

French neo-fascist Le Pen, interior minister debate anti-Muslim policies

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On Thursday night, Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin and neo-fascist Marine Le Pen held an hour-long debate on France2 TV. The result was a sinister, degraded spectacle, focused on fascistic measures against Muslims and immigrants, in which the moderators admitted that it was difficult to distinguish Le Pen from Darmanin.

Before this carefully staged event, the press published a battery of polls on potential candidates in next year's French presidential elections. An IFOP poll found that 67 percent of the population expects Le Pen and President Emmanuel Macron to make it to the second round, setting up a rematch of the 2017 elections. Moreover, 70 percent would be unhappy about such an election. A Harris Interactive poll found that currently Macron would only very narrowly defeat Le Pen, who would get 48 percent of the vote.

The debate thus had the character of an attempt by the French political establishment and media to frame the 2022 elections, with Darmanin standing in for Macron—presuming that Macron runs again, despite his massive unpopularity. That a debate between France's best-known neo-fascist and its top cop could be taken as a preview of the next elections points to the increasingly fascistic course of the ruling class.

Though France has seen 3.4 million of Europe's 32 million cases of COVID-19 and 81,000 of its over three-quarters of a million deaths, not a word was spoken about the pandemic. Le Pen had confirmed shortly before, in an interview with Jean-Jacques Bourdin on BFM-TV, that she opposes lockdowns. Nor was there a word on France's bloody war in Mali or the grotesque levels of social inequality produced by austerity policies imposed by Macron, the “president of the rich.” On these fascistic policies, there is unanimity in the ruling elite.

Instead, moderators Léa Salamé, Thomas Sotto and Nathalie Saint-Cricq began by pressing Le Pen to say if she supports the ultra-repressive “anti-separatist” law,

which would allow the state to impose loyalty oaths and dissolve associations or political parties. Drafted under Darmanin's authority at the Interior Ministry and presented as a measure targeting Muslims, this bill is now under discussion at the National Assembly.

Le Pen floundered as she tried to criticize this fascistic bill, claiming she was “disappointed” in the law, and complaining that it does not openly declare that it targets Islam. She also obliquely referred to the dangers the law poses not only to Muslim associations, but to the entire public. She said: “We needed a great, fighting law, not an administrative text. You are limiting the liberties of everyone, but you are not struggling against Islamist ideology.”

Darmanin responded by attacking Le Pen from the right, as “soft” on Islam. “You are acting with softness, Mrs. Le Pen, you have gone so far that you say that Islam is not a problem,” he said—an astonishing and sinister statement about a religion practiced by an estimated 3.5 million people in France. He later added: “Mrs. Le Pen, as she attempts to de-demonize her party, has come to act with softness. You should take vitamins, I find that you are not tough enough!”

There ensued a debate on whether the Macron administration has been successful in limiting immigration. The moderators also speculated about whether Le Pen is “mature” or “presidential” enough to serve as president, and Darmanin repeatedly insisted that Le Pen is poorly prepared.

Le Pen also hailed Darmanin's book, *Islamist Separatism: A Manifesto for Secularism*, just out in bookstores. “I could have signed this book. You define Islamism very clearly,” she said, adding: “But what of all that remains in the law? Very little.” She called to ban publicly wearing the headscarf, making it virtually illegal to be a practicing Muslim.

Darmanin advanced the fascistic argument that French

law can ban burqas or headscarves, but only that its principles prevent it from openly stating it is targeting a religion. “Secularism, that means precisely not recognizing them,” Darmanin claimed. Referring to the 1905 secularism law, he claimed: “Everyone knows it was made against the Catholic Church, but it is not called the Law against the Catholic Church. It is called the law of separation of church and state.”

This is a travesty of French law. The principle of secularism mandates state neutrality on religious issues and prevents the state from instituting or favoring a religion. It does not allow the state to target a religion or its members. Darmanin’s characterization of the 1905 law as an attack on Catholicism, which still exercises vast influence in France over a century after the 1905 law passed, reflects Darmanin’s own far-right views.

It was confirmed last week that Darmanin is a former sympathizer and writer for the *Action française*, the fascist, monarchist group that opposed the 1905 secularism law and supported the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime. Re-established in 1955, it took back its original name in 2010. The fact that French law on religious affairs is being rewritten under the authority of an *Action française* sympathizer is another warning to the far-right turn of official politics.

When Macron and Le Pen emerged as the candidates in the second round of the 2017 elections, the *Parti de l’égalité socialiste* (PES), the French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, called for an active boycott. It warned that Macron was no alternative to a neo-fascist. Its warning had nothing in common, however, with an abstentionist position. The only way forward, it stressed, was to build a politically independent movement in the working class against whichever reactionary candidate won.

Nearly four years later, this assessment has been fully vindicated. Macron, who in 2018 hailed France’s Nazi-collaborationist dictator and convicted traitor Philippe Pétain as a “great soldier” in the face of mass strikes and “yellow vest” protests, has pursued a fascist course. Ramming through labor reforms, rail privatizations and pension cuts in the face of mass popular opposition, he came to rely virtually entirely on the police forces as his social base.

The ruling elite’s murderous “herd immunity” policy on the pandemic has vastly accelerated the turn towards fascism internationally. In Washington, on January 6, US President Donald Trump incited a coup attempt on the US Capitol in Washington, in an attempt to overturn his

defeat in the 2020 presidential elections. In France, Macron is trying to pass a “global security law,” authorizing the use of drones against protesters and to ban taking videos of police, in addition to the “anti-separatist” law.

Pseudo-left parties of the affluent middle class that backed Macron, openly or tacitly, in 2017 are complicit in this. All helped implement Macron’s “herd immunity” policy, overseeing the return of workers to work and of children to school, leading to a resurgence of the virus that cost tens of thousands of lives in France alone. The Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) and Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s *Unsubmissive France* underscored their political complicity last week by supporting or abstaining in votes on the “anti-separatist” law’s reactionary provisions.

Former Green Party leader Cécile Duflot was virtually alone in this milieu in warning on Macron’s fascist policy. “Historically, those in power were the most blind at great tipping points: this was true in World War I, when Nazism took power or in pre-Mussolini Italy,” Duflot wrote in *Le Monde*.

She added: “Democrats do not seem to realize that France can easily turn into a quasi-dictatorship. ... The bill on separatism has very dangerous limitations on civil society. Adding to that measures on the state of emergency and general laws, I let you imagine the disaster that can unfold in a few days if [Le Pen] gets power.”

In reality, France has turned into a quasi-dictatorship under Macron. Even if the now entirely plausible scenario of a neo-fascist victory next year is averted, it could still become a fascist regime under Macron or one of his allies.

The defense of workers’ lives and democratic rights against Macron’s fascist laws and policies requires the independent political mobilization of the working class. Only the preparation of a European-wide general strike to impose a scientifically-guided confinement policy, independently of unions who support “herd immunity” policies, can halt the pandemic. Such a movement would pose the question of developing a mass socialist political movement to transfer state power to the working class.



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