

French National Assembly vote to ban the burqa: An attack on democratic rights

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The 335-to-1 vote by the French National Assembly last month to ban full-face veils in all public places in France is a reactionary attack on democratic rights and a conscious step away from the rule of law. The trampling of religious freedom is part of a broader law-and-order campaign aimed at preparing police-state measures against the population.

That the principle of banning the burqa found support across the entire political establishment testifies to the decay of democratic consciousness in France and to the complicity of the so-called “left” parties. The ban must still be debated in the senate in September, but it is widely expected to pass.

Starting in the spring of 2011, women wearing a burqa or niqab in France will face a €150 fine and will be forced to take citizenship classes. This is proceeding under the hypocritical guise of protecting burqa-clad women from pressure from their relatives, who face draconian penalties. Anyone deemed guilty of forcing a woman to wear a full-face veil will face a €30,000 fine and one year in jail. At the suggestion of the opposition Parti Socialiste (PS), these penalties are to be doubled if the woman is a minor.

On June 23, several weeks prior to the National Assembly vote, European parliamentarians from 47 countries at the Council of Europe unanimously voted for a resolution condemning burqa bans as anti-democratic and discriminatory. Those voting for the resolution included parliamentarians from the PS and the UMP (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire), France’s ruling conservative party.

The Council of Europe resolution states that it “deplores that a growing number of political parties in Europe are stirring up fear of Islam, leading political campaigns promoting a simplistic vision and negative clichés about European Muslims, equating Islam with extremism. Incitement of intolerance and even hatred of Muslims is inadmissible”.

In an unmistakable reference to burqa bans like that pushed by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, the resolution notes, “Article 9 of the European Convention of Human Rights gives each individual the right to wear religious garments, or not, in private and in public...a broad ban on wearing the burqa and the niqab would deny the right to cover their face to women who freely wish to do so”.

Despite this resolution, PS and UMP deputies overwhelmingly voted for (or failed to vote against) the burqa ban in the National Assembly. The French press had barely reported the Council of Europe vote—a cowardly act of self-censorship by the media.

The 335-to-1 vote in the 577-member Assembly was marked above all by the absence of the majority of “left”—that is, PS and Parti Communiste Français (PCF)—deputies, who did not appear for the vote. The UMP provided the vast majority of the votes for the ban, though a minority of PS and PCF deputies also voted for it. This included the PCF’s André Gérin, who had a leading role in promoting the ban, chairing the anti-burqa commission set up last year by Sarkozy.

The lone opposing vote came from UMP deputy Daniel Garrigue, a political associate of ex-Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, Sarkozy’s main rival on the French right. Garrigue commented that “in order to combat extremist behavior, we run the risk of sliding towards a totalitarian society”.

Villepin’s objections are for factional purposes, however. He and his political mentor, ex-President Jacques Chirac, do not oppose anti-Muslim policies in principle. While Villepin was in government, Chirac passed the 2004 ban on Muslim headscarves in public schools. This measure was in part designed to promote right-wing sentiments among the teachers, who had just lost a bitter strike against pension cuts.

The fact that the only opposition in the burqa vote came from the UMP testifies to the bourgeois “left’s” support for the ban, despite their cynical attempts to avoid political responsibility for the measure.

The PS justified its non-participation in the vote not on the grounds that it opposed banning the burqa, but by citing fears that Sarkozy’s ban might prove ineffective, as it might be ruled unconstitutional. In the run-up to the vote, the PS proposed to limit the ban to state facilities rather than all public places. Facilities that would be included in the PS proposal include mass transit, hospitals, schools and government buildings. It would effectively, if not formally, condemn any woman wearing the burqa to seclusion at home.

The burqa ban provoked condemnations in the Muslim world. The *Khaleej Times* of the United Arab Emirates carried a July 14 editorial entitled “The Veiled Threat in Europe”. It asked, “What is going on in the continent that gave the world the Magna Charta, the first charter of human rights in the world, and democracy? Not long ago, Europe and the brilliant EU experiment were viewed as role models of progress, political freedom and civil liberties by the rest of the world.... All that appears to be a thing of the past now”.

It warned against the persecution of Muslims, who number over 5 million in France, stating, “Let’s not forget that not long ago

Europe witnessed a similar campaign against the Jews that eventually resulted in thousands of them being sent to their deaths by the Nazis. European governments, lawmakers and the media must therefore desist from once again unleashing a monster that cannot be coaxed back into the bottle”.

