

#MeToo campaign turns on French Environment Minister Nicolas Hulot

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As the #MeToo movement encounters a growing backlash, rape charges against Nicolas Hulot in recent days have brought the media frenzy to absurd heights.

The accusations against Hulot, rumors of which had been circulating and amplified in the media for at least a week, came from the newly-founded *Ebdo* magazine. *Ebdo* was launched in January by Thierry Mandon, a former junior minister for state reform of France's Socialist Party (PS) government. The magazine cited a 2008 complaint "for acts of rape" against Hulot over events that occurred in 1997. The complaint was filed intentionally after the expiration of the statute of limitations, by a granddaughter of the late President François Mitterrand.

The second charge involves a former associate of the Hulot Foundation. This employee has "issued an official denial ... of the rumors" on the LCI television channel, declaring that she had "no comment about this affair which is not in fact an affair."

Hulot, who received public support from President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Edouard Philippe on Wednesday, preempted the publication of the article in *Ebdo* by speaking to BFM-TV, to reject the accusations and rule out any resignation. A few hours later, Interior Minister Gérard Collomb reiterated the government's support for Hulot.

The author of the 2008 complaint, Pascale Mitterrand, insisted that her identity not be revealed and that the matter not be used politically against Hulot, and claimed she did not want it to be reported. She herself has not said it was an act of rape but of "act under constraint." Her father, Gilbert Mitterrand, told LCI that her family "had nothing do to with this media buzz."

The WSWs has no political sympathy for Hulot, a long-standing representative of the corporate and

political elite. He is part of a reactionary government promoting militarism and unprecedented attacks on workers' basic social rights in France and across Europe. But such witch-hunts against politicians have nothing to do with democracy. It stokes an atmosphere of denunciation, humiliation and summary dismissals that trample on basic democratic rights and due process and benefits the most reactionary forces.

For the Macron government, which supported #MeToo last year as it put forth a reactionary bill setting up a morals police against immigrant youth in working class suburbs, supposedly to protect women, the #MeToo chickens have come home to roost. The sexualized media hysteria Macron helped stir up has now turned against the government itself.

At the same time, the Islamophobic campaign in the political elite is still escalating against #MeToo's original intended targets in France. Islamist scholar Tariq Ramadan, against whom rape charges were directed just after the #MeToo campaign emerged in France in October, was arrested on January 31 and indicted. He is still detained. As soon as the charges were made public, his employer, Oxford University, placed him on leave.

Ramadan has denied all the accusations. As ultra-detailed descriptions of the sexual accusations circulated in the press, a confrontation with one of his accusers reportedly ending with both Ramadan and the accuser insisting on their own account of events. Ramadan refused to sign the transcript of the discussion.

Ramadan's lawyers accused the Paris prosecutor's office of having influenced the inquiry and hidden exculpatory evidence, and demanded the General Inspection of the Justice System (IGJ) investigate the procedure. They also demanded the identification of a

judge who reportedly took testimony from one of Ramadan's accusers in 2009, who did not press charges at the time.

The accusation against Ramadan, even if he were proved to be guilty, has been politically manipulated from the beginning, stemming from a campaign waged by a large variety of forces appealing to anti-Muslim racism.

One of the leading protagonists in the campaign against Ramadan is the "secular feminist" writer and former *Charlie Hebdo* journalist Caroline Fourest. Initially a promoter of pseudo-left identity politics who then turned towards attacking Islamic fundamentalism after the 11 September 2001 attacks, she wrote a 2004 book on Ramadan titled *Brother Tariq*. Over the last decade, she has campaigned to brand "political Islam" as the greatest threat to democracy.

Speaking to RTL radio last October, she said that after a discussion with one of Ramadan's accusers, she "presented [the accuser] to a judge." She added the claim that Ramadan has a "hatred of women" and that "his sexuality corresponds to the ideas that he promotes." Fourest, who claimed to have been well apprised of accusations against Ramadan as far back as 2009, reportedly testified in November and provided "plenty of evidence" against Ramadan.

Ramadan is a political representative of the Muslim bourgeoisie who is hostile to the working class, but his case clearly illustrates how #MeToo reinforces Islamophobic campaigns waged by forces ranging from *Charlie Hebdo* to the neo-fascist National Front.

In recent weeks, #MeToo has met with an increasing backlash in the media and in the broader public. After the statement signed by 100 women including actress Catherine Deneuve criticizing #MeToo, more forces in cultural circles have criticized its repressive character.

As *Ebdo* published its article on Hulot, France TV Info published an interview with Austrian filmmaker Michael Haneke attacking #MeToo as a "witch hunt." He added, "I consider the hysteria and the sentencing without trial that we are seeing today to be quite disgusting ... Each shitstorm that these revelations trigger, including even on Internet forums of serious newspapers, poisons the social climate."

Certain newspapers which hailed and enthusiastically promoted #MeToo are now reporting that it is causing "unease," seeking to distance themselves from it as

they risk being exposed by the witch hunts they helped trigger. They have also pointed to the inconsistency and the vagueness of the accusations against Hulot.

On February 8, in an article titled "Rumors on Nicolas Hulot: Hype leads to Unease," *Libération* wrote, "In fact, after reading [the accusations], one has more questions than answers. It is as if the magazine had lit a fuse and was then hoping that it could sell a lot of copies." *L'Obs* magazine said there was "unease in the press" over the issue.

Political commentator Alain Duhamel complained, "Everything is based on anonymous denunciations, which are supposed to remain such, by alleged victims. We are as usual in a world of allegations, accusations, rumors without—for the moment at least—any tangible proof."

Significantly, Duhamel pointed to the risks to the Macron government and the entire ruling elite: "This could not come at a worse time, since there is already the matter with Darmanin [a public finances minister recently accused of rape]. ... Now we are in a period where accusations of sexual violence dominate the headlines every day. ... A majority of Frenchmen already consider the political establishment to be financially corrupt. If they conclude it is sexually corrupt, as well, that is getting to be too much."

This comment points to the deep conflicts among wealthy and affluent social layers of which #MeToo is one expression. Having permitted the media to whip up this anti-democratic campaign, they are now beginning to wonder whether—in the interests of stabilizing a regime that is discredited and hated by masses of workers—it might be better to clip its wings.



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