France: parliamentary mission against burqa promotes anti-Muslim prejudice

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The French parliamentary mission of enquiry on the burqa and the niqab held its second session September 9. Set up by President Nicolas Sarkozy after he declared on June 22 at a meeting of parliament that "the burqa is not welcome in France," it is widely assumed to be preparing a law banning women from wearing the body-covering burqa in public.

The commission, which held its first meeting on July 8, represents an attack on religious freedom, democratic rights, and fundamental secular principles denying the state the right to interfere in questions of personal opinions and beliefs.

Recent official estimates put the number of burqa-wearing women in France at less than 2,000 and demonstrate that the issue of the wearing by a tiny minority of Muslim women of this full-body garment, which covers the face, has been artificially blown up out of all proportion. This is to serve the political agenda of the Sarkozy government—that is, to victimize Muslims and create an anti-democratic diversion from the government's drive to make workers pay for the economic crisis through mass unemployment and cuts in living standards and social and democratic rights. Propaganda against the burqa, which is worn in Afghanistan, also is used to promote French imperialism's military intervention there.

According to an opinion poll carried out by the news site *oumma.com*, 80 percent of French Muslims consider that the mission was intended to stigmatise Islam and 86 percent opposed a law regulating the whole-body veil (*voile intégral*).

The mission is made up of deputies from all the parties in parliament and chaired by Communist Party (*Parti Communiste Français*, PCF) deputy André Gerin. Sarkozy knows that, as with the question of the wearing of Islamic headscarfs by girl pupils in schools—which was made illegal in a reactionary law passed with the support of the bourgeois left in 2004—he can unite the "left" and middle-class feminist organisations behind him on this issue.

Lutte Ouv rière (LO) has stated its support for the mission, whereas Olivier Besancenot's New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) has expressed its consent by maintaining a deafening silence on the issue. Both organisations supported the 2004 law against girls wearing the Muslim headscarf at school—to the point that LO leader Arlette Laguiller marched side-by-side on a feminist demonstration with minister Nicole Guedj of the ruling conservative UMP (*Union pour une Majorité Populaire*).

The PCF is fully participating in the anti-Muslim campaign. Its daily *l'Humanité* gave Gerin a full interview without criticism of his provocative statements against the burqa, such as: "The full-body veil in the street is becoming repulsive, shocking." The Stalinist newspaper also offered him a stand at its fair last weekend.

The burqa issue is providing the conditions for attempts to witchhunt the population using the state apparatus. Eric Raoult, a UMP (the ruling Union for a Popular Movement) deputy and reporter for the mission, disconcerted by statistics showing the tiny number of women wearing the burqa in France, stated, "That's why we are also going to consult the social service providers, very close to the realities on the ground, or the education authorities, which are aware when there are problems of the identification of mothers when children leave their primary schools."

The conservative daily *Figaro* September 9 commented, "These institutions could however be reluctant to gather what is considered sensitive information concerning families." Memories of schools and social services being required to inform on Jews and the Resistance, under the collaborationist régime of Philippe Pétain during the Nazi occupation of France (1940-1944), are still strong, and

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powerful popular opposition to informing to the authorities persists.

Elisabeth Badinter, a well-known Socialist Party (*Parti Socialiste*, PS) figure associated with women's rights whose husband Robert is famous for his campaign to abolish the death penalty, gave her submission at Wednesday's session of the mission. She said, "veiled women are the tip of the iceberg of Muslim fundamentalism...the wearing of the veil is the banner of Salafism.... In France we fight destructive ideologies which undermine human dignity, we struggle against sects, Nazism, anti-semitism, fundamentalism must be combated." She also urged, in the classical language of the racist far right, that immigrants should "comply to the practices and customs of the country they are living in or leave.... Why not go to Saudi Arabia or Afghanistan where no-one will require you to show your face...."

The Stalinist Gerin told the press August 27, "For me the question of the full-body veil is a Republican fight. The full-body veil has nothing to do with Islam. It is the tip of the iceberg of the black tide [*marée noire*—a term also used for an oil slick] of the fundamentalists in some areas of our country."

Le Figaro of September 9 reports that Fadela Amara, the former leader of the feminist organisation *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* (Neither Whores Nor Submissive) who joined Sarkozy's government in 2007, "has come out on several occasions for a law, is considering a ban on the burqa in the public services: schools, hospitals, town halls...but also on public transport. Finally, identity checks would be carried out in sensitive places such as stations and airports."

Addressing the parliamentary mission, her successor in *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* Sihem Habchi declared, "The choice must be made between the burqa or the Republic."

An attempt to refute the anti-burqa campaign's claims by Yazid Sabeg—the commissioner for Equality and Diversity of Opportunity in the Sarkozy government—have unleashed a torrent of criticism in the press. Sabeg asserted that "you can think what you like about the burqa and its regressive character or not.... It is not up to the state to regulate French people's clothing."

In his interview with the Catholic daily *La Croix*, he attacked the confusion being sown by the anti-burqa campaign, which avoids "the real discussion on the real issues, which are first and foremost economic and social." He added, "The crisis is worsening on the working class estates, and social tensions are at their height. There's no more work, no more housing, the education system is no longer fulfilling its role. Let us take care of the real issues. Instead of that, the polemic on the burqa is going to open the way to frustration, racism."

UMP members of the parliamentary mission issued a statement calling for Sabeg to resign: "These words directly undermine the work of the parliamentary mission and trample on sexual equality and personal dignity. Mr. Sabeg no longer has the credibility to be a minister of the Republic; he must resign."

At a ceremony for two French soldiers killed in the neo-colonial war of occupation in Afghanistan, Sarkozy used the same language as supporters of the ban on the burqa and the niqab. Claiming that this war, in fact for control of strategic control of this oil- and gas-rich region, was a "fight against barbarism and obscurantism."

He asserted that the current death toll of 31 French soldiers in Afghanistan was a "sacrifice [that] would have no sense if we allowed terrorism, if we allowed the medieval faction, barbarians, to triumph. This sacrifice would have no sense if we were to abandon the Afghan people to what we can only call its executioners....We shall stay as long as it takes...."

He made no reference to the thousands of Afghans killed and maimed by French and NATO occupation forces, often through indiscriminate bombing.

The anti-democratic content of the anti-burqa campaign is further clarified by a glance at French colonial history. In 1958, at the height of the bloody repression by the French army of the Algerian independence struggle, the authorities asked Algerian women to remove their veils to signify their support for French colonial rule. Many Algerian women who had given up the veil took it up again as a gesture of defiance.

Today, French imperialism is again advancing the fraudulent claim that it is trying to liberate women by banning various forms of Muslim clothing. In fact, the absence of opposition to this reactionary campaign inside the political establishment—from the UMP to the NPA and LO—testifies to the absence of any constituency for democratic rights in the French bourgeoisie.

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