

France: Racist campaign against burqa threatens democratic rights

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14 July 2009

Conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy and the French bourgeois left are jointly mounting an anti-democratic campaign to illegalize the minority of Muslim women in France who wear body-covering clothes, the burqa or the niqab. In addition to setting a dangerous precedent of banning personal religious conduct, this measure aims to fan the flames of anti-Muslim racism, dividing the working class and promoting a fascistic political atmosphere in France.

In his June 22 speech to assembled parliamentarians at the Palace of Versailles, President Sarkozy declared, “The burqa is not welcome on the territory of France.”

Sarkozy was picking up an initiative of André Gerin, a Communist Party (PCF, France’s Stalinist party) deputy and mayor of the poor suburb of Vénissieux, near Lyon. Gerin’s petition for legislation banning the wearing in public of the burqa and the niqab has the support of deputies from all the parties represented in the National Assembly.

Immediately after Sarkozy’s speech, a parliamentary mission to study the issue was set up. It started its deliberations July 8 and is due to report at the end of December.

As the composition of the mission makes clear, there is support throughout the French political establishment for the victimization of France’s Muslims. The mission comprises 32 deputies: 1 PCF, 1 Green, 11 Socialist Party (PS), 17 UMP (the ruling conservative Union for a Popular Movement), and 3 others. The mission’s reporter will be UMP deputy Éric Raoult, and it will be led by Gerin.

Jean-François Copé, the leader of the UMP parliamentary group in the National Assembly, set the tone. He told the press July 8 that what was needed was “a banning law preceded by six months to a year of dialogue and explanation.”

He suggested that Muslim women’s wearing of the burqa or niqab was the sign of a vast conspiracy: “The extremists are trying to test the Republic.” He insisted that the burqa poses “a problem of security and public order and promised that “anyway, the response will be strong.” He absurdly suggested that criminalising personal conduct based on religious opinion had nothing to do with religious discrimination. “The burqa is a political issue,” he said, “not a religious one.”

Broader media commentary has given the lie to Copé’s

assertion that the aim was not for state interference into the freedom of religious opinion. Reporting depositions at the first session of the mission, held July 8, French news agency AFP cited anthropologist Dounia Bouzar: “Mme. Bouzar explained that the full veil was imposed by the Salafists who say they base themselves on the original Islam and keep apart from the exterior world, which is considered to be impure. She spoke of ‘sectarian behaviour.’”

Another significant factor in the anti-burqa campaign is the growing anti-Muslim hatred in the French ruling class as it expands its imperialist interventions in the Muslim world. France has sent troops to Afghanistan to bolster the neo-colonialist US occupation there, hypocritically presenting its intervention as a defence of women’s rights. It also recently obtained military basing rights in the Persian Gulf.

Thus UMP deputy Pierre Lellouche, who specialises in military matters and is France’s special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, said, “If I fight daily for the rights of women in Afghanistan, you will understand that I would wish that all women in France should have the right to their bodies and their persons.”

The Stalinist Gerin argued in the same vein in an interview with conservative news magazine *L’Express* on June 18. He said the sight of women wearing the burqa or the niqab “is already intolerable to us when it comes from Iran, Afghanistan or Saudi Arabia.... It is totally unacceptable on the Republic’s soil.”

It is no accident that the media and the politicians constantly refer to the “burqa,” which is seen extremely rarely in France, rather than the niqab, which, though also very rare, is seen somewhat more often. The burqa, a single garment covering the whole of a woman’s body, with a grid for the eyes, is worn in Afghanistan and conjures up images of terror in that war-torn country. The niqab, which also covers the whole body, involves material covering the face, leaving a slit for the eyes. It is mostly connected with Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states.

Though disguised under a hypocritical cover of secularism and protecting women’s rights, the anti-burqa campaign is a racist assault on basic individual liberties. It is also particularly

dangerous in that it sets precedents whereby the state can outlaw political or religious beliefs it deems contrary to its interests.

No credence can be given to claims that Muslim women's rights can be defended by whipping up an anti-Muslim atmosphere and forcing women to modify their beliefs and conduct under the threat of punishment by the state.

