

Austria's Black-Green government agitates against Muslims

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At the end of last month the Austrian government headed by the right-wing Chancellor Sebastian Kurz launched a deliberate provocation against Muslims in Austria by introducing its so-called "Islam Map." The Kurz government, a coalition of the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the Greens, are trying to distract attention from their disastrous policies and mobilise far-right forces.

For an entire week at the end of May, an overview of 623 Muslim institutions in Austria could be viewed on the internet. The presentation of the "map" had previously been announced at a government press conference. The website presentation contained addresses, personal data of leading figures as well as information about the activities of Muslim institutions and associations. The presentation also included an explicit request to report observations about the listed associations to the authorities.

All of the organisations were listed under the label "political Islam," regardless of whether the organisation in question had political connections and objectives or not. The publication of details of hundreds of associations, mosques and their leaders was intended to mobilise the far-right dregs of society to hound and attack Muslims.

The intended reaction was not long in coming. Immediately after the publication, right-wing extremists in Vienna sprayed graffiti on several mosques and hung up posters with the inscription "Look out! Political Islam near you." Similar signs were also put up in St. Pölten. While this represented a clear danger for Muslims, it was the intellectual architects of the attacks, namely the authors of the map and Austrian Integration Minister Susanne Raab (ÖVP), who immediately received police protection.

There was a huge wave of criticism of the government's right-wing campaign, and even the Council of Europe demanded the withdrawal of the map. "The

map overshoots the mark and is potentially counterproductive," the Council declared in a statement by Daniel Hölting, the special representative for anti-Muslim intolerance and hate crimes.

Many Muslims felt stigmatised and their security threatened by the publication of their addresses and other details and the Muslim Youth of Austria (MJÖ) announced it would file a complaint against the map. Due to the "massive security risk" now facing Muslims, the association demanded the deletion of the map and intends to file a complaint with the data protection authority.

Other Muslim associations, plus representatives of churches and other organisations, also spoke out strongly against the map. The Islamic Religious Community in Austria (IGGÖ) denounced the map as a risk to the security of Muslim institutions.

The University of Vienna has distanced itself from the provocation, although several academics from the university had helped to draw up the map. The strong reactions were certainly the reason why the map was taken off the internet at the end of a week. Officially, it was claimed that alleged threats against employees of the IT provider had made it necessary to take down most of the content, although the map itself, featuring a host of Muslim sites, is still available on the internet.

At the same time, both the map's authors and the government are sticking to the campaign. "This is not discriminating in general against Muslims," Raab told the German newspaper *Die Welt*. "It is about the common fight against political Islam as a breeding ground for extremism." For her part, Green Party integration spokesperson Faika El-Nagashi announced a "lull" and a review before the site goes back online.

The comments by both politicians make clear that they continue to fully back the content of the campaign. On Thursday, Ednan Aslan, a religious scholar at the University of Vienna, who had drawn up the map on

behalf of the government-affiliated Documentation Centre for Political Islam, declared that one would not allow “Islamist threats” to disrupt the “scientific work.”

The Documentation Centre for Political Islam was set up in 2020 by the ÖVP and the Greens. It was supposedly modelled on the Documentation Archive of the Austrian Resistance—in what is in fact a brazen insult to the victims of the Nazis. In fact, the roots of the Documentation Centre can be traced to an initiative of the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) in 2016. After the collapse of the previous ÖVP/FPÖ government, the Greens took over the role of the FPÖ and, together with Kurz, continued the former coalition’s extreme right-wing policies.

Not surprisingly the anti-Islamic campaign has received glowing praise from far right-wing and openly fascist circles. Beatrix von Storch, deputy federal spokesperson for the Alternative for Germany (AfD), regarded the initiative of the ÖVP-Green government in Vienna as a role model for Germany.

“The German Interior Minister Seehofer should take action against Islamic extremism in our country with the same verve shown by the Kurz government in taking action against Islamism in Austria,” the far-right politician demanded. The CDU interior politician, Hans-Jürgen Irmer, who is known for his xenophobic utterances, also demanded such a map for Germany.

This latest provocation underlines the right-wing character of the government in Vienna. During the course of his coalition with the FPÖ, Kurz had already closed down several mosques and expelled dozens of imams. Since the action lacked any legal basis, most of the mosques were reopened following court rulings. The headscarf ban in Austrian schools, introduced in 2019, was also overturned by the Constitutional Court one year later. Again, this fundamental attack on religious freedom and freedom of expression was aimed, like the publication of the map, at whipping up anti-Islamic and xenophobic sentiments.

From the start of its participation in the Austrian government, the Green Party, which likes to portray itself as a cosmopolitan and liberal party, agreed with these xenophobic policies and have gone even further.

One of the first announcements of the ÖVP-Green government was an action plan against religiously-motivated political extremism. Criminal law was to be adapted to “current challenges.” These “challenges” did not refer to the growing incidents of far-right terror, but rather the “specification and addition of criminal offences to effectively combat religiously motivated political

extremism (political Islam).”

The Islam Act passed in 2015 was strengthened by the ÖVP and the Greens this year. The Act laid down regulations on the financing of Islamic organisations and institutions and associated penalties for non-compliance. The aim is to facilitate the closure of mosques and the expulsion of imams. The Greens also agreed to include a ban on headscarves in the coalition agreement.

Last week, the Austrian parliament’s interior committee confirmed the first part of new anti-terror legislation adopted by the government. A broad majority from all parties represented in the ruling National Council voted for a tightening up of the country’s citizenship law. According to this law, persons convicted under one of the terror paragraphs of the penal code can in future have their citizenship revoked, provided they have another citizenship. The law is clearly directed against immigrants, mainly from Muslim countries.

With this right-wing course, the government in Vienna is also reacting to current scandals. The Public Prosecutor’s Office for Economic Affairs and Corruption in Vienna accuses Kurz of giving false testimony to the official committee investigating the Ibiza affair. According to a recent opinion poll published by the news magazine *Profil*, 47 percent are now in favour of Kurz’s resignation.

Above all, however, the undemocratic policies of Kurz and the Greens are directed against the entire population. The COVID-19 pandemic and the government’s unscrupulous policies have massively aggravated the social situation in the country. The government’s policy of opening up the economy despite the continued spread of the coronavirus has cost the lives of more than 10,600 people. Unemployment also rose to record levels in 2020.

At the same time, the government plans to slash benefits for the unemployed in order to force them back to work, in a blatant attack on basic democratic rights. The ÖVP and the Chamber of Commerce are currently planning a legislative initiative that will require the long-term unemployed to take work anywhere in the country. In the process, unemployment benefits are to be reduced from 55 to 40 percent of former wage levels.



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