

The NPA and the French regional elections: A case history of opportunism

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In this past March's French regional elections, the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) ran a young Muslim candidate, Ilham Moussaïd, on its list for the Vaucluse department in southeast France. Moussaïd wears the Muslim headscarf.

Well aware of the unpopularity in immigrant neighborhoods of President Nicolas Sarkozy's anti-burqa measures, the NPA promoted their candidate in a bid to attract support in these neighborhoods. Shortly after the regional elections, the NPA expelled her.

The behavior of the NPA in relation to the candidacy of Moussaïd was totally unprincipled. It reflected the NPA's rejection of both a principled defense of religious freedom and the Marxist analysis of religion. After attempting to gain influence in the Muslim population on a religious basis, the NPA quickly capitulated to the anti-Moussaïd campaign launched by the bourgeois press and echoed by feminists within the NPA.

When Moussaïd's candidacy was announced, the bourgeois press launched a campaign against her. Sections of the media denounced the participation in the elections of a woman wearing the head scarf as "anti-democratic." NPA members themselves contributed to the campaign against Moussaïd.

On February 18, an article in *Libération* entitled "Out With Every Veil" reviewed the way Moussaïd's candidacy had been covered in the media: "It all began with an article published in *Figaro* on Tuesday, February 2. Rapidly, two press statements were published that morning [explaining] that the choice of the Vaucluse NPA, which, after a serious and complex discussion, had been to include on its lists an internationalist, anti-capitalist, feminist member of theirs who considers she must wear the veil out of her religious convictions."

The TF1 television channel reported the statement by Sihem Habchi, president of the right-wing feminist organization *Ni Putes ni soumises* (Neither Whores Nor Submissive). Habchi announced that she intended to file a complaint "against this NPA list which figures a veiled woman, Ilham Moussaïd, who has declared her intention to keep wearing her scarf." She denounced to Agence France Presse (AFP) "an anti-republican, anti-secular, anti-feminist attitude."

Habchi rejected the right of a woman wearing Muslim religious dress to stand in an election. "It is out of the question

that a woman displaying a religious symbol should run, since, as an elected official, there is an obligation of neutrality and reserve," she told AFP.

Caroline Fourest wrote an article in *Le Monde* denouncing "the fundamentalism rampant in the working class neighborhoods" and accused the NPA of playing the role of "useful idiots' of Islamism."

Le Monde published an opinion piece by Frédéric Bourgade, "an NPA sympathizer and voter." He began by denouncing the scarf worn by Moussaïd: "It expresses clearly her rejection of mixing, getting together, except in the case of conversion. Thus it gives precedence to the religious dimension over free choice in love. A dimension which excludes the right to abortion, because children are a gift of god. Where the feminism professed by our comrade is, I can't see."

Le Monde on February 9 quoted Samuel Joshua, a Marseille NPA leader, who "is also dubious." He told the newspaper, "Is it a good choice? The veil is a sign of the oppression of women. Ilhem does not see it like that, but we can't treat it as normal." He went on to say he feared the NPA could "explode" over the issue.

The NPA's defense of Moussaïd was half-hearted, at best. Olivier Besancenot, the NPA spokesman, stated that Moussaïd's candidacy was "the reflection of our roots in the neighborhoods."

Omar Slaouti, responsible for the NPA's work in "sensitive" neighborhoods, said, "She's a member who agrees with our program. She's a feminist. It is out of the question that there be two levels of membership."

In February, *Ni putes ni soumises* and the Egypt-based Arab Women's Solidarity Organization filed a request with the Marseille Administrative Tribunal asking it to order the *préfet* to deny official registration of the NPA list for the region because of the presence of a veiled candidate. In the event, the *préfet* validated the list.

The NPA carried out no campaign to condemn this reactionary attempt to mobilize the state against the democratic rights of its candidate, nor did it publish any public statement in her defense.

Moussaïd's candidacy and the nature of the NPA

At the beginning of February, *Figaro* interviewed Moussaïd and drew a portrait of her. Since 2006, she had been participating in the association AJCREV, working with children in Avignon. She had demonstrated against the war in Iraq and the massacres in Gaza, where she met members of the NPA.

Having voted for the Socialist candidate Ségolène Royal in the 2007 presidential elections, she joined the 10 or so activists in the NPA “popular committee” in Avignon.

Figaro explains, “Marx? She did not know him. She started to read one of his books but can't remember the title. The believer is not afraid to say that it was her ‘faith’ which brought her to the NPA—the struggle against injustice, against ‘the rule of money.’”

According to Moussaïd, “Marx is Marx, but the members of the NPA in 2010 are not like that! You must remember why we went from the LCR (Revolutionary Communist League) to the NPA: so as to open up the working class areas. We are a revolutionary party, aren't we? Well, let's start with that revolution.”

This interview with Moussaïd reflects quite accurately the nature of the NPA. Moussaïd has no Marxist training, having little interest in Marx or Trotsky, but was attracted to the NPA, hoping to struggle through it for what she considered to be the principles of Islam, a religion persecuted by the French state.

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The NPA does not attempt to fight with its members for an internationalist and socialist perspective, preferring to adapt to religious conceptions and ideas spontaneously produced in the population by the action of the media and the bourgeois parties.

The statement that the NPA is a secular party deserves special comment. Representing the principle of the neutrality and non-intervention of the state as regards religious questions, secularism is a democratic principle that, historically, has been defended by the socialist movement. However, when the NPA declares itself to be secular, it is in order to indicate that it fights for no clear political line on essential political questions.

A revolutionary party is not an eclectic organization. The Marxist party bases itself on dialectical and historical materialism and the heritage of the struggle of the Trotskyist movement against Stalinism throughout the Twentieth Century. By its political and philosophical character, the NPA is the opposite of such a party, as is shown by its treatment of Moussaïd.

By setting itself up on the basis of the rejection of the heritage of the Trotskyist movement—declaring at its founding congress that it wanted to have the “best” from the “communist” (that is, Stalinist or Maoist), social democratic and anarchist tendencies—the NPA promoted various reactionary ideas,

including the conception that a struggle for the emancipation of the workers is compatible with faith.

The expulsion of Moussaïd

Following the regional elections and the poor showing of the NPA, a press statement was issued in April. As quoted by *Libération*, it read, “Following the media campaign against the NPA, targeting a veiled candidate who should have remained one candidate amongst others, the Vaucluse NPA is reorganizing itself.”

The statement was signed by Jacques Hauyé, the head of the NPA's departmental list of candidates in the regional elections. It continued, “The committees on feminism and secularism regret the exploitation of Islam to which the candidate lent herself, with the active support of a team which acted independently and continues to work with her.”

Moussaïd, presented as being a secularist, feminist, anti-capitalist militant during the regional elections, was expelled from the party scarcely a month later on the grounds of her “exploitation of Islam.”

In an NPA opinion piece in May, the sociology professor Josette Trat and other members of the national leadership of the party denounced Moussaïd: “In disagreement with the decisions of the Vaucluse members concerning the candidacy of Ilham, we consider as the least problematic the lack of collective discussion on a choice which had a national dimension and which the entire NPA is called on to take upon itself, as if the discussion was closed before even having begun. First of all, let us remember that the NPA has declared for secularism.”

It was not Moussaïd who exploited Islam. It was the NPA that exploited Moussaïd in order to give itself a left cover, attempting to shield itself from the anger of immigrants and workers against the reactionary anti-burqa policies to which the NPA was adapting.



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