# French Senate amends anti-separatism law to ban hijab for youth under 18

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**6 April 2021**

Last week, on the first day of reading of President Macron's "anti-separatism" law, the French Senate voted to approve an amendment banning Muslim women under the age of 18 from wearing hijabs anywhere in public. A second amendment would ban parents from participating in school trips and activities with their children if they are dressed in religious clothing.

Both amendments still need to pass through the National Assembly before coming into law. They were tabled by a group of senators from the conservative Republican Party (LR) and European Democratic and Social Rally group.

The amendment targeting under-18-year-olds passed by a margin of 177 to 141, with senators from the Socialist Party, Communist Party and a majority of Macron's Republic On the Move party voting against it. It would prevent non-adults from wearing "signs or clothing" in public spaces that "ostensibly manifest a religious affiliation" or "that would signify the inferiority of women to men."

While the authors were conscious to avoid mentioning the hijab by name, the primary target of the amendment are France's 5.4 million Muslims. Police would effectively be given the right to harass and arrest Muslim youth, and virtually anyone wearing clothing that they deemed inappropriate under the sweeping language of the bill. It is to be enforced through a further build-up of the police in impoverished and minority areas, and invasive measures against Muslims.

A 2019 survey found that around 20 percent of women from a Muslim background regularly wear the hijab or another veil; another 20 percent wear it in some contexts. Most Muslim women who do wear a veil or headscarf start at the age of puberty, in their early teenage years. The legislation would outlaw this practice. Muslim girls and young women would be forced to dress in accordance with the dictates of the state if they wish to participate in public life.

The amendment underscores the reactionary and far-right character of the Macron government's "anti-separatism" law. Among other measures, it establishes a "Charter of principles" that Muslim associations are legally obliged to sign, pledging their allegiance to the state, and grants the state vast powers over religious and other associations. Political discussion inside mosques is banned, and statements denouncing the French state as racist are declared to be defamatory.

As with the entire law, the latest amendment turns the principle of "secularism" on its head. The democratic principle of the separation of church and state aims to prevent the intervention of the state into the private lives of citizens. The Macron government and the extreme right are using references to "secularism" to justify state infringements on the democratic rights of the Muslim population.

The votes against the amendment by a majority of government senators—as well as representatives of the Socialist Party, Unsubmissive France and the Communist Party—are hypocritical and cynical in the extreme.

A major concern motivating them is that the amendment expresses even more openly the blatantly discriminatory character of the "anti-separatism" law, and threatens to provoke an eruption of opposition in the working class and youth against it.

Secondly, there is a concern that the amendment itself may be unconstitutional. This was stated by Darmanin in explaining his reasons for opposing the amendment. Along these lines, Communist Party Senator Mari-Noëlle Lienemann explained her vote against the amendment by stating that she wanted to "find

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legislation that outlaws the veil for minors," but that "we cannot make a mistake in choosing which method to use" to achieve it. "If the measure is rejected [as unconstitutional], that would have an impact contrary to our intentions," she said.

The amendment is also the extension of restrictions on wearing Islamic clothing that have been passed with the support of the entire political establishment over decades. In 2004, the Socialist Party voted to support the ban on students wearing religious clothing in schools. In 2010, the Sarkozy government used anti-terrorism measures as a justification for banning the niqab and all other clothes that cover the face in public.

Unsubmissive France and the Communist Party deputies have either voted for or abstained on more than 40 percent of the articles on the "anti-separatism" law in the National Assembly.

Darmanin's absurd claim that he is concerned the amendment would undermine "religious plurality" in France fools no one. Darmanin is known to have supported the royalist and far-right *Action française*. Last October, he declared he was shocked at the sight of halal and kosher foods in supermarkets, and said such separated food aisles were the first step toward "communalism."

In a debate with Marine Le Pen, the leader of the far-right National Rally in February, he attacked Le Pen from the right as being "soft," and for failing to vote for some of the government's anti-terrorism laws.

Last November, dozens of mosques, as well as BarakaCity, the largest Muslim charity in France, were investigated and closed by the government on the claims that they were suspected of "separatist" sympathies. Many of those targeted and arrested were critics of French imperialist wars and interventions in the Sahel, Middle East, and North Africa.

Justifying this policy, Darmanin stated last December that "up until now, the government has been interested in radicalization and terrorism," but would now also target those "who create the intellectual and cultural space to secede and impose their values."

The fascistic nature of the government's campaign is made clear by a series of tweets from the Inter-ministerial Committee for the Prevention of Delinquency and Radicalization on March 29.

One tweet claimed: "The term '#islamophobia' has been imposed by Islamists with the aim of prohibiting any form of criticism of radical Islam." The term was used "to justify the massacre of the cartoonists of Charlie Hebdo," a reference to the 2015 terrorist attack on the magazine. While it insisted that "[Muslims] must be able to live their faith and worship freely," it ominously added, "in accordance with the laws and values of the Republic."

In these statements, the French state is propagating far-right conspiracy theories, claiming that anti-Muslim discrimination is a myth conjured up by unspecified pro-Islamist groups to justify terrorism and communalism. Under Macron, fascistic attitudes and policies have been adopted wholesale by large portions of the French state.

Right-wing campaigns against the veil have also not been limited to France in recent months. In February 2020 the Coalition Avenir Québec introduced a "secularism" bill which sought to ban hijabs in schools. Last month, Switzerland outlawed face coverings, including the niqab and burka in public.

Like its international counterparts, the Macron government is desperate to contain rising social outrage following the mass amount of death and economic devastation that has resulted from the ruling class' murderous mismanagement of the pandemic. This had led to the rapid construction of a police state apparatus as well as measures to facilitate the repression of all opposition to the dictates of French imperialism. While the current measures are primarily aimed toward Muslim minorities, they are part of preparations for a much wider assault on the fundamental democratic rights of the working class in France and across Europe.

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