France prepares ban on denying a Turkish genocide of Armenians

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30 December 2011

The National Assembly's passage on December 22 of a law banning the public denial of the Armenian genocide has provoked a major diplomatic crisis between France and Turkey. In the days before the vote on the law, the Turkish government tried to exert pressure to prevent the vote, and reacted forcefully once the law was passed.

The Turkish state forbids the use of the term genocide to characterise the massacres of Armenians perpetrated in 1915 on the territory of the former Ottoman Empire.

The infringement of the new French law now carries the penalty of a year in prison and a €45,000 fine.

The initiative for this law came from President Nicolas Sarkozy's government. During a visit to the Armenian capital Erevan in October, he publicly pressed for the recognition of the Armenian genocide, since "denial was not acceptable." Valérie Boyer, a deputy of the ruling UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) for a Marseille constituency with a large Armenian community, then proposed a bill on behalf of the government.

Most of the deputies were not present for the debate before the vote. The law was finally only voted on by some 50 majority and opposition deputies, out of 577, with about 10 from both sides voting against.

The Socialist Party (PS) and the Communist Party (PCF) voted with the government in favour of the law, which, in fact, is a reprise of a similar law passed by the National Assembly in 2006, which the UMP and the government then opposed.

Historians who had already opposed such a law, again expressed their hostility to the present law. In particular, they are worried that it represents an attack on freedom of enquiry and freedom of speech, and oppose giving the state the right to gag historians. The French historian Pierre Nora, who opposes the voting of the law, in the name of historians' freedom, is quoted in *Le Monde*.

The law is deeply reactionary. It allows French imperialism to hypocritically set itself up as a moral authority as it carries out a military offensive in the Muslim world—with wars in Libya and in Afghanistan, and an on-going intervention in Syria carried out with the US and Turkey. It also facilitates dividing the working class along ethnic lines, while giving the state anti-democratic censorship powers.

One of Sarkozy's more or less openly admitted motivations, in the context of the campaign for the presidential election in April and May 2012, was to attract the Armenian vote.

Sarkozy is seeking re-election, as his government becomes ever more unpopular. His inability to provide any solution to the economic crisis and his repeated attacks on living standards, jobs and civil rights as well as his defence of finance capital have provoked hostility in the majority of the population. He is led in the polls by the PS, and the neo-fascist National Front is close behind.

Sarkozy has systematically opposed the entry of Turkey into the European Union (EU). The issue of the denial of the genocide, which the new law penalises and puts at the same level as the Shoah, serves as a further obstacle to Turkey's membership of the EU.

As the former UMP minister and vehement supporter of the law, Patrick Devidjan, admitted: "It's a political act: just when Turkey wants to join the European Union, and appear to be a country which defends human rights, this law helps to reveal the attitude of Turkey on the international arena and clearly shows that Turkey is not the country of human rights."

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The announcement of the vote set off a major diplomatic crisis with Turkey. The Turkish government and media reacted aggressively to the vote. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened France with economic and political sanctions, the freezing of military cooperation, and diplomatic isolation in the Middle East.

Sarkozy's initiative provoked incredulity and anger among many bourgeois politicians, even within his own government. Foreign Minister Alain Juppé (UMP) was quoted in the weekly *Marianne* saying: "This bill is intellectually, economically and diplomatically bullsh*t. We're not going to get into a genocide competition. All that just to get the votes of Frenchmen of Armenian extraction. It's ridiculous!"

Another rival presidential candidate, Dominique de Villepin, a former prime minister who left the UMP in February 2011, has called the voting of the law an "error." On December 25 on Europe 1 radio station, he warned: "Let's be prudent. We are opening up disputes which will push us backwards and not forwards."

That a section of big business should express its misgivings publicly is not surprising. The past five years have seen a noticeable rapprochement of France with Turkey, and a strong increase of French investment in the country. Turkey has become an important export market. France, which has €11.5 billion direct investments in Turkey, sold €6.3 billion worth of exports there and bought €5.4 billion worth of imports in 2010.

French car makers have 20 percent share of the Turkish market, and French banks have obtain significant interest income there.

At a time when French imperialism is intervening in Syria, where it partially depends on Turkey for assistance, Sarkozy's initiative seems very ill-chosen for large sections of the French bourgeoisie.

France has established close collaboration with Turkey in order to intervene in the civil war which is developing between the Alawite regime of Assad and the imperialist-backed Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army. This imperialist intervention in Syria must be seen in the broader context of a political, and potentially military, imperialist confrontation with Iran throughout the Middle East.

Ever more pressing demands for a military intervention in Syria by the imperialist powers, including France, are being expressed. Some days ago, Bernard Valero, spokesman for the Foreign Office called on the United Nations Security Council to vote "a firm resolution which demands the end of the repression."

According to the French satirical weekly *Le Canard Enchaîné,* and the Turkish daily *Milliyet*, the Free Syrian Army is trained by British soldiers and French intelligences service agents. For weeks the FSA has been calling for "foreign air strikes" (according to *Le Monde* of November 24). France has committed itself to the establishment of a "buffer zone" between Turkey and Syria.

The French Senate must now debate the bill voted by the National Assembly. The UMP Senator Roger Karoutchi pointed out yesterday that it had not yet been written into the Senate timetable, adding that it made him "uncomfortable". According to Karoutchi, the Senate could decide to place bill on the agenda for January 10, which would mean that the Senate would debate it in February.

Zeynep Necipoglu of the French Chamber of Commerce in Turkey (CCFT) has announced that the CCFT would carry out "a determined campaign with the senators to make them aware.... of the great amount of damage that [this initiative] is likely to cause." According to the CCFT, this could enable the French political establishment to "act in order for the bill to be voted down in the Senate."

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