

Spain joins anti-burqa witch-hunt

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The fact that hardly anyone wears the burqa or niqab in Spain shows that more is behind proposed bans than hypocritical posturing about for Muslim women's rights. Some local authorities have already banned the burqa and niqab. These authorities were encouraged by the campaign in France, which culminated in a national ban on wearing these garments in public spaces, passed by the National Assembly on July 13.

The Spanish Senate has also passed a similar initiative, proposed by the right-wing opposition Popular Party (PP) and supported by the Catalan-nationalist Convergence and Union (CiU). It urged the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government to "ban the use of full-face veils in all non-religious public places or events, and any other garment that hides the face and makes it difficult to identify the person".

In the debate, no one defended the democratic rights and religious freedoms of women targeted by these measures. The position of the PSOE, which voted against the initiative, was expressed by the party's Organisation Secretary, Leire Pajin. She said the PSOE will continue to work "from accountability, consistency and seeking maximum consensus," to "achieve the eradication of the use of the burqa and the niqab in our country, also its eradication from public and private life".

That is, the PSOE voted against this initiative not due to its anti-democratic character, but because it sought broader cross-party agreement. The PSOE's position parallels those of the bourgeois "left" in France, who encouraged the anti-burqa campaign and denounced women wearing the burqa, but then raised technical objections to the bill. In France, however, the conservatives held the majority in the National Assembly, where the ban was passed in a 335-to-1 vote, with the "left" abstaining from the vote.

The PSOE spokeswoman in the Senate, Carmela Silva, defended "the long trajectory" of the PSOE in defence of women's rights, attacking the PP and CiU for not wanting an "agreement between all" for "the eradication of the burqa". She stressed that the regional parliaments and local councils already have sufficient powers to regulate on these matters.

PSOE claims to be defending Muslim women's rights by

banning the burqa are utterly hypocritical. Its "long trajectory" in defence of women's rights did not prevent the PSOE from ignoring the US support for the Taliban when they were enforcing the use of the burqa in Afghanistan, in the mid-1990s.

Indeed, the spread of the burqa in Afghanistan is largely the result of the support of Muslim fundamentalism given by the United States and European countries. They backed the fundamentalists to provoke a Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and then trap the USSR in a bloody war there. Today, many local political leaders who collaborate with the US and European occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan share similar retrograde views.

In letting Spain's local councils regulate the use of the burqa and the niqab, the PSOE means to give them free rein to target Muslims and attack democratic rights, without Congress intervening in the matter. This has already happened in places like Barcelona, Lleida, El Vendrell, Tarragona, Manresa, L'hospitalet, Coin and Reus where the garments have been prohibited in all public spaces.

The only clear concern over the ban from within the political establishment came from sections of the right, who worried about its impact on their reactionary promotion of Catholicism. During the Senate debate, a PP spokeswoman stated that we "do not want the government to use this issue to deny Catholic symbols as part of our Spanish tradition."

The Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) voted against the ban because the debate was too "hasty" and in the words of the party's senator, Miren Lore Leanizbarrutia, it "should be more important and deeper". The policy of the PNV is to seek consensus on a law banning the burqa in a similar manner as the PSOE, but they are against local councils legislating on the matter on grounds that it is a national problem that should be resolved in Congress.

The Spanish Communist Party, the leading party in the United Left (IU) coalition, openly backed the principle of banning the burqa. It published a communiqué by the secretary of its women's section, Cristina Simó Alcaraz, who declared,

“So if the Burka is unjust, humiliating, degrading for the person who suffers it and all the others who see it and meanwhile they tolerate and do nothing, why not legislate? This only has a name: political cowardice.”

Despite these sentiments, the IU voted against a ban. IU Congress spokesman Gaspar Llamazares, called it a “smokescreen” to prevent discussion of “more important issues,” adding that “the country already has too many serious problems for the government to create new ones”.

The Senate initiative was eventually rejected in Congress, 183-to-169, on July 20. However, the burqa debate has not finished and will return to Congress after the summer recess, as a result of a proposition sent by the CiU to the Constitutional Commission that urges the government to investigate the possibility of regulating the use of the burqa.

The major parties’ support for banning the burqa, disagreeing only over how to implement it, shows the lack of democratic sentiments throughout the entire bourgeoisie.

In an interview in the newspaper *Público*, Ángeles Ramírez, an anthropology professor at the Autonomous University of Madrid, pointed out: “First, there are no women in burqas in Spain and, second, by calling any integral veil a burqa, the authorities make citizens link it with something negative, with Afghanistan and with the veto towards women.”

Cynically presenting the neo-colonial war of Afghanistan as a defense of democratic rights, i.e. “liberating women”, is a recurrent method used by the European ruling elite to justify the neo-colonial war in Afghanistan. One PP legislator, Soraya Saenz, spoke in favour of the burqa ban: “How can our soldiers be fighting in Afghanistan for the liberty of these women while the government has no courage to defend them here?”

State denunciations of the burqa play a critical role, as the PSOE is well aware of the dangers posed at home by working-class hostility to the war. They were the undeserving benefactors of huge opposition to the Iraq war in the 2004 elections. After their victory, they were forced to bring back the troops that were in Iraq, but they left the troops in Afghanistan under the pretext that it was not an illegal war.

Under conditions of economic crisis and soaring unemployment, the Spanish ruling elite is targeting immigrant workers as an escape valve to growing social tensions.

This is shown by numerous laws and policies, such as the October 2009 Immigration Law that extended the period of detention—before expulsion—from 40 to 60 days. There is continuous police persecution of illegal immigrants across

Spain, to the point it has become an official police policy directed by the Interior Minister, Alfredo Perez Rubalcaba (See “Zapatero government accused of directing anti-immigrant crackdown”).

In January, the Vic town council refused to register illegal immigrants, preventing them from accessing basic public services. The local representatives of the Catalan-nationalist Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), the Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSC, the PSOE’s Catalan section), and the xenophobic Platform for Catalonia all gave support to this reactionary measure. When the Attorney General deemed the measure illegal, the PP and CiU stepped up their campaign nationally for a more draconian anti-immigrant policy.

In April, a 16-year-old of Moroccan origin, Najwa Malha, was prohibited from entering her school because she wore the hijab. Her parents appealed to the PP-controlled Education Department of Madrid, but were forced to change school when the regional government refused to intervene.

The most recent reactionary measure was carried out by Lleide city council, which closed down the local mosque claiming that 1,200 worshippers were attending services, “exceeding the allowed capacity” by four times. The mayor told local Muslims to “pray at home”. The imam of Lleide, Abdelwahab Houzi, called the attendance figure “totally exaggerated. It is impossible that so many people have been counted. We believe these figures have been previously planned. It’s ridiculous. We feel persecuted.”

Such reactionary measures have been tested out in Catalonia, where the largest Moroccan population lives. But the ruling class is stoking up anti-immigrant prejudice in order to implement anti-democratic legislation that will in the end be directed against the entire working class.



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