The French measure is part of a reactionary campaign in several European countries to ban the burqa. In April, Belgium’s lower house approved a full nationwide ban on the burqa, under pain of a €25 fine and seven days’ imprisonment. Similar bans have been proposed in Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria and Switzerland. Already, Barcelona, Spain’s second largest city, has banned Islamic veils in municipal offices, public markets and libraries. Certain German regions ban teachers from wearing headscarves in public schools.

These bans seek to divide the working class, promote anti-Muslim racism, and intimidate popular opposition to the hated Afghan war.

As in the case of France’s 2004 headscarf law, the burqa ban was proposed to divide the working class and shift the political climate to the right. Sarkozy proposed the ban in June 2009, at the end of a series of union-led “days of action”, in which workers demonstrated their hostility to a €360 billion bank bailout. These days of action soon ground to a halt, however, because they were organized on the bankrupt perspective of supporting a modified bailout package put forth by PS First Secretary Martine Aubry.

The latest moves against the burqa are likewise a political diversion, but under the more explosive political conditions created by the Greek debt crisis. Already badly weakened by the UMP defeat in the March regional elections, Sarkozy’s standing has been shattered by revelations that his party took donations from billionaire Liliane Bettencourt while helping her evade taxes. At the same time, Sarkozy is trying to impose roughly €100 billion in anti-working-class budget cuts to satisfy the banks, notably through a massive pension cut.

After the regional elections, Sarkozy used the burqa issue to further poison the political climate. Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux witch-hunted Lies Hebbadj, the partner of a niqab-wearing woman pulled over by the police for wearing a niqab while driving, accusing him of benefit fraud and threatening to take away his French citizenship. This incitement of anti-Muslim racism led to several incidents where halal grocery shops and mosques were shot up by unidentified assailants.

The Sarkozy government has escalated its repressive measures over the summer. Riots provoked by the police killing of a young Muslim man in Grenoble and a Roma in Saint-Aignan became the pretext for the government to prepare legislation allowing mass deportation of Roma. The riots were repressed by police firing live ammunition.

Sarkozy’s use of anti-Muslim law-and-order demagoguery to poison the political atmosphere is now widely acknowledged, even in the bourgeois press. Noting his recourse to anti-immigrant, law-and-order rhetoric amid the Bettencourt scandal, *Le Monde* commented, “The tactic is now honed to perfection: each time he has hit trouble since the beginning of his term, Nicolas Sarkozy has put forward his image as a law-and-order champion, most often in a polemical way”.

The burqa ban is also part of a sordid campaign to provide a “left” cover for the occupation of Afghanistan, by presenting it as part of a feminist struggle for women’s rights.

This was explicitly raised as one of the reasons for the burqa ban, as it was first proposed last year. At the time, UMP deputy Pierre Lellouche, 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”.

Polls last month found that 70 percent of the French population opposes the Afghanistan war. The response on the part of the press has been to endorse neo-colonial sentiment. In a July 20 editorial, *Le Monde* wrote, “What we are dealing with is building a state, if not a nation.... Some may call it the last incarnation of a dirty Western habit: neocolonialism. Whatever one says, this shows the magnitude of the task ahead”.

A naked appeal to neo-colonialism as the justification for the war would meet with overwhelming opposition from the population, however, so measures had to be found to fashion a more deceptive, “left”-sounding pretext. As leaked documents show, the ruling class sees initiatives like the burqa ban as critical to continuing European participation in the war.

In a March 11 report published by WikiLeaks, entitled “Sustaining Western European Support for the NATO-Led Mission—Why Counting on Apathy Might Not Be Enough”, the CIA noted that “public apathy enables leaders to ignore voters”. However, it worried that the degree of opposition to the war might eventually overwhelm public apathy, itself the product of the absence of any political avenue through which people can express their hostility to the war.

The report stressed, in particular, the low level of support for the war among women: “French women are 8 percentage points less likely to support the mission than are men, and German women are 22 percentage points less likely to support the war than are men”. The CIA concluded that there had to be a campaign to highlight women’s “experiences under the Taliban, their aspirations for the future, and their fears of a Taliban victory”.

The anti-burqa campaign, presenting the state as the enlightened defender of women’s rights against sections of the Muslim population, is motivated by similar political aims. All of the parties that have participated in this campaign stand exposed as agents of political reaction and imperialist war.



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