

November 10 Demonstration: France's Left Is Finally Fighting Islamophobia

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The recent mosque shooting in Bayonne was just the latest violent attack against France's Muslims. The secularist left has long rejected the idea of "Islamophobia" — but as the far right goes mainstream, Muslims' calls for solidarity have become impossible to ignore.

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For decades, Islamophobia has been central to the exercise of political power in France. Now, after years of paralysis, the Left is finally starting to fight it.

On October 28, two elderly Muslim men were badly wounded when a gunman attacked a mosque in Bayonne in southwest France. In recent years, French mosques have been defaced, rammed, and burned down, and their congregations harassed and targeted. Bayonne represented a dangerous new escalation. The response in Paris last Sunday — as 25,000 people took to the streets demanding an end to Islamophobia — offers hope that the anti-Muslim consensus may finally have splintered.

The Bayonne attack's political motivations were immediately clear. The alleged perpetrator, eighty-four-year-old Claude Sinké, wanted "revenge" on Muslims, whom he baselessly blamed for April's fire at Paris's Notre-Dame Cathedral. Sinké was not just some lone crank: in 2015, he had stood in regional elections for Marine Le Pen's far-right Front National (in mid-2018 renamed the Rassemblement National).

In the wake of the attack, the Rassemblement National (RN) condemned Sinké and tried to distance itself from him. But it was far from the first time that the party had been implicated in murderous violence, often targeted against immigrants. A party with origins in neofascist groups, its first president, Jean-Marie Le Pen (himself once convicted for assaulting a political rival), thought that "a respectable Front National doesn't attract anyone." Just this year, the lead RN candidate for the 2020 council elections in Strasbourg had to stand down after revelations that he had committed racist attacks on individuals and kebab shops in 2011 and 2012. Le Pen's party has made Islamophobia one of its central platforms — and it demands a response.

The Normalization of Anti-Muslim Racism

Islamophobia is a fixture of “Republicanism,” the supposedly unchanging set of national values that emerged from the 1789 revolution that constitutes the ideology of the French political mainstream. Like hostility to immigration, it is particularly central to French conservatism.

This centrality was illustrated by a recent right-wing convention hosted by Marion Maréchal-Le Pen — the great hope of the far right — and opened by commentator Éric Zemmour. Maréchal had invited Zemmour as part of her bid to win traditional right-leaning voters to her own more radical positions. A highly paid celebrity commentator, Zemmour’s inflammatory anti-Muslim rhetoric recycles many of the tropes historically used against Jews (four years ago, he called for the bombing of Molenbeek, the Brussels suburb where some of the terrorists responsible for the 2015 Paris attacks lived). Zemmour delivered exactly what Maréchal wanted, offering a sickening mixture of Islamophobia, attacks on other minorities, and red-baiting against the Left. In a perfect example of the acceptability of Islamophobia and the media’s complicity with right-wing extremism, his tirade was broadcast live on a top news channel.

But this Islamophobia isn’t limited to the Le Pen family or its friends. Although some voters backed him in the 2017 election as a bulwark against the far right, Emmanuel Macron’s government has, in fact, rarely stopped kowtowing to the RN’s politics. Barely a week goes by without a new Islamophobic frenzy. On October 8, following the attack in the Paris police headquarters, the president called for a “society of vigilance” against Islamist terror, inviting the public to spot and denounce what he called “the little gestures which indicate distance from the laws and values of the Republic,” whether they occur at work, during religious worship, or at school.

Macron’s intention was clearly to legitimate a witch hunt against Muslims — and even Muslim schoolchildren. A few days after his declaration, a university in the Paris area issued a circular inviting its staff to raise the alarm if they noticed signs of potential terrorist sympathies. Among possible danger signals, the university listed starting to eat halal, growing a beard, or adopting the headscarf: for the university, the mere fact of converting to Islam represented a risk of “radicalization.”

