

# Civil liberties? - France's Authoritarian Turn

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**In the wake of recent terrorist attacks, France's Macron government has announced a string of authoritarian measures which stigmatise Muslims and further undermine the country's fragile civil liberties.**

Last month, the horrific assassination of the teacher Samuel Paty by a young jihadist aroused the anger and outrage of a France still traumatised by the 2015 terrorist attacks.

But if words failed most of us in computing such an unspeakable event, this did not apply to the team surrounding President Emmanuel Macron. Far from seeking to ease tensions, Macron has added fuel to the fire by reinforcing a climate of suspicion about Islam more generally in France, and by casting opprobrium on the radical Left and academia, accusing them of intellectually arming the terrorists.

Throughout his five-year term, Macron has consistently manufactured an image of a strong president, often to the point of sacrificing civil liberties in the process. This was clear from elongated states of emergency to clampdowns on the *gilets jaunes* and labour movement. The police have been granting far-reaching impunity and they have often imposed themselves violently (see the number of serious *gilets jaunes* injuries) in an increasingly febrile social context.

But a further step was taken in the aftermath of Samuel Paty's assassination, when Muslim groups were accused, without any proof, of complicity with terrorism and threatened with dissolution. Through the Interior Minister, Gerald Darmanin, the executive decided to strike hard and fast. Echoing the cries of the far-right, Darmanin decided to target two emblematic groups of Muslim civil society, repainting them as "enemies of the Republic" [1] - the Collective Against Islamophobia in France (CCIF) and the community organisation BarakaCity.

Attacking the people who fight Islamophobia and provide support to France's most precarious Muslim citizens, it was decided, was the new counter-terrorism effort. It shouldn't need spelling out the dangerous precedent this sets. The handful of support that CCIF was able to gather, most notably from Amnesty International France [2], wasn't enough to prevent the government sending a notification of dissolution to the organisation on November 19<sup>th</sup>. The anti-racist association joins the sad fate of BarakaCity, which has disappeared from the landscape in an even more deafening silence.

These dissolutions only add water to the mill of Islamophobia in France, which seeks to associate jihadists with the entire Muslim community. And with the honourable exception of the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA), the Left has shown a worrying myopia on the events - even though they themselves are also in the government's sights. These attacks on Muslim associations should have been condemned for what they are: an Islamophobic offensive that threatens everyone's civil liberties. But a climate of fear and cowardice prevails.

The opponents of equality have been quite clear in their overall intentions; they can be seen in the combined attacks by Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer against La France Insoumise and left-

wing academics, who have been accused of “Islamism.” Forged by the far-right and repeated *ad nauseam* by Macron’s most loyal lieutenants, this empty and floating concept is now widespread in France and used to silence the Left and critical intellectuals. Claiming equality for all citizens or analysing the logics of intersecting oppressions (of class, race and gender) is now regarded as laying the groundwork for jihadism.

This renewed McCarthyism is not unprecedented, and the groundwork for it has been cultivated for some time among the confidantes of the presidential executive. But it is now openly adopted at the highest levels of the state, in the hope of silencing progressive opposition and to compete with the far-right in an increasingly reactionary political arena.

It is in this context, marked by clear violations of the freedom of association by the executive, that Macron tacitly decided to throw France into the camp of the “illiberal democracies” of Orbán’s Hungary or Bolsonaro’s Brazil. His unwavering parliamentary majority adopted the Comprehensive Security Act on the evening of Friday, November 21<sup>st</sup> – one of the most draconian pieces of legislation in France’s modern history.

Of particular note was Article 24, which plans to punish with “one year’s imprisonment and a fine of 45,000 euros” any citizen broadcasting unblurred images of a police officer or soldier. This also applies to journalists, who have been invited by Darmanin to report to the police if they wish to cover demonstrations. In January, witness video was key evidence in the case of a 42-year-old Algerian driver, Cédric Chouviat, who died after police pinned him to the ground even after he told them “I’m suffocating.” The consequences of this law are profound.

There were also proposals to crackdown on religious freedom, creating lists of state-endorsed imams and tightening restrictions on the schooling of Muslim children, including the provision of identification numbers to make it easier to determine when they missed school. What remains, amidst all of this, of freedom, equality and fraternity? Republican values, already eroded by three decades of increasing economic and social inequalities, now seem more battered than ever.

The political forces that oppose neoliberalism can no longer afford the luxury of looking elsewhere when a significant portion of the French people – its Muslim community – is under siege by the state. As is so often the case, a campaign against one minority is in fact turning into an attack on civil liberties in general. France is moving in an increasingly dark direction. The broadest possible opposition to Macron and his extreme centre – for this is what it is – must now become the political priority.

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**P.S.**

- “France’s Authoritarian Turn”. Tribune. 23.11.2020:  
<https://tribunemag.co.uk/2020/11/frances-authoritarian-turn>

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## Footnotes

[1] <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/decapitation-de-samuel-paty-darmanin-va-proposer-la-dissolution-du-ccif-et-de-barakacity-associations-ennemies-de-la-republique-20201019>

[2] <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/latest/news/2020/11/france-is-not-the-free-speech-champion-it-says-it-is/>