

Partial autonomy for Corsica splits French government

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The French government faces a crucial test, following the resignation of Interior Minister Jean Pierre Chevènement due to his disagreement with the Corsican policy of Socialist Party Prime Minister Lionel Jospin.

For several months, Jospin has pursued the project of partial autonomy for Corsica. On December 13 last year he invited representatives of all the political parties from the island to his office at the Matignon in Paris to discuss Corsica's future. In addition to the liberal-democratic Corsican President José Rossi, also participating was his deputy and European Parliament representative Jean Guy Talamoni, chairman of *Corsica Nazionale*—the political arm of the armed separatist organisation “FLNC Canal historique”. The meeting received excited attention in France, because up to then no head of government had met publicly with Corsican separatists.

Since then Jospin has submitted his program for Corsica's partial autonomy, which foresees a provisional solution up to 2004. In 2004 a constitutional amendment will grant the island—which has belonged to France since 1797—more self-determination, with the proviso that up to then the acts of terrorism cease. The Corsican parliament will be able to independently amend French laws concerning infrastructure, economics, tourism, sport and schools as well as table new laws, which until 2004 will still require the subsequent agreement of Paris. The Corsican language will be given equal status with French and be taught from the first school year. The extensive tax breaks available on the island, for example the traditional discharge from death duty, will retain their validity.

While the Corsican parliament agreed these suggestions at the end of July with an 80 percent majority, critical voices in Paris are growing, not only in the opposition Gaullist parties, but also in the government camp. Chevènement opposes the project, and is supported by several government members.

Chevènement, who was responsible for Corsica as Minister of the Interior and for the regions, believes that granting greater regional independence endangers the sovereignty of the French state. A precedent could be created that would be “as contagious as the computer virus ‘I Love You’,” he explained. He fears similar demands for autonomy on the part of the French Basques and Catalonians, from Brittany, the Alsace and even from Savoy.

Chevènement has been one of the most important pillars of the Jospin government. As a “left” Euro-sceptic he is important in retaining the support of a layer of voters. He is party chairman of the *Mouvement des Citoyens* (Citizens Movement—MDC), which split off from the Socialist Party in 1992 in opposition to the Maastricht Treaty. He has already resigned from government twice before, in 1983 as Industry Minister and in 1991 as a Secretary of Defence. In 1991 he resigned due to his opposition to the Gulf War, which he regarded as a purely American enterprise and contrary to French interests.

While Chevènement fears a softening of the central French state by increasing tendencies for autonomy in the regions, Jospin hopes to be able to contain the activities of the Corsican separatists by granting them

limited concessions.

Jospin had been prime minister for barely six months when on February 6, 1998 the French Prefect on the island, Claude Erignac, was shot. The state reacted harshly. The new Prefect Bernard Bonnet, an officer's son and “energetic republican”, established his own elite police force the GPS, and unleashed a virtual private war in order to re-establish the “constitutional state” by all means necessary, including illegal ones.

On April 20, 1999 an unlicensed beach restaurant was burnt down and the trail of evidence led directly to Prefect Bonnet, who until then had enjoyed the full support of Jospin. His position became untenable and he ended up in prison. This affair shook the authority of the French state on Corsica more than ever before. In the midst of the European election campaign Jospin faced a vote of no-confidence in the French National Assembly (parliament).

Two reports were commissioned, one by the Senate and one by parliament, in order to take a close look at political conditions on the “beautiful island” and the effects of France's Corsica policy. Both reports concluded that the French state had committed grave errors in Corsica. In particular, Gaullist Ministers Debré and Balladur were accused of contributing to the escalation of violence by engaging in secret negotiations with the separatists and by favouritism. There was talk of high-ranking French politicians being involved in Mafia activities such as murder, drug trading and money laundering.

Jospin took the initiative to propose a new solution to the “Corsica question” and invited the island's political representatives to the Matignon for discussions and developed his partial autonomy project. In order to appease critics such as Chevènement, the prime minister walked a tightrope regarding the Corsica question. In an article in the newspaper *Le nouvel observateur* he defended his recent project and