As usual, women are the foremost victims of Islamophobic scapegoating. On October 11, a headscarf-wearing mother accompanying a field trip to a session of the regional council in Bourgogne-Franche-Comté was forced by RN members to leave the chamber and then aggressively harassed [1]. Nothing in the formal rules of the assembly prohibited headscarves being worn, but the fact that someone was doing so was enough, in the eyes of the far right, to disqualify her from even observing regional government in action. In the days after this incident, there were eighty-five debates on the question on French news channels — even though opinion surveys show that Islam is not a major preoccupation for the French public. Not a single headscarf-wearing woman was invited to participate [2].

Far-right voters are the principal obstacles to Macron’s reelection in 2022, and he is determined to attract them to his side. Indeed, his government has just announced harsh new immigration and refugee policies to show them there’s no need to turn to Le Pen [3]. Signaling his Islamophobia is part of this same approach. In a long interview controversially granted to the far-right *Valeurs actuelles* magazine, Macron said that women sometimes wear the headscarf as a sign of their desire to “secede” from the Republic and claimed, entirely falsely, that the woman attacked in the Bourgogne-Franche-Comté council was associated with political Islam and had deliberately set the incident up [4].

With anti-Muslim flare-ups all around, it would have been reasonable not to throw more fuel on the

fire. But the very day after the headscarf incident, the French Senate voted for a bill, sponsored by the right-wing Les Républicains, to ban parents accompanying school excursions from displaying religious symbols — a measure targeting the headscarf first and foremost. The bill is unlikely to become law, since the education minister, Jean-Michel Blanquer, is opposed to it: he knows that, given the current climate, there's no actual need for such a law. He certainly isn't a friend of Muslims — he has said that “the headscarf quite simply isn't desirable in our society” and criticized parents' groups that defend women's right to wear what they want during field trips.

The regular and insolent endorsements of Islamophobia from France's most powerful politicians inevitably fuel anti-Muslim racism. The Collective against Islamophobia in France (CCIF) noted a rise of almost 50 percent in Islamophobic incidents in 2018 [5], most of which targeted women. More than half were committed by state institutions, a consequence of repressive policing, anti-terror, and anti-radicalization practices. Among the many forms of discrimination in 2018, the CCIF reported excessive delays in the processing of Muslim people's passports and identity cards and a very significant rise in the number of “S forms” issued, a prerequisite for surveillance by state security services. In a recently released report, the Fondation Jean-Jaurès found that 42 percent of Muslims have been the target of discrimination on the basis of their religion, mostly at the hands of the police [6].

A Shift on the Left

The intensity of Islamophobic racism and its centrality to the ideology of the French ruling class make it an urgent priority for left-wing political forces. But the French left, strongly committed to France's secularist tradition, has historically not been up to the task.

Just after the November 2015 attacks, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, 2017 presidential candidate and popular figurehead of the left-nationalist La France Insoumise party, said that he disputed the very term “Islamophobia.” Mélenchon, who has consistently called for the prohibition of public displays of religion [7] like Muslim street prayers, gave an explanation widespread across the political spectrum: “For my part,” he said, “I defend the idea that we have the right not to like Islam, we have the right not to like the Catholic religion, and that is one of our freedoms.”

In fact, Mélenchon was attacking a straw man here. Left-wing groups fighting Islamophobia have never wanted to stifle critique of religion as such: Mélenchon's declaration served only to discredit the campaign against anti-Muslim racism. It was a sign of how things have changed for the better that, at the party's summer school this August, a similar statement by a different speaker caused a furor.

Sunday's march, with its demand to put an end to discrimination, hate speech, and “liberticidal” laws directed against Muslim people, may be the start of a major realignment. Initiated by Madjid Messaoudene, a local politician in the Saint-Denis suburb north of Paris, the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA), the CCIF, and activist groups fighting racist police violence, among others, the march was endorsed by the largest coalition of left-wing individuals and organizations ever assembled against Islamophobia [8]. The Greens, Générations (a left split from the Socialists led by its unsuccessful presidential candidate, Benoît Hamon), Mélenchon's France Insoumise, and the Communists were all on board, as were the Solidaires union, the general secretary of the important CGT union confederation, the UNEF (the French students' union), and organizations like the French Jewish Union for Peace and the Human Rights League.

