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France

Faced with widespread revolt, government declares state of emergency

- IV Online magazine - 2005 - IV372 - November 2005 -

Publication date: Friday 11 November 2005

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The nightly riots in the poor neighbourhoods around France's towns and cities have now been going on for two weeks. On November 7th, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin announced the government's response. It was to resuscitate a 1955 law authorizing the proclamation of a state of emergency. This law not only authorizes prefects (non-elected, government-appointed administrators of France's departments - the equivalent of counties) to impose curfews in areas where they deem it necessary. It can also be used to ban meetings and demonstrations, control the press, place banning orders on people going to certain places, search houses at night and even put people under house arrest.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/racaille.jpg>]

The utilisation of the 1955 law is highly symbolic. It was originally adopted during the Algerian War of Independence to combat the independence fighters and the population that supported them. Fifty years later it is being used against young people, many of whom are the grandchildren of those same Algerians. Because the areas where the riots have taken place are not just poor and neglected. They are also home to large concentrations of North and Black Africans. The vast majority of these young people were born in France and therefore have French citizenship. But they are very conscious of not being French citizens like anyone else. Young people of Arab and African origin are second-class citizens. Even when they succeed in leaving school with qualifications, or even go to university, their chances of finding a job are much less than their white counterparts. And they are subjected to constant racist harassment - police controls, de facto colour bars at the entrance to night clubs, etc.

The use of the 1995 law amounts to a recognition that the only thing the government has to offer these young people is repression. Periodic attempts to 'rehabilitate' their neighbourhoods have had little effect. A generation of young people has grown up in grim, increasingly ghetto-like housing estates, with little hope of escape, and feeling rejected by a society whose loudly-proclaimed commitment equality does not seem to apply to them. The significance of the state of emergency has not been lost on those concerned. Recalling the aim of the original law fifty years ago, Djamel a 30-year old inhabitant of the Paris suburb of Aubervilliers, put it succinctly to a journalist from the daily Le Monde: " In this country a bougnoule (a racist term for North Africans) remains a bougnoule. It's serious. You see, its proof that they don't consider us to be really French". His friend Omar added: "People are going to go crazy. We're already confined to our estates, now they're passing laws to lock us up in our own homes".

People - young people - have already "gone crazy". In many ways, what is surprising is not that the suburbs have exploded but that they did not explode before. The riots were sparked off by the deaths of two teenagers in the Paris suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois, who were accidentally electrocuted as they took refuge from police. That was the straw that broke the camel's back. But it was far from an isolated incident. Young people - mostly of Arab and African origin - regularly die from the brutal methods of the police. Usually the result is a local riot or protest march, and then things die down again - till the next time. This time the pent-up anger exploded and the revolt spread to other Parisian suburbs and then across France. The scale of the revolt is indicated by the more than 30 zones where the state of emergency has been invoked. They cover areas in and around France's main towns and cities, from the English Channel to the Mediterranean.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/paris2005.jpg>]

The term "riot" which has come to be applied to the revolt is in fact misleading. The revolt is the work of gangs of youth who know each other and who consciously turn their anger into acts of destruction of property - burning cars, schools, shops, buses - and attacks on the hated police. As one young man put it to the Madrid daily El Pais: "We don't have words to explain what we feel. We only know how to speak with fire". Beyond their immediate targets, their anger is directed against Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, the hard right hopeful for the 2007 presidential election,

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who has described them as "rabble" and "gangrene" and threatened to "hose down" their neighbourhoods. The only political demand that the rioters put forward is for Sarkozy's resignation.

Of course, there is a negative side to this revolt. It is easy enough to see that wreaking havoc in their own neighbourhoods causes damage to their neighbours and families. This can and is being exploited by the government to divide their communities between generations and between French and immigrants. But when the despair of those to whom society offers no future explodes in revolt, it rarely does so in a neat, tidy and "politically correct" way. What is happening in France today recalls the explosions in the ghettos of North America in the 1960s and the 1981 riots in England.

The riots have been the at the centre of French political life for two weeks. The right-wing government has alternated between Sarkozy's provocative statements and mealy-mouthed assurances of the government's concern and understanding. But the bottom line was to send in more and more police, thus acerbating the situation, and finally to resort to the 1955 law. Well over a thousand young people have already been arrested. In this climate the far Right has been having a field day. National Front leader Jean Marie Le Pen has called on rioters to be stripped of their French citizenship. Philippe de Villiers, leader of the rival Movement for France has said that the government "has not taken the measure of the anti-French insurrection which is threatening the unity of the republic". Both the far Right and the right wing of the ruling UMP party have called for the army to be sent in to the suburbs.

The main opposition party, the Socialist Party, has not rejected the use of the 1955 law, confining itself to saying that it was necessary to be "vigilant" in applying it but that "above all, it is imperative to re-establish order and security". Forces to the left of the SP have reacted differently, placing the blame for the riots on decades of neglect, institutionalised racism and police brutality. The LCR, French section of the Fourth International, has called from the beginning for the resignation of Sarkozy. This demand has also been taken up by the Communist Party leadership, which has however had to contend with pressure from within the party, mainly from the municipalities it controls in the suburbs, to put equal blame on the police and the rioters.

A joint statement opposing the state of emergency was issued on November 8th, signed by political parties (the LCR, the CP, the Greens and the Citizens' Alternative), trade unions and civil rights organisations. Discussions are taking place with a view to organising unitary initiatives, including demonstrations in defiance of the curfew in the areas where it has been imposed. A first rally took place on November 9th in Bobigny, administrative centre of the Seine Saint-Denis department, north-east of Paris, the area where the revolt began. It was supported by the LCR, the CP and the main trade unions of the department. But over and above such initiatives, when the dust has settled, the French Left will have to develop an ongoing presence in the neighbourhoods where the revolt exploded, and from which it has been all too absent in recent years.