

Fatima Payman resigns, Australian Labor government on Islamophobic rampage

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Senator Fatima Payman yesterday announced her resignation from the Labor Party, a week after crossing the floor to vote for a Greens motion calling for the recognition of Palestine.

In a press conference, Payman described “the ongoing genocide in Gaza” as a “tragedy of unimaginable proportions.” She said: “Witnessing our government’s indifference to the greatest injustice of our times makes me question the direction the party is taking.” Payman explained that she was leaving Labor but would remain on the crossbench as an independent senator.

Her statements pointing to Labor’s complicity and her decision to leave the party represent a breach, after nine months of unity, in a government that has unwaveringly supported Israel and its war crimes.

But Payman’s remarks were hardly a frontal assault on Labor. She was leaving “a party I’ve proudly served” with a “heavy heart,” describing Labor as an organisation that “emerged to challenge the notion that politics belong solely to the privileged few and [to] fulfil the promise of our lucky country.”

That was never the character of Labor, and it is certainly not how it has functioned over Payman’s 29-year lifetime, during which it has ruthlessly implemented the dictates of the corporate elite, while supporting every US-led war globally.

Given the relatively tepid character of Payman’s stand and the fact that her vote in favour of token Palestinian recognition was arguably in line with official Labor policy, the most striking aspect of the controversy is the ferocious response from the government.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese personally suspended Payman from the party caucus last Sunday and demanded that she resign from the Senate entirely so that Labor would be done with her but still retain the seat. That having failed, Albanese preemptively announced Payman’s pending “resignation” from Labor like a boss telling an employee they had the “option” of quitting or being sacked.

For months, Labor has branded protests and opposition to

the Gaza genocide as a threat to “social cohesion.” Like a mantra, Albanese and Labor leaders have insisted it is necessary to “lower the temperature” lest “conflicts overseas” be “reproduced in Australia.” This has been a self-serving line aimed at shielding the government from any scrutiny over its support for Israel.

That notwithstanding, it is remarkable how rapidly the Laborites have dispensed with their concern for “cohesion” and mild “temperatures.” They have mobilised their entire party apparatus to politically and personally crush Payman, a first-term Senator. In the process, they have engaged in a campaign of Islamophobia notable for its blatant racism, even in a country blighted by more than twenty years of the bogus “war on terror.”

Prior to her resignation, unnamed Labor sources told former Murdoch hack and current Australian Broadcasting Corporation “star” reporter Patricia Karvelas they had “concerns” after Payman reportedly said her decisions were being guided by “God.”

The unmistakable suggestion was that Payman, a visibly Muslim woman who wears a hijab, was some sort of Islamic extremist and/or in the thrall of a religiously induced psychosis.

In daily backgrounding by Labor leaders, dutifully relayed by a compliant press, Payman has alternately been depicted as a naive and stupid dupe of the Greens and as a dishonest, conniving operator who was planning her resignation for a month, without any attempt to square the conflicting lines of attack.

Almost as soon as Payman had announced her resignation, the unnamed and faceless Labor sources discovered a new “concern.” Payman was still technically a citizen of Afghanistan, from where her family escaped as refugees decades ago. This, they warned, could mean she was ineligible to sit in the Senate under draconian Constitutional provisions barring dual citizens from parliament.

Of course, all of this was known when Labor selected Payman as a candidate for the 2022 election. The Labor leadership and the electoral authorities were evidently

satisfied that Payman had taken “reasonable steps” to renounce her foreign citizenship. They knew then and know now that terminating her formal ties completely would probably require travelling to Afghanistan. Under conditions of Taliban rule, that would be more likely to result in Payman’s imprisonment or death than the end of her Afghan citizenship.

Labor’s Muslim-baiting and gratuitous attempts to draw attention to Payman’s “foreign” ancestry, in other words, are about as subtle as a sledgehammer.

This morning, Albanese pressed on, warning that the establishment of a political party for Australian Muslims would not serve the Islamic community. “It is not in their interests [to] isolate themselves,” he stated. There is no such party, and there is no indication that anyone intends to form such a party. Amid a flurry of media articles intoning against the dangers of “importing” the “tribalism” of the Middle East, Albanese was simply engaging in racist dogwhistling.

The campaign exposes the sham of Labor’s attempts to co-opt immigrant communities with a façade of “diversity.” In addition to covering over the fundamental class divisions in society, the confected politics of “multiculturalism” can rapidly give way to the open “white Australia” racism upon which Labor was founded.

The frenzied response to Payman can only be understood as a product of two factors: the deepgoing crisis of the government, and Labor’s character as a party of imperialist war.

With an election due next May at the latest, all polling indicates that Labor’s support is lower than in 2022, when it scraped into office with less than a third of the primary vote because the Liberal Party’s support fell even further.

Amid the worst decline in working-class living standards in decades and pro-business austerity measures from Labor, its paltry cost-of-living relief measures have fallen flat.

Labor was evidently hoping to exclude the genocide from official political discussion and the next election by pointing out that Gaza is a long way from Canberra and by voicing mealy-mouthed “concern” over the mass death of Palestinians. But broad layers of the population are aware that Labor is complicit, with its political, diplomatic and material support for Israel, including through ongoing military export permits, undeniable.

An article in the *Australian* yesterday reported that Albanese and Labor leaders fear they could lose up to six seats in the working-class suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne at the next election, either to independents centrally raising the genocide or with the Gaza crisis as a key contributing factor. It is in the working-class electorates, former bases of support for Labor, that its vote dropped most precipitously in 2022 and previous elections.

The current campaign is thus not simply directed against Payman, but at the mass opposition to the genocide. Having failed to reverse the sentiment through lies that it is merely a bystander to the “Middle East conflict,” Labor is intensifying its earlier line of threatening to ban protests and of ruthlessly attacking all opposition to the war crimes.

The Greens and various pseudo-left parties such as Solidarity have hailed Payman’s stand and presented it as proof that their perspective of shifting the Labor Party away from support for Israel is viable.

In reality, the exact opposite has been demonstrated. The more opposition is expressed, the more viciously Labor attacks it and restates its backing for the slaughter. That is because, contrary to Payman’s claims, Labor is not a party of “equality” or of working people. It is a bureaucratic machine that serves the interests of the corporate and financial elite through war abroad and a war against the working class at home.

Labor’s support for the genocide is inseparable from its central involvement in a global war drive led by the US. That has included expanding Australia’s support for the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and, above all, completing the country’s transformation into a frontline state for an American-led war against China. This militarist program is incompatible with democratic rights.

Payman, the Greens and the pseudo-left either say nothing about the Ukraine war and the looming conflict with China, or support them. But it is impossible to oppose imperialist war on a case-by-case basis under conditions where the ruling elites are implementing a program that threatens nuclear world war.

As the Socialist Equality Party has insisted, the genocide and the danger of global war will not be ended by pressuring Labor, by dissident MPs or by single-issue independents. What is posed, amid a breakdown of capitalism, is nothing less than the development of a revolutionary and socialist movement, uniting the working class internationally against all the governments and the profit system.

To ensure that there is a genuine socialist, anti-genocide and anti-war party on the ballot at the next federal election, join the SEP as an electoral member today.



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