The call for the march was even signed by Lutte Ouvrière, a Trotskyist party historically unsympathetic to Islamophobia as an issue — indeed, some of its leading members played a major

role in the process leading to the 2004 law that banned the headscarf in schools. As activist Houria Bouteldja commented, the march was a “victory in itself for political antiracism since it took fifteen years of preparatory work to get this result.”

There was controversy both within and outside the groups supporting the march. A government spokesperson called it an “attack on the state,” [9] and numerous politicians and commentators joined in the denunciation. Several people who signed the initial call to march recanted. The national political bureau of the Socialist Party (PS) declined to support the march at all: the head of the Socialist group, Olivier Faure, who recently told national radio that some areas of France were experiencing “colonization in reverse” by immigrants and their descendants [10], described it as “anti-secular and anti-Republican.” Socialist senator Laurence Rossignol said that while opposition to anti-Muslim racism is necessary, the march drew the anti-racist left onto the terrain of “political Islam” [11] — a reference to the fact that the CCIF, one of the organizers, is sometimes claimed to have connections to the Muslim Brotherhood (the CCIF describes itself as a non-religious organization, explicitly opposes radicalization [12], and calls in its 2019 report for better training on the meaning of secularism [13]).

Political hostility toward the fight against Islamophobia has also drawn legitimacy from years of work by public intellectuals [14]. The sociologist Manuel Boucher condemned Sunday’s march as a “major political mistake for the Left” [15]; others, including prominent philosopher Pascal Bruckner, attacked it as a concession to political extremism [16]. Thanks to his 2017 book *An Imaginary Racism: Islamophobia and Guilt* [17], Bruckner is one of the most important intellectual apologists for French state racism. For Bruckner, Muslim religious signs like headscarves are mere “instruments for the conquest of the public space, tracts calling for sedition.”

As the anti-colonial Parti des Indigènes de la République put it, people like Bruckner “want to confiscate from Muslims the meaning of their own religion.” Bruckner and other public intellectuals’ refusal to consider that a “sign” like a headscarf might have many meanings, different for different people, is characteristic of the reductive simplifications with which Islam is approached, and a major regression from the philosophical culture once dominant in France that championed the idea that symbols can take on a variety of contextually determined meanings.

Opposition to the march was also motivated by revelations of reactionary statements by two signatories who added their names to the call [18], along with 300 others, after its initial publication in the newspaper *Libération*. In an old video exhumed by the far right in order to discredit the march, the imam Nader Abou Anas tells women that they should stay at home and not deny their husbands sex. As soon as this was revealed, the imam’s signature was withdrawn from the appeal. Another signatory, the Brest imam Rachid Eljay, was criticized for an old video excusing sexual abuse. Eljay, once a Salafist, has subsequently taken a government-endorsed course for imams, opposes the jihad in Syria and attacks in France, and is now seen as a moderate and, as a result, is targeted by the Islamic State [19]. As a number of signatories observed, refusing to take part in a demonstration because of disagreements with other participants makes the very principle of mobilization by different political actors around clearly defined goals impossible.

The evolution in attitudes toward Islamophobia was particularly clear in Mélenchon. While some members of his own party, initially supportive of the march, hedged and backtracked, Mélenchon maintained his strong support, regardless of his reservations about the term “Islamophobia.” He noted that no concrete alternative was being offered by the march’s opponents, and he criticized the fact that “on the basis of a disagreement about a word, people are managing to refuse Muslims the right to be defended by people who aren’t Muslim and who want to put an end to the current atmosphere against them.” [20]

Even the electorally decimated Socialist Party, whose refusal to participate on Sunday was read by some organizers as an attempt to sabotage the march, may have been somewhat influenced. The fact that the most venomously Islamophobic Socialists, like former prime minister Manuel Valls, are no longer in the party (many having gone over to Macron's La République En Marche! movement) has played a role here. Seeking to give the impression that they are committed to fighting racism, the PS says it will call for a different demonstration against anti-Muslim hatred in the coming weeks. How serious it is remains to be seen.

