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France

Fighting French Fascism Means More Than “Anyone but Éric Zemmour”

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On Tuesday 30 November, Éric Zemmour launched his bid for the French presidency with a video that leaves no doubt as to the project he has in mind. [1] The decision to stage his announcement in the style of Charles de Gaulle could only poorly conceal the reality that his remarks had more to do with Vichy leader Philippe Pétain. But from an anti-fascist perspective, another decisive factor that needs assessing is how, over these last three months, the mass media have propelled Zemmour to the forefront of the French political scene.

We should begin by noting that, according to polls at least, this period has seen an increase in the potential voter base for the far right. It has risen from about 30 percent before the summer (combining the voting intentions for Marine Le Pen and “national-conservative” Nicolas Dupont-Aignan) to 36–37 percent according to more recent polls (i.e., also including Zemmour) — a score to which we should also add potential support for Florian Philippot and François Asselineau. It is thus hardly impossible — depending on how the balance of power shifts — that by April’s first-round contest, the various forces of the far right could together rally 40 percent support. [2]

We should take this electoral shift, and the wider political situation in France, very seriously. The far right as represented by Le Pen, Dupont-Aignan, and Asselineau took a total of 27 percent in the first round of the 2017 presidential election — already an historic high. And we can also get a measure of what the famous “barrage” against Le Pen, as represented by Emmanuel Macron, really amounted to. Under Macron’s rule, familiar neoliberal and authoritarian policies produced familiar effects, with fascist and fascist-adjacent organizations and ideas continuing to make headway both electorally and ideologically. The most violent groups have multiplied attacks on left-wing, feminist, and anti-racist activists in recent months.

Mainstreamed Extreme, Zemmourized Mainstream

We also see this far-right advance when we look at the current most likely scenario for the second-round contest: another runoff between Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen. She has today widened her lead over her competitors (including Zemmour, but also the conservative Les Républicains, which has yet to pick a candidate). Over summer, Le Pen was rated 40 percent in polls for the second round (already significantly above her 2017 score, 34 percent, and far above her father’s 18 percent in 2002). She is now [December 2021] running at 45 percent, approaching the highest levels she reached in the months after the terrible murder of schoolteacher Samuel Paty [3] in the context of an all-out reactionary offensive that saw the passing of Macron’s global security law, legislation against “Islamic separatism,” and government attacks on “Islamism-leftism.” [4]

It is possible that Le Pen is currently benefiting from the ideological effects of this offensive (in which Macron’s administration has played a crucial role) and by the hypermediatization of Zemmour over the last three months. But it can also be assumed that she is benefiting from a perceived softening of her image by her far-right rival’s harsh talk of “national suicide.” This shift is illustrated by a poll conducted by Odoxa in mid-November — and the comparison between this data and a similar survey conducted in 2014. [5] Zemmour is today much more widely seen as “far right” (+24 points), “racist” (+23 points), “dangerous” (+23 points), “misogynistic” (+15 points), and “aggressive” (+9 points), while Le Pen is less perceived as “aggressive” and “racist” than seven years ago.

Another important factor is how far Zemmour’s media and polling breakthrough has accelerated the classic bourgeois right’s turn toward more extreme positions. The primaries for Les Républicains have played out almost entirely on the Zemmourian terrain of a “threatened,” “submerged” France on the verge of “annihilation” because of excessive immigration, endemic criminality, etc. [6] It is not simply or mainly that one of the candidates — Éric Ciotti — sought to mimic Zemmour’s positions in every way, including by taking up the racist conspiracy theory of the “great replacement.” [7] It is that all the candidates were harmonized to a Zemmourist playbook, including even Michel

Barnier, who may initially have seemed the most centrist.

In this sense, Stathis Kouvelakis was certainly right to assert that Zemmour has already won through the dissemination of his ideas across much of the political field (even if his candidacy itself turns out a failure). [8] And it is not that the pro-Macron right is going to belie this argument — having, in its four years in power, drawn deeply from the obsessions, language, and proposals of the far right.

“Anyone but Zemmour”: A Dead End

We can see that “anyone but Zemmour” would be a dead-end strategy for at least two reasons.

