

# Woman wearing a niqab forced to leave Paris Opera

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The press revealed on October 19, 16 days after the event, that during a performance of *La Traviata* at the Opéra Bastille in Paris, a woman spectator was made to leave on the orders of the deputy manager of the Paris Opera, Jean-Philippe Thiellay, because she was wearing a niqab. She was a tourist from a Persian Gulf state holidaying in Paris with her husband.

According to Thiellay, “some members of the choir indicated that they would not sing” if the woman remained in the hall. This scandalous act of discrimination demonstrates the undemocratic nature of the laws and measures against the veil, the burqa and the niqab and the atmosphere of Islamophobic hysteria stoked by the French political establishment.

The Ministry of Culture is using the resulting scandal to oblige the administrators of artistic venues to act more severely, as an all-out cultural police. The Socialist Party (PS) government said that a note is being drawn up at the ministry, reminding administrators of procedures to apply in theatres, museums and other public establishments “in order to make people comply with the law, harmonise responses, and to prevent problems.”

From now on, women dressed in a full veil are to be banned from entering public establishments on the grounds that this will avoid the scandals that result from expulsions.

Guy Laurent, an Opéra Bastille regular, told the right-wing British newspaper the *Daily Mail*: “What possible harm could a woman sitting quietly in the audience with face covered do to anyone? The woman would clearly have felt utterly humiliated by what happened—French culture should be more tolerant. It is not the job of theatres to enforce petty laws.”

In contrast, the few criticisms of the expulsions of the veiled tourist from political leaders have been limited,

cynical and entirely in keeping with official Islamophobia. *Public Sénat* quoted Green Senator Esher Benbassa who reproached the Opera Bastille management only for its clumsiness, but not for throwing out the spectator: “It’s the lack of courtesy which shocks me. It’s a really bureaucratic way of imposing the law.”

Remarkably, Benbassa explained that the veiled tourist had a sufficiently Western outlook that it was pointless to repress her: “This woman in a niqab was intending to listen to *La Traviata*. If a person is willing to see an opera for two and a half hours, then they already have a Western culture. That person is not totally lost to the West.”

Paris Opera management received statements of support from officials of the PS, of the right-wing UMP (Union for a Popular Movement), and by the founder of the neo-fascist National Front, Jean-Marie Le Pen, a torturer in the French army during the Algerian War. Claiming that the presence of a veiled woman at the Opéra Bastille was the sign of a “flare-up of communalism,” Le Pen said that the singers had done well to point her out.

This reactionary act is the product of a decade during which successive French governments have imposed anti-Islamic laws while waging a succession of imperialist wars in Muslim countries, such as Libya and Syria. In 2004, under President Jacques Chirac, the National Assembly passed a law banning the wearing of the veil in schools.

Promulgated on October 11, 2010, the law banning full-body veils, such as the niqab and burqa, specifies that “no person may, in a public space, wear clothing intended to hide the face” under penalty of a €150 fine and/or a citizenship class. It stipulates that “public space means public highways and well as places open

to the public or part of a public service,” including cinemas, theatres, museums and restaurants.

According to an investigation by the National Assembly, only “approximately 1,900 women were concerned at the end of 2009” by this law, while the number of Muslims living in France is estimated at over 5 million.

The law has already provoked discriminatory Islamophobic acts across France. The most notable include the confirmation on June 25 by the Court of Cassation, France’s highest appeals court, of the sacking of a veiled worker at the Baby-Loup daycare center near Paris, and the ID check on a woman wearing the niqab in Trappes, a Paris suburb, in July 2013. The police then attacked her husband, who tried to shield her from the police, after which riots broke out in Trappes in protest at police brutality.

The pan-European scale of this official racism was confirmed by the European Court of Human Rights. Last July 1, it declared the banning of the full body veil in France to be “legitimate,” rejecting the suit brought by a French woman against the ban.

Public and cultural life in France is being poisoned by these reactionary policies, through which the ruling elite, including the bourgeois “left,” has legitimized the neo-fascist National Front (FN) and far-right moods.

Since President François Hollande was elected in 2012, the pseudo-left and the trade union bureaucracies have done everything they could to stifle workers’ anger against this government, which is hated for its reactionary social and foreign policies.

The political context they have created, in which the working class is blocked from deploying its political strength against the PS, has enabled the rise of right-wing and Islamophobic tendencies to influence the most disoriented layers of the population (See: From pseudo-left to New Right: The trajectory of France’s Jean-Luc Mélenchon).



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