The attempt to justify this measure with appeals to secularism (*laïcité*) is likewise both false and reactionary. From a legal standpoint, *laïcité* is a principle of conduct by the state, holding that the state will adopt a neutral position towards religion. Singling out and persecuting an oppressed minority like France's Muslims for their personal conduct directly violates this principle.

The anti-burqa campaign also falsifies the main political experience that led up to the passage of the 1905 *laïcité* law: the Dreyfus Affair. Then, a coalition of socialists and intellectuals gained mass support to overturn the victimization by the Catholic Church, the army and the state of a member of a persecuted religious minority—Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer falsely convicted of spying for Germany. Today, the most powerful elements of the state are victimizing members of an impoverished and oppressed minority, while attempting to hide their racism with a pseudo-secularist fig leaf.

Such a right-wing campaign is only made possible by the collaboration of the Stalinist PCF—a long-standing party of government of the French bourgeoisie—and the so-called “far left.” Their support for the measure gives the lie to the conventional belief that they somehow represent the left. In fact, after a political degeneration and a shift in their social orientation and composition that has spanned decades, these parties now find themselves in the camp of the political right.

Gerin's role is particularly significant in highlighting the national chauvinism that runs rampant inside the Stalinist PCF. An admirer of Fidel Castro, he joined the PCF in 1964 as a trade union activist and was elected to the PCF central committee in 1979. Elected as PCF town councillor in 1977, he became mayor of Vénissieux in 1985 and has been the National Assembly deputy since 1993.

Having attracted national attention for his enthusiastic support of Sarkozy's 2005 repression of the suburban youth riots, his racist statements symbolize the alignment of sections of the PCF on the neo-fascist politics of the National Front. In his 2005 book *The Ghettos of the Republic*, published with a preface by Éric Raoult, he wrote, “I am gradually becoming aware of the problem. It's a question of the differences in ways of life, cultural differences between the Judeo-Christian world and the Islamic world.”

In an October 5, 2007, interview with *Riposte laïque* (*Secular Counterattack*), he attacked “problem families” and singled out immigrant families. He said, “I've been asking the authorities for a year: make these families leave for everyone's good, and if they're foreigners, don't hesitate to expel them. In fact, I'm

for strong, radical methods, which will set an example.” In another interview, on December 7, 2007, Gerin lamented the “mortal danger represented by anti-white, anti-France racism.”

The response of the so-called “far left” in France has again demonstrated its inherent tendency to adapt to the vilest initiatives of France's political establishment. *Lutte Ouvrière* (Workers' Struggle) issued a denunciation of women wearing the burqa, on the ludicrous grounds that they force others to wear the burqa: “To recognize the ‘freedom’ to wear the burqa, would be to help to deny freedom to thousands of others to reject the pressure which pushed them to wear it.”

LO added, “Religious freedom, which is also invoked, cannot be accepted as an argument.” In short, from *LO*'s standpoint, religious freedom only applies to some—and it does not apply to the most oppressed layers of the working class in France, among which most burqa-wearing Muslims are found.

The Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA, New Anti-capitalist Party) of Olivier Besancenot has maintained a deafening silence on this issue. The party's Web site contains not one commentary on the question of the burqa. This is particularly significant in that they are preparing an electoral alliance with the PCF in next year's regional elections.

None of these parties has raised an obvious issue: the implication of such a dangerous measure for broader political freedoms in France. If political or religious beliefs can be declared illegal because they are deemed noxious to the ideological bases of the French Republic, the state is making a major step along the road towards banning revolutionary proletarian politics and preparing direct class repression.

Such concerns—automatic for any party seriously concerned about the danger of its repression by the state—do not occur to the PCF and “far left,” however, because these parties are thoroughly integrated into the bourgeois establishment and the state.

The anti-burqa campaign is a stark warning to the working class of the degeneration of the French bourgeois establishment and its petty-bourgeois satellites. The campaign will supply endless media coverage to divide workers along ethno-racist lines and poison the atmosphere against Muslims, precisely as economists predict deepening tensions due to the economic crisis, with rising unemployment and the arrival of a new graduating class on the job market. Class-conscious workers must oppose the anti-burqa campaign and break with all parties that promote or sanction it.



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