

Protesters call proposed French antiradicalism law anti-Muslim

News in the [March 10, 2021](#) issue



Activists rallied on February 14 in Paris to demand that the French government abandon a bill aimed at rooting out Islamic extremism, a bill the protesters say could trample on religious freedom. (AP Photo / Thibault Camus)

Activists rallied on February 14 in Paris to demand that the French government abandon a bill aimed at rooting out Islamist extremism that the protesters say could trample on religious freedom and make all Muslims into potential suspects.

The legislative debate comes amid lingering fears of extremist violence after recent attacks, including one in which an Islamic radical killed a history teacher.

President Emmanuel Macron's centrist government argues that the bill is needed to protect French values like gender equality and secularism and to prevent radical ideas from taking root and inspiring violence.

But those at the protest said France already has legal tools to do this and that the bill stigmatizes the country's second-biggest religion even though most French Muslims do not espouse extremist views.

Some characterized it as a political ploy by Macron to win over conservative and far-right voters ahead of next year's presidential election.

"It's not worth attacking a whole community because one person did a horrible act," said Zeyneb Bouabidi, a woman from the Paris suburb of Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, where teacher Samuel Paty was killed in October after showing his class caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad, published in satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*, for a discussion about free expression.

Bouabidi described facing occasional discrimination at university and at work because of her Arab-sounding name, and she fears laws like this one could make matters worse.

"They make comments like 'go back to your country.' But I am in my country! I was born in France," she said.

A collective of Muslim, antiracist, left-wing, pro-Palestinian, and other activist groups organized the rally near Trocadéro Plaza, across from the Eiffel Tower, to call for the bill to be scrapped. About 150 people took part in the peaceful protest, including Muslims and non-Muslims.

The government insists the bill doesn't target Muslims. It seeks to halt the issuing of virginity certificates, the practice of polygamy, and forced marriage. It would crack down on fundamentalist teaching by requiring all children three and over to be in school, along with tightening rules on the funding and functioning of mosques and religious associations.

Other religious groups, from Buddhists to Roman Catholics, have complained they also could suffer fallout from the bill. —Associated Press