them, but he did not go back on the austerity policies which, under successive governments, have turned the urban council estates, with a largely immigrant population of some five million, into sites of high unemployment, social neglect, poverty, discrimination and police repression.

Amara was part of a generation of youth who wanted to fight against these conditions and embraced humanist, universalist and egalitarian principles. She came into the Socialist Party (SP) through *SOS Racisme*. Julien Dray, a former member of the left radical *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (*LCR) who joined the SP in 1981 and was spokesperson for the party's presidential candidate Ségolène Royal this year, was active in founding the association in 1984 along with SP activists. The movement was dominated by the SP, which insisted that the struggle against racism be limited to calls for certain reforms. It is heavily subsidised by the party and the state.

Amara joined *SOS Racisme* in 1986 and worked very closely with Julien Dray until forming NPNS. Then she came under the wing of former SP Prime Minister Laurent Fabius.

The Socialist Party exploited the idealism of the youth around *SOS Racisme* as a means of diverting the working class from a struggle against the SP's abandonment of the programme of social reforms on which Mitterrand was elected president on May 10, 1981. While its attacks on the social conditions provided a breeding ground for the extreme right (in June 1984 the National Front made a breakthrough in the European Elections and won 10 percent of the vote), the Socialist Party made protests against the National Front and racism its main claim to progressive politics. For a period, through *SOS Racisme*, it called for "*droit à la diversité"*—the right to be different.

In 2002, after five years of pro-capitalist policies by the Plural Left government of Lionel Jospin, National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen experienced his biggest political success. He outdid Jospin in the first round of the presidential election and entered the second round as the contender against the incumbent Jacques Chirac.

This prompted the passage of the liberal left into the camp of Gaullist reaction. During the election, the "left"—including the LCR—campaigned for Chirac, presenting him as a safeguard of "republican values" and democratic rights.

At the beginning of 2003, Chirac's Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin launched a highly publicised campaign to prepare a law

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prohibiting Muslim girls from wearing headscarves in school. Against a background of carefully cultivated Islamophobia internationally that accompanied George W. Bush's "war on terror", the law provided for greater state powers to intervene in schools and among the immigrant population and acted as a diversion from a series of attacks on working conditions, pension rights and the national education service that provoked a protracted movement of strikes and protests.

The feminist wing of *SOS Racisme*, immediately after the ignominious defeat of the Socialist Party in the 2002 elections, began an offensive against the oppression of Muslim girls by conservative Islamic elements on the impoverished council estates. This dovetailed perfectly with Raffarin's Law on the Veil, which Amara fervently supported. It represented a sharp turn to the right by the Socialist Party from its previous defence of "the right to difference". It was a turning point for Amara, now working closely with Fabius, who was vociferously in support of the Law on the Veil.

In February 2003, Amara and her friends from *SOS Racisme* and the SP launched *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* and the "March of Women against ghettos and for equality". Amara and her *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*, despite their positions in the SP, were presented as political novices who had emerged from a spontaneous reaction against male backwardness on the estates sparked by Sohane Benzaine's death. They were lionised by the media and the political establishment. Gaullist Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin received them three times. In June 2003, the UMP speaker of the National Assembly Jean-Louis Debré organised a stunt called "Today's Mariannes" (Marianne, the symbol of the French Republic), placing large pictures of 14 NPNS women, wearing the Phrygian hats of the French republic, on the walls of the Palais-Bourbon, which houses the Assembly.

Arlette Laguiller of the supposedly Trotskyist radical group *Lutte Ouvrière* (LO) gave credibility to Amara and brought its activists to her meetings. In 2004 and 2005, Laguiller protested alongside Amara's *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* on Women's Day. Amara can be seen linking arms in 2004 with Raffarin's Secretary of State for Justice Nicole Guedj.

Amara's class collaborationist political position was blatant: "I was very happy to see women getting involved, whatever their political allegiance." Laguiller said that Amara's association was "the only one with a clear message on the veil" and criticised those opposing the law forcing young Muslim girls to remove their veils in schools. The common front between the right, "left" and "far left", which had supported Chirac's election in 2002, was seen once again.

Malek Boutih, ex-president of *SOS Racisme*, now member of the Socialist Party National Secretariat and responsible for its highly restrictive immigration policy document, commented very favourably on Amara's recruitment to Sarkozy's government. He termed it "a real hope for the suburban neighbourhoods which will be able to rely on her [Amara's] strength, her independence and her determination."

Boutih is on the right of the party and a close supporter of Ségolène Royal. Congratulating Amara, he repeated her phrase saying, "There are things at stake which go beyond political divisions: to fight racism, the increase in Islamic fundamentalism and communalism."

Boutih admires Sarkozy for his ability to place people from the ethnic minorities in high office and criticizes the Socialist Party for its inability to imitate him. In an interview in *Le Monde* (25 June), he declared: "Nicolas Sarkozy, won't put up with the conservatism of his camp, he makes it evolve. In the Socialist Party it's the opposite."

The current president of *SOS Racisme*, Dominique Sopo, said of Amara's new alliance: "It's a good thing. With this government we have a representation of [ethnic] diversity which is a first in this country."

Sarkozy has also appointed Rama Yade, a young Senegalese woman from his UMP party, as Secretary of State for Human Rights as well as lawyer Rachida Dati, an advisor to Sarkozy since 2003 and UMP member since 2006, as Minister of Justice. Dati has the job of legislating harsh law-and-order legislation to repress urban youth. Neither have connections to any struggle for democratic rights.

The uncritical support which Arlette Laguiller and *Lutte Ouvrière* have given to Fadela Amara was not an act of solidarity with politically uneducated working class women in struggle, but a political alliance with the Socialist Party. LO was even for the disciplining of teachers who might not be tough enough on girls wearing the Islamic scarf.

The *Lutte Ouvrière* web site on June 22 said of Amara's inclusion in Sarkozy's government: "But this type of situation is not exceptional. People who pass from the left to the right, from one day to the next, as easy as that, have been seen before, just as some politicians who have gone in the opposite direction."

For its part, the *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (LCR) begrudgingly admitted that its promotion of Amara's NPNS association as yet another pressure group for social reform was a failure. "This initiative [setting up the NPNS], which marked for many the renaissance of popular feminism, had aroused, including in our own ranks, a lot of hope. However, the denunciation of the violent relations between young men and women [in the urban ghettos], insufficiently related to violence against women in the rest of society, exposed it to being taken over by the state's fight on crime." (*Rouge* June 29)

The LCR does not explain how it encouraged the building of a movement dominated by the SP, which then became part of the state's tough on crime policy.

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