French political establishment capitulates to government’s appeals to racism

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The February 4 declaration by President Nicolas Sarkozy’s interior minister, Claude Guéant, that “not all civilisations are of equal value” has provoked an uproar, and a steady capitulation to Guéant’s racist appeals in the French political establishment.

Guéant’s remarks, made at a meeting of the right-wing student union UNI (National Inter-University Union), implicitly aimed to stigmatize immigrants and particularly Muslims, a long-time target of the French right and far right.

Guéant, a political thug whose specialty is making anti-democratic, law-and-order appeals, hypocritically denounced civilizations that deny “individual liberties” and women’s rights. Members of the UNI—a right-wing outfit set up after the 1968 student protests and general strike with the help of French imperialism’s “Mr. Africa,” Jacques Foccart—were well aware of its political subtext.

It was a crude, racist attempt to appeal to the far right vote in Sarkozy's bid to be re-elected in the the presidential elections in April-May. Sarkozy's austerity policies and his wars in Afghanistan and Libya have made him extremely unpopular, trailing in approval ratings and behind the Socialist Party candidate François Hollande. Neo-fascist candidate Marine Le Pen of the National Front is close on his heels, and Guéant’s remarks were an attempt to win votes for Sarkozy from Le Pen, on a far-right, anti-immigrant basis.

What followed, however, was an even more remarkable incident. On February 7 Serge Letchimy, a deputy from Martinique, publicly drew a comparison between the policies of Guéant and those of the Nazis in the French National Assembly.

Letchimy said: “You are day after day taking us back to the European ideologies which gave birth to the concentration camps, the outcome of a long history of slavery and colonialism. Was the Nazi regime, so concerned with purification, a civilisation? Was the barbarity of slavery and colonisation a civilising mission?”

The response of Prime Minister François Fillon and the entire cabinet was to stage a walk-out. They were followed by all the ruling UMP’s (Union for a Popular Movement) deputies.

The cabinet did not dare either to attempt to refute Letchimy’s criticisms, or to attempt to ignore them: it is too clear that Sarkozy’s re-election campaign is chasing the neo-fascist vote and making deep attacks on democratic rights. (See: “Back to Vichy”)

Letchimy, a leader of the Martinique Progressive Party (PPM), is a member of the PS parliamentary group. However, he was largely disowned by the PS, a party which has adapted itself to Sarkozy’s racist policies.

The leader of the PS group of deputies, Jean-Marc Ayrault, when pressed by Fillon to repudiate Letchimy’s comment, declared: “We may or may not be in agreement with the way it was expressed.”

Francois Hollande, when asked that evening on France2 TV whether he disapproved of Letchimy's intervention, declined to give an answer. He dismissed

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the controversy over Guéant's comments as a "useless polemic," noting simply that he thought Guéant's remarks were a "provocation."

After Letchimy's statement, UMP deputies called for him to be hauled before the National Assembly bureau where he could be punished with a loss of salary and suspension. *Le Monde* reports that, "on LCI TV, Christian Jacob, the chairman of the UMP group of deputies, demanded, in accordance with the rules of the National Assembly 'exemplary sanctions' against a deputy, who according to the right, had made a shameful, even monstrous parallel."

In fact, Guéant's fascistic remarks were only one in a long string of racist provocations and measures by the Sarkozy administration. This includes mass, indiscriminate round-ups and deportations of Roma and undocumented immigrants (*sans-papiers*), anti-Muslim provocations such as the ban on the burqa, and repeated claims that immigrants are responsible for crime.

The principal question that emerges is: how has it been possible for the French ruling class to repeatedly carry out such policies without encountering effective political opposition?

The entire bourgeois and petty-bourgeois "left"—the PS, the Communist Party (PCF), Left Party, New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) worked actively with Sarkozy in Islamophobic campaigns to legislate to ban the burqa and, before that, the Muslim veil in schools.

They have supported the rise of French imperialism's wars in Afghanistan and in Africa, last year's neo-colonial intervention in Libya, and now its support for pro-NATO proxy forces in Syria, who are trained and supplied by the French army and other NATO forces.

The NPA, the PCF and the PS have worked with the unions, notably the CGT (General Confederation of Labour), to impose Sarkozy's case-by-case policy of only legalising sans-papiers if they are required as cheap, rightless labour by an employer.

Soon Letchimy himself was backing down. *Le Monde* reports that at the meeting of the National Assembly bureau on February 8, "Mr. Letchimy, who had warned Mr Guéant that he would 'not be welcome' in Martinique, assured him that he would do nothing to obstruct his visit, settling merely for not greeting him." The bureau opted not to sanction Letchimy.

President of the Martinique Regional Council, Letchimy made no attempt to prevent Guéant's visit last Saturday. His party, the PPM, merely boycotted the minister's meetings on his 4-day stay.

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