

Strange goings-on in Corsica

Police and senior government officials implicated in arson attack

Richard Tyler
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Events on the small Mediterranean island of Corsica have created the most serious political crisis yet for the Jospin government in France.

This week, the *Assemblée nationale* (parliament), will debate a no-confidence motion tabled by three of the rightwing opposition parties. The text of the motion of censure starts by quoting Jospin's own words on taking office in June 1997: "A constitutional state should not tolerate exceptions. In Corsica — as everywhere else within the national territory — the government will take care to respect the laws of the republic."

The motion goes on to assert that, "high-ranking civil servants representing the State have admitted being the instigators" of criminal acts carried out on the night of April 19 and "of carrying them out". It concludes by saying that the government was "in ignorance of what was going to be carried out, which represents a serious dysfunction of the public authorities... the acts perpetrated by its representatives constitute an attack of extreme gravity against the fundamental principles of a constitutional state". It demands the government "accept its responsibility" for what has been dubbed the "Rainbow Warrior II" affair, in reference to the 1985 blowing up of the Greenpeace ship by members of the French security forces. What has lead to such serious charges being levelled against the government of Lionel Jospin?

On April 19, a fire burnt down *Chez Francis*, a beach bar and restaurant belonging to Yves Feraud. Situated on the fashionable Aqua Doria beach at Coti Chiavri, the bar was a popular haunt of local celebrities, Corsican nationalist politicians and businessmen. Like many such beach bars on the island, *Chez Francis* had been erected illegally without obtaining planning permission from the local authorities; it stayed open thanks to its owner's

powerful Corsican friends.

But this was no accidental fire. Found at the scene of the blaze were several empty petrol canisters, a police walkie-talkie, a military-issue dagger and a bloodstained Balaclava. The last item belonging to Captain Norbert Ambrosse of the elite para-military GPS force established to fight crime and corruption on Corsica. The Captain was discovered in the local hospital, suffering from serious burns to his hands and face. Investigators also found papers at the arson scene denouncing the bar's owner as a "police informer".

Six days later, Colonel Henri Mazarès and two other officers from the GPS were arrested and charged with the "wilful destruction of property by concerted arson". Documents showing how to construct incendiary devices were found at Mazarès' house. Under questioning, Mazarès claimed that the three gendarmes had been engaged on a "surveillance mission" when they discovered the burning beach bar. They then fled the scene, fearing it might be an ambush.

Mazarès later changed his story and confessed, saying that the *Prefect*, Bernard Bonnet—the highest-ranking government official on the island—had himself demanded the destruction of the restaurant as part of a campaign to reaffirm the "authority of the state". He also said that Bonnet's chief of staff, Gerard Pardini, had helped him to torch another beach bar. Investigators claim to have tape recordings of Bonnet telling Mazarès that he has "taken all precautions" and that Pardini would be the "fall guy".

French daily *le Figaro* compared the bungled attempt to cover up the arson attack with the actions of the incompetent character Inspector Clouseau, played by Peter Sellers in the Pink Panther films.

Immediately, calls were made for Prefect Bonnet to resign. Both on Corsica and in France, the press began to

speculate that such an operation would not have been carried out without the knowledge of political superiors. Corsican nationalists denounced it as the actions of a “Machiavellian French state”.

The political flack started to be directed at Prime Minister Jospin and his Interior Minister Jean-Paul Chevènement, who had hailed the new Prefect as “the right man in the right place”, and supported the GPS being able to bypass the local police and solve the murder of Bonnet's predecessor. What did they know about these strange goings-on in Corsica involving senior police officers, or even the Prefect?

The London *Telegraph* wrote that, “the scandal... has shone unwelcome light on one of the murkiest corners of French political life, the ambiguous links between the forces of law and order and the Corsican underworld. Criminal interests, corruption and protection rackets have long held sway on the island, where violence is habitually blamed on ‘nationalist extremists’ but tends in reality to serve shadowy ‘commercial interests’.”

On May 3, Bonnet was detained for questioning and flown to a top security prison in Paris, where he continues to plead his innocence.

Prime Minister Jospin tried desperately to downplay the scandal saying, “none of the state authorities—whether Prime Minister, Defence Minister, Interior Minister—has intervened in these events in any way whatsoever.” He told parliament, “Do you really believe it would make sense for me or for any one of my collaborators or Ministers to instruct a regional Prefect, to instruct the gendarmerie, to set fire to a beach restaurant?”

“No member of my cabinet, none of my aides, gave any order or received any information concerning this serious incident before it took place,” Jospin declared. He announced Bonnet's sacking, and that the GPS would be dissolved.

Prefect Bonnet was sent to the island following the murder of his predecessor Claude Erignac in February 1998. Erignac was shot in the head with a pistol apparently “stolen” from a police strong room. He was the most senior official killed in over 25 years of separatist violence on the island.

The new Prefect was given a wide brief to “clean up” Corsica and bring Erignac's killer to justice. His predecessor had set up the 95-strong GPS force brought from the mainland, fearing that the sympathies of the local gendarmes were too unreliable.

Although an island of just under 300,000, Corsica receives large amounts of government and European

Union (EU) money. It gets \$480m of “solidarity support” from the state each year, plus \$1.3bn to run the island's official bodies. Corsica has also had some \$800m from the EU since 1994. A government report last year said that, “the vast proportion has been misappropriated”. Most crime on the island is related to gangland battles over property and land, state grants and tourism.

Bonnet ordered the arrest of dozens of prominent Corsicans for misappropriation, he set up investigations into banks and local development funds. He also requisitioned the bulldozing of illegal beach bars and restaurants.

It was this latter operation that was thwarted by influential local politicians. Bonnet was forced to accept a compromise, whereby the illegally constructed bars could remain throughout the lucrative tourist season, and would be dismantled in the winter.

This obviously rankled with the Prefect. One observer of the island's affairs suggested that Bonnet had simply “gone native, using Corsican methods on the Corsicans, instead of sticking to the rule book.”

It is unlikely that the censure motion will pass in the *Assemblée nationale* next week, as the coalition government enjoys a clear majority. Nobody has, so far, come forward with any concrete evidence suggesting that the Prime Minister or his cabinet colleagues were directly implicated in the Corsican affair. However, Jospin's denials are just as damning, as they are tantamount to an admission that no one in the government knew what was being done in Corsica by their most senior representatives, officials and the elite GPS.

The affair has produced one other significant effect: uniting the feuding Corsican nationalist and separatist organisations. Last Saturday, several thousand demonstrated for more autonomy and against the actions of the French state. For the first time in 10 years all 14 Corsican nationalist movements demonstrated together. The rally was called by the “Fium'Orbu Committee” set up in January to promote reconciliation between the hostile separatist groups, whose rivalry has previously resulted in mutual assassinations.



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