

France enforces burqa ban

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Protests in Paris against the coming into effect on April 11 of the anti-democratic law banning the wearing of full-face veils, the niqab and the burqa, by Muslim women have led to several arrests of veiled women.

On April 12, Local Government Minister Philippe Richert announced at the National Assembly that four women had already been arrested, for having broken the anti-burqa law.

Le Nouvel Observateur reports, “According to police sources, a veiled woman, arrested in a shopping centre in Les Mureaux [near Paris] was fined €150, as the law provides”. Moreover, “another fully veiled woman was arrested on Tuesday in Saint-Denis (near Paris) and taken to the police station after having refused to take off her veil on the public highway. The woman, who removed her niqab, was not booked but was reminded of the law”.

The burqa ban prohibits the wearing of the full-face veil in any place open to the public—the street, shops, parks, public transport, hospitals, official buildings. It threatens veiled women with a €150 (\$215) fine or special citizenship classes; they can also be taken into custody for up to four hours for verification of their identity if they refuse to uncover their face. People who force women to wear a veil face up to a year in prison and a €30,000 fine (\$43,000), double if the veiled person is a minor.

Official estimates put the number of women who wear these veils at no more than 2,000 out of France’s five to six million Muslims.

On Monday, April 11, the day the law came into effect, the *Guardian* reported, “About a dozen people, including three women wearing veils, staged a protest in front of Notre Dame cathedral in Paris on Monday, and two women were taken away in a van”.

Similarly, last Saturday, three days before the law

came into effect, some 60 demonstrators, including 20 women wearing the full-face veil, defied a police refusal to authorize their protest at La Place de la Nation in Paris, called by a Salafist group. According to *L’Express*, the police arrested 61 protesters, including 19 women. Two protestors, Mr Choudry coming from Great Britain and Mr Belkacem from Belgium, were arrested and given expulsion orders.

Kenza Drider was arrested on Monday. She lives in Avignon, and was interviewed as she took the TGV train to Paris wearing a niqab. She said that she has been attacked and subjected to racist abuse since the debate on banning the veil began last summer: “This law is Islamophobic and racist”, she said. “My life now consists of hate, stares, and insults”.

She said she would continue to go “shopping, to the post office and to city hall if necessary. I will under no circumstance stop wearing my veil”. She added, “If I am warned verbally and must appear before the local prosecutor...I will appeal to the European Court of Human Rights”.

She insisted, “It’s a question of freedom of religion, of conscience. Those rights are protected by European law” and that “It’s not an act of provocation...I’m only carrying out my citizens’ rights, I’m not committing a crime.... If they [police] ask me for identity papers I’ll show them, no problem”.

There have been warnings by police that enforcing the law could provoke violent protests in impoverished Muslim suburbs. Thierry Depuyt, secretary of the Unsa-FO police trade union for Nord/Pas-de-Calais and Picardy stated, “If we aren’t careful when we intervene, we run the risk of a flare-up on the housing estates, though the women who wear the niqab or the burqa cause no trouble to public order in comparison with ordinary policing like violence or drug dealing”.

The government has provocatively declared its intent to move ahead. Sarkozy’s new minister of the interior,

Claude Guéant, warned that the law would be “adhered to” and that “the police and the *gendarmerie* are there to apply the law, and they will apply the law”.

The application of the anti-burqa law is the culmination of a two-year campaign launched by Sarkozy after he declared on June 22, 2009, at a meeting of parliament that “the burqa is not welcome in France”. This was part of a broader effort to make racist attacks on Muslims under cover of women’s rights and secularism, such as the 2004 ban on headscarves in French public schools.

This anti-democratic campaign, which aimed to divide the working class and undermine opposition to imperialist wars in Muslim countries, had the full support of France’s official “left” or “far left” parties.

France took a leading role in the development of the European Union’s anti-immigrant and racist policies. Anti-burqa laws have been passed in Belgium and are being implemented or proposed in Italy, Switzerland and other countries.

A parliamentary commission against the burqa was set up and held its first meeting on July 8, 2009. All parliamentary parties participated. It was chaired by André Gerin of the Stalinist Communist Party (PCF), one of the most vocal opponents of the burqa. It also had delegates from the ruling UMP (Union for a Popular Movement), the big-business Socialist Party (PS), and the Greens.

It had the support of the pseudo-left *Lutte Ouvrière* (Workers Struggle) and—though it initially tried to mask it by running a headscarf-wearing candidate named Ilham Moussaïd in the March 2010 local elections—the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA). However, Moussaïd and her backers in the local NPA branch were subsequently expelled by the NPA leadership, as the NPA aligned itself more directly to the positions of the ruling class.

The law went through the National Assembly and the Senate in 2010 with massive majorities, and then the Constitutional Council. The PS, PCF and Greens either voted for it or abstained.

The campaign for the ban proceeded with open contempt for constitutionality and the rule of law. At the April 2, 2010, meeting of the cabinet, Prime Minister François Fillon stated that the government would fast-track this legislation, even though it could be ruled unconstitutional and contrary to the European

Convention of Human Rights.

“We are ready to take legal risks because we think that the stakes are worth it”, he said, adding, “We cannot encumber ourselves with prudence in relation to legislation that is unsuited to today’s society.... If we have to shift the jurisprudence of the [French] Constitutional Council and that of the European Court of Human Rights, we think that it is our public duty to do so”.

The political consequences of this right-wing campaign are becoming ever more apparent. It has created the opportunity for Marine Le Pen of the neo-fascist Front National to adopt the pose of a defender of secularism, while advocating a policy of “national preference” in the provision of social services.

At 30 percent approval ratings due to his unpopular policies—and forecast to fail to qualify for the second-round runoff in the 2012 elections—Sarkozy is appealing to the most reactionary forces in French society to press forward with his agenda.

Emboldened by the lack of opposition in the political establishment, the Sarkozy administration is pressing ahead. On April 5, the UMP organised a “convention” to propose further measures to restrict the rights of Muslims. The Socialist Party (PS) had criticised the event as a dangerous provocation for civil unrest. However, after having signed a petition opposing it, PS First Secretary Martine Aubry and ex-PS prime minister Laurent Fabius withdrew their signatures upon learning that Tariq Ramadan, a Swiss Moslem university professor, had also signed.

Sarkozy also launched a war of aggression last month against Libya, while deepening France’s neo-colonial intervention in the Ivory Coast and its participation in the unpopular NATO occupation of Afghanistan.



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