American Progressives and France's Surge to the Right

written by Kitty Kelly Epstein | May 22, 2021

Macron's newest orders banning demonstrations in solidarity with Palestine reveal even more clearly the real nature of France's anti-Muslim campaign, one that the U.S. and French Left have with few exceptions mostly ignored.

Members of the French military have issued two recent letters threatening a military coup. On April 29, twenty retired French generals, a hundred senior officers, and more than a thousand soldiers of the French military signed a statement threatening a civil war if the French government did not take action against "Islamists" and "suburban hordes" polluting French traditional values. The language and intent of the statement were clearly to sow fear and hatred of the racially and economically segregated "suburbs" that are home to many Muslim and Black French people. A second letter from active military personnel and some civilians was published in May.

Although we might hope that those issuing the threats represent an irrelevant fringe group, in fact one of the two leading candidates for President, Marine Le Pen, agreed with them in public And the current government of Emmanuel Macron is already carrying out many of the repressive actions against Muslims that those who threatened the coup have suggested. Some of these actions, a law forbidding the filming of police "with intention to identify them," for example, affects all French people and has been protested by Amnesty International.

Many of the actions target only Muslims and violate basic free speech rights. Macron's Interior Minister now requires that all Muslim clergy sign a pact that they will not criticize the French government, and the Ministry has closed down an organization which worked on anti-discrimination, the Collective Against Islamophobia in France (CCIF), with no legal basis for doing so. This is extremely rare. In addition to government repression, French Muslims live with routine televised insults and face physical harm. On the same day the military leaders threatened a coup, a white French man nearly killed an Arab French man and his family by ramming through their house with his car.

The French Senate, dominated by the right-wing party, Les Republicans, has passed additional provisions to a law originally proposed by Macron's party, preventing Muslim women from going with their children on school field trips, if they wear a head scarf (a hijab); banning an individual from praying in a public university, and prohibiting foreign flags at a wedding. There is a further step in the legislative process which requires Senate and Assembly to agree on a common version of the law, and some of the Senate provisions may not ultimately go into effect. Macron's move to the Right is widely interpreted as a desire to win over those who would otherwise vote for Le Pen. Given the absence of a viable candidate on the Left, Macron is betting more progressive voters will be

forced to stick with him. Whatever his calculation, his anti-Muslim actions echo Donald Trump's dream: removing free speech from U.S. citizens, which is exactly what Macron has done.

The U.S. and French Left have often been vocal about the threat of "fascism." Yet in a situation where fascist-minded members of the military are threatening a coup, and mainstream parties are taking away civil rights, opposition from the broader Left has been minimal. Muslim people seem isolated, on their own in organizing against these new discriminatory laws. An exception is the French National Student Union (UNEF), which has taken up the issue of racism in a serious way. In an action that reveals the extent of the normalization of repression, or at least the threats, the Senate has introduced a measure that would ban organizations like theirs, if they allow Black or other oppressed groups to have meetings without whites. One of the Left political parties, La France Insoumise, has disagreed on some points of the proposed 'Security' and "Secularism" laws. Yet the Left as a whole has been missing in organizing against the repression.

Why So Little Attention from American Progressives?

What explains the relative silence from the U.S. Left? One reason is that though we love singing La Marseillaise, we have not come to grips with the extent of the racism in the country that produced the revolutionary tradition with which so many identify. We have much to admire in the stunning protests by French workers to defend pension rights, the Yellow Vest protests against increasing taxes, and the protests by high school students to stop required exams during the pandemic. Yet alongside this are other "French traditions," like colonizing swaths of Africa and killing more than half a million Algerian people fighting for their liberation. One long-term result of France's colonial history, which many on the French and U.S. Left have yet to confront, is the marginalized population of Black and Brown people living in France.

In discussing these issues with activists on the Left I've seen we in the U.S. Left are not immune from effects of propaganda that villainizes Muslims. When I compared the new French laws against Muslims to the Nazi's campaign of suppression of Jewish rights, a friend blurted, "But the Jews were peaceful." This statement reflects how activists, either consciously or unconsciously, have been influenced to see anti-Muslim discrimination as justifiable. Why are we not outraged about laws targeting all Muslims based on the well-publicized crimes of individual Muslims, who have, for the most part, represented no one but themselves?

Another factor is the extent to which anti-Muslim forces have succeeded in casting as a defense of women's equality the misogynist argument of French politicians that they have the right to regulate women's dress, "saving" Muslim women. The French effort to stop Muslim women from wearing a veil (including dress that non-Muslim women would call a scarf) has a long history dating back at least as far as the Algerian revolution. The observation of anti-colonial revolutionary and psychiatrist, Frantz Fanon, writing in 1959 rings true today: "Still today the dream of a total domestication of Algerian society by means of unveiled women aiding and abetting the occupier continues to haunt the colonial authorities." (*Algeria Unveiled*, p. 43)

We need to listen to French Muslim women who are saying that their choice of dress is their business, not the government's. "Hands off my hijab" is a current slogan of activists, one of many statements by Muslim women pushing back on government repression.

Muslim women are constantly discussed on the French news, but they are rarely invited to speak for themselves. The economic and social discrimination is horrendous and downplayed: Those wearing the headscarf cannot, by law, be teachers or hold any other form of public employment. Those who don't wish to wear the scanty swim suits required by French authorities, cannot go to public pools.

I think both solidarity and the danger to all humanity posed by the Right requires that we take action. U.S. women's organizations need to mobilize on behalf of French Muslim women. The message of the Biden administration in regard to France should include opposition to the suppression of Muslim rights. Our events and protests should speak out against anti-Muslim racism and foster a deeper collaboration between the anti-racist movements in France and the U.S, which would benefit all of us.