States Within the State

In the sixteenth century, France's Catholic kings went to war against the country's Protestant minority. Today, state authority is embodied not in Catholicism, but in an obligatory and violent secularism, justified by a willful misinterpretation of the foundational 1905 law on the separation of church and state, intended to ensure the religious neutrality of the state and guarantee the free exercise of religion. Just before the Bayonne attack, Macron told Muslim community representatives that "in some places in our Republic, there is a separatism that has become established." [21] Statements like this, along with the widespread references to housing estates "taken over" by Islam strongly recall the historic anxieties about Protestants constituting a menacing "state within the state."

Under the cover of a danger to the French state, elites fear the emergence of a bloc that might directly challenge their decades-long politics of neoliberal immiseration and foreign military intervention, in both of which Muslims are prime targets. François Baroin, one of the originators of the 2004 law prohibiting the headscarf in school and a current favorite for Les Républicain's presidential candidacy for 2022, even describes organizations that fight discrimination against specific groups as an "assault on the Republic" and its supposed homogeneity.

So normalized is Islamophobic sentiment that its expression can be completely uninhibited: the assistant editor of the major right-wing newspaper Le Figaro stated on national television that he "hates the Muslim religion" and that he has "taken buses and boats in France where there was someone wearing a headscarf, and I've got off." [22]

The vicious attack on Muslims is a perfect diversion from the political crisis faced by the French ruling class. In the last year, Macron has been weakened by the gilets jaunes movement, to which he has offered a brutally repressive response, with more than 10,000 protesters taken into custody (a figure unprecedented for any social movement), and allegations that the tear gas lavished on demonstrators contains dangerous levels of cyanide [23]. He also faces an indefinite rail strike from December 5 in protest against his plans to reform pensions. In such a context of social struggle, scapegoating Muslims and reinforcing repressive immigration policies are reflex distractions, which have the added advantage of sowing division among different sectors of the public — Muslims and non-Muslims, immigrants and non-immigrants. The success of Sunday's march lays the groundwork for a united political response. As well as slogans of solidarity with Muslims, parts of Sunday's crowd also chanted slogans associated with the gilets jaunes protests. The unification of these two struggles is a precondition of an effective Left challenge to Macron.

Muslims, Solidarity, and the Left

Islamophobes claim that Muslims want to "secede" from the French state. But for many of those protesting on Sunday, their greatest wish was in fact to be recognized by it. This confirms

sociological studies that suggest that the headscarf is not a sign of a rejection of French society [24], but of its wearers' successful integration into it, and simply the result of a desire not to lose all contact with their heritage. On Sunday, women in headscarves brandished their French identity cards as signs that they, too, are French citizens, insisting that the marginalization, discrimination, and state violence to which they are subject has to end.

Some will never listen to this, seeking to impute other motives to the protesters. In his 2017 charter for state Islamophobia, Pascal Bruckner offers puerile conjecture on the far left's reasons for fighting Islamophobia, claiming that Islam provides "the substitute for a Marxism and a third-worldism in their death-throes" and "incarnates a power of devotion" that the Left has lost. At the same time, he thinks that leftists hope to use Islam as the "spearhead of a new insurrection," and therefore see the fight against Islamophobia as an opportunity for entry into Muslim communities, with whom they also feel a "losers' solidarity."

But Bruckner's sorry psychologizing is wide of the mark. As the placards and slogans at Sunday's march made clear, France's systematic, state-sanctioned abuse of Muslims makes them feel rejected, threatened, and disenfranchised. The brutality of the hostility they encounter, whether physical or ideological, sets a standard for how the French ruling class responds to other groups it sees as a political threat: immigrants, gilets jaunes, disaffected residents of outer suburbs, environmentalists. Whether with these groups or with Muslims, standing together should be a basic instinct of solidarity for the Left. Sunday's march is a necessary and long-awaited first step in this direction.

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P.S.

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<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/11/france-left-islamophobia-macron-melenchon-bayonne-attack-marine-le-pen>
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Footnotes

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