The first is that such a strategy minimizes the danger that Le Pen’s Rassemblement National (RN, formerly Front National) continues to represent, and conceals the fact that its political project is no less oppressive than Zemmour’s. [9] Le Pen’s repeated calls for Zemmour to join her campaign demonstrate that she is in no way in disagreement with him on substance, only with his strategy. Her supporters insist, rightly, that everything he stands for has already been promoted by the Front National or RN over recent decades. That approach underestimates the strength of the RN’s electoral rootedness. If Marine Le Pen currently seems able to withstand the crash test of a far-right competitor supported by one of France’s main media empires, it is because Zemmour has never significantly eaten into the popular part of her electorate (blue- and white-collar workers), among whom polling support for Le Pen is both stable and far superior to all other candidates. [10]

The second reason is that the focus on the fascist Zemmour tends to conceal not only the radicalization of the forces of the bourgeois right (Macron’s supporters and Les Républicains), of which the Le Figaro journalist is himself a pure product, but also the processes of fascization that have been set in motion by the Islamophobic, anti-migration and ultra-securitarian policies, carried out over the last twenty years in particular. We might think especially, in the most recent period, of the twin liberticidal laws (the global security and separatism bills), which could only be imposed so easily (if not without opposition) in the context of a shameless and forced instrumentalization of terror attacks. This has been aimed at dissolving Muslim and anti-racist organizations fighting Islamophobia (in the name of the fight against “separatism”) and delegitimizing the Left (because of its alleged complicity therein, labelled with an expression — “Islam-leftism” — directly borrowed from the far right).

Anti-Fascism and Fighting Islamophobia

Any anti-fascist strategy must confront multiple fascist forces. That means fighting the fascists who occupy the electoral and institutional terrain and those who seek to dominate the streets. The fascization processes — in the form of institutional and ideological transformations — provide a fertile ground for the progress of the far right (of its organizations and ideas).

In the present French context, it seems quite obvious that Islamophobia is the foremost vector of this fascization process through

- the institutionalization of discrimination (in the name of the threat that Islam supposedly constitutes to the Republic and to France);
- the banalization of arbitrary procedures targeting Muslims in particular (from administrative raids on people’s homes to the banning, without serious grounds, of organizations fighting against Islamophobia);

the dehumanization of people from the Global South who seek to reach Europe (on the grounds that they are Muslims and therefore potentially dangerous); and
the rise of a conspiratorial variant of Islamophobia that gives preemptive legitimization to the ethnic cleansing policies promoted explicitly by Zemmour (for what, other than this, is the plan of those who seriously imagine that France is occupied, dominated, colonized, etc. by Muslims?).

All this means that the struggle against Islamophobia is central to anti-fascism in France — and, without doubt, in the whole of Western Europe. The conditions for this fight have become particularly difficult in France since it is now not only stigmatized by the media but also widely criminalized. The way in which the Council of State recently rubber-stamped the banning of the Collective Against Islamophobia in France (CCIF) is, from this point of view, a warning for all the collectives or associations that fight against oppression. As one statement protesting the ban put it:

By a curious twist, the dissolution of the CCIF is thus approved on the grounds that by fighting — legally — against anti-Muslim discrimination and hatred, it has made itself guilty of discrimination and hatred. . . . Indeed, for the Council of State, “to criticize without nuance” public policies or laws that one considers discriminatory is to push the victims of the alleged discrimination down the slope of radicalization and to invite them to ignore the laws of the Republic.

We Need Something Else

The rise of neo-fascism derives from a prolonged crisis of hegemony — that is, from the French ruling class’s weakened capacity to obtain the consent of the majority of the population to its (neoliberal) policies and from the disintegration of the relationship between representatives and represented (as seen through the weakening of the parties, the rise of abstention, etc.). But it also springs at least as much from the crisis of an alternative to neoliberal capitalism — that is, from a crisis of the Left (if by this we mean the forces that have not given up challenging capitalism in one way or another).

In its combination with the decline of social democracy and the communist parties, the crisis of hegemony could have constituted (or still could constitute) a favorable terrain for the rebirth of forces promoting such an alternative. Indeed, we have seen this rebirth take place in the form of electoral successes achieved by organizations such as Syriza, Podemos, and La France Insoumise, and by figures such as Bernie Sanders and, especially, Jeremy Corbyn, who have come to challenge the hegemony of the “left” neoliberal currents within the Democratic Party and the Labour Party, respectively. But these successes were ephemeral and did not crystallize, for various reasons, into organizations capable of recreating organic, enduring links with the working class.

In the French case, social movements are vigorous (if we compare them with Britain and Germany, to stay within Western Europe), as is critical thought. But the political left has failed over the last twenty years to give rise to an emancipatory project capable of competing for hegemony with the pair constituted by the neoliberal extreme center and the neofascist far right. The effect was that the Left, excluding the Parti Socialiste (PS) — whose policy in office from 2012 to 2017 was wholly on the Right’s terrain — gathered only 21.3 percent in the first round of the presidential election (and only 27.7 percent even including the PS candidate Benoît Hamon). However, it could be at an even lower level in 2022.

In all opinion polls, it is among the working class — blue-collar and white-collar combined, who represent about 50 percent of the active population — that the Left polls at its lowest levels. One may take refuge in the comforting thought that this will itself suppress electoral illusions, free up working-class militancy, and clear a path toward insurrection. But this isn’t really what we see historically: most of the great moments of mass social conflict, where the question of revolutionary rupture was concretely posed, were also moments when the political left managed to gather the votes of a large part of the working classes and built vast activist organizations capable of reworking the common sense of the working class from within.

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It is this counter-hegemonic capacity — this organic link with the working class — that has been lost. The chimera of a “union of the Left” or of a “people’s primary,” hoping to line up all the existing organizations behind a single candidate and thereby add together their (small) scores, will not provide a way out of this morass. The problems run much deeper and will need confronting in the difficult period ahead of us. Unity is necessary politically (including electorally), but it must be sealed on the basis of a project of rupture — not on a vague platform alongside forces or figures that contributed to the disaster of François Hollande’s presidency and that wish to more or less renew the same neoliberal policies. [11]

It is indeed necessary to build broad mobilizations against Zemmour and his project, including this Sunday in Paris (just as the people of Marseille did last week). But such a mobilization should not focus too much on this sinister individual at the expense of leaving the field open to Le Pen and the RN, or indeed underestimating the necessary fight against everything that has allowed Zemmour’s rise. This also means fighting the banalization (and radicalization) of Islamophobia at the highest levels of the state, as in mass media, and in resisting the state authoritarianism daily expressed in the fate imposed on migrants and the securitarian surveillance of working-class and immigrant neighborhoods.

Finally, if we want to achieve lasting victories against fascism and its rise, we cannot be satisfied with one-off mobilizations or with pushing back Zemmour’s candidacy. We cannot escape the need to rebuild a mass organization capable of carrying forth a political alternative to racial and patriarchal capitalism, in popular mobilization as at election time.

4 December 2021

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[1] Stathis Kouvelakis, 26 October 2021 “[The Zemmour moment](#)”.

[2] An opinion poll published on 7 January by [Les Echos](#) gave Marine Le Pen 18%, Zemmour 13% and Nicolas Dupont-Aignan 2%. Valérie Pécresse, victor of the primaries of the traditional right, is credited with 18% and Emmanuel Macron 25%. In a second round against Le Pen, Macron would win 57%-43%, against Pécresse with a narrower margin 52%-48%. *IVP*

[3] France 24, 15 October 2021 “[‘The violence shook me profoundly’: Teachers, students remember Samuel Paty’s murder](#)”.

[4] *Jacobin*, 25 November 2020 “[Emmanuel Macron Is Creating a Liberalism Without Civil Liberties](#)”, *Jacobin*, 20 February 2021 “[Emmanuel Macron’s Government Is Mounting a Witch Hunt Against “Islam-Leftism” in France’s Universities](#)”.

[5] Odoxa, 23 November 2021 “[Face à Marine le Pen, Éric Zemmour ne fait pas le poids](#)”.

[6] *The Local*, 2 December 2021 “[French conservatives pick shortlisted candidates](#)”.

[7] *New Statesman*, 17 June 2021 “[How French conservatives are turning toward Marine Le Pen](#)”, *Jacobin*, 4 September 2019 “[No. There Isn’t a](#)

[White Genocide](#)”.

[8] Stathis Kouvelakis, 26 October 2021 [“The Zemmour moment”](#).

[9] *Jacobin*, 20 April 2017 [“The Dangers of Detoxification”](#).

[10] *Jacobin*, 27 June 2021 [“Billionaire Tycoons Are Turning French Radio Into a Copy of Fox News”](#).

[11] *Jacobin*, 21 June 2016 [“Hollande’s Party”](#).