

French government witch-hunts partner of niqab-wearing woman

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Since April 2 the French government of President Nicolas Sarkozy has unleashed an Islamophobic witch-hunt against Lies Hebbadj, a naturalised Frenchman of Algerian origin. This aims to create the climate for legislation that will enable the state to strip immigrants of their French nationality virtually at will. It is the continuation of a reactionary campaign started a year ago to ban the burqa or niqab full-face garments that is designed to stir up public opinion against Muslims.

On June 9, Hebbadj was taken to the Nantes criminal court in a police detention van escorted by two motorcycle policemen after being held in custody for 48 hours. He was being charged with polygamy, benefit fraud and the employment of illegal immigrants in his butcher's shop and taxi business.

His partner Sandrine Mouleres, a mother of four children, had also been taken in on June 7 for questioning about benefit fraud and was released the following morning at 1 a.m. after 18 hours in police custody. The state prosecutor stated that a search of her house had been "fruitful," but there were no charges since her explanations concerning "fraud and social benefits for which she may have been reproached" were "satisfactory."

This is an act of political retaliation for Mouleres' opposition to the government's anti-burqa and anti-niqab campaign. On April 2, at the height of the political and media agitation for the law banning the burqa, the police fined Mouleres €22 for driving while wearing a niqab full-face garment, claiming that it obscured her vision. This was the first time such a charge had ever been made in France. She refused to pay, saying that the police were practicing discrimination against her. Hebbadj came forward to defend her.

The *France Info* site reports: "Four of his female

partners, one of which is his legitimate wife, are to be summoned to be tried for social benefit fraud and, some of them for swindling."

Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux immediately issued the accusations for which Hebbadj is now being charged and raised the possibility of stripping him of his nationality. In an official letter, he asserted that Hebbadj "reportedly lived in a state of polygamy with four wives with whom he had fathered twelve children" and that he was suspected of "social benefit fraud."

The conservative daily *Le Figaro's* legal expert points out that at present a naturalised citizen can only lose his nationality by a decree agreed by the Council of State, and if he has been condemned for actions prejudicial to the interests of the nation or for an act of terrorism or acts "incompatible with the quality of being French."

More tricky for Hortefeux and Besson is the stipulation that such a loss of nationality cannot be imposed "if the loss of nationality leads to making the person stateless." This could well be an aspect of the code in the sights of the government.

Hebbadj admitted to having "mistresses" but is only officially married to one woman. He has contracted religious marriages to three other women who, not recognised through civil marriage, do not count as wives under French law.

The daily *Libération* of April 26 quoted Hebbadj in reply to Hortefeux: "To my knowledge, mistresses are not illegal in France, nor by Islam. Perhaps by Christianity, but not in France... If you can lose your nationality for having mistresses, a lot of French people would lose their nationality."

The anti-immigrant and Islamophobic campaign, of which the law against the burqa is an essential element,

was launched by President Nicolas Sarkozy after he declared on June 22, 2009 that “the burqa is not welcome in France.” The burqa mission, led by Communist Party deputy, André Gerin, was set up with the support of all parliamentary parties, including the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the Left Party of Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the Greens.

The bourgeois left’s participation in the agitation against the burqa has opened the way for the government’s attacks.

This culminated on May 11 when the Socialist Party voted with the UMP in the National Assembly for a resolution calling for a law totally banning the wearing of the burqa or full-face veil in public. It was passed unanimously with Communist Party, Green and Left Front deputies absenting themselves from the chamber at the time of the vote.

The vote was in conscious defiance of the fact that on March 30 the highest administrative court in the land, the State Council, issued an opinion against legislation banning the burqa. It declared that: “A general ban on the wearing of the full-face veil as such, or of any way of hiding one’s face in the entirety of public space, would be subject to serious risks”, both “concerning the constitution” and “the European Convention of Human Rights.”

The attacks on immigrants and minorities are a crude diversion from the draconian austerity programmes currently being imposed in France and throughout Europe and an important step in the destruction of democratic rights and the development of a police state. They also serve to justify the imperialist military interventions of France and the European Union in Afghanistan and the Middle East.

Government officials are intensifying their campaign against citizenship rights. On June 9, the day Hebbadj was taken to court to hear his charges, Hortefeux announced his intention to “change the nationality code” in order to fight against “de facto polygamy,” so that a naturalised citizen who became polygamous could be stripped of his nationality.

Later, Hortefeux repeated that it is not “right” that a foreigner having acquired nationality through marriage should retain it, if in the following years he “lives in a state of de facto polygamy and takes advantage of the system of social benefits. He added that the right of nationality “is not a taboo question” but “a contract

[which] like any contract, can be broken.”

The general secretary of the ruling UMP (Union for a Popular Movement), Xavier Bertrand, said: “Polygamy is against the rules, the principles of the Republic. Therefore, if there is proven polygamy, in that case a person cannot continue to be French.”

In fact, until 1993, polygamy was legal for African workers living in France.

A *Figaro* article reports that Immigration Minister Eric Besson has suggested that the immigration bill due to go through parliament on September 25 could be amended, if the president and the prime minister so wished, to legislate for the removal of a naturalised citizen’s nationality in cases of benefit fraud, polygamy or serious acts of violence.

The newspaper comments: “However, polygamy remains difficult to prove. Rare are those who contract two civil marriages.”

The government is nonetheless calling for measures against polygamy. *Le Nouvel Observateur* quotes Hortefeux: “The definition which the penal code gives of polygamy does not correspond to reality” for in its present state “practically no one can legally found to be polygamous in France.” The law “does not take into account religious marriages or situations of living together with shared interests, in reality ‘de facto polygamy’, organised so that a man may live off the social benefits received by the wives.”

The hypocrisy of Hortefeux’s pose of concern for social security is underlined by his government’s support of ongoing austerity plans and bank bailouts, which plunder state finances throughout Europe to satisfy the banks. Stripped of cynical claims of concern over state finances, Hortefeux’s position amounts to the following: since the law does not help him target immigrants, it must be changed so the reactionary anti-Muslim campaign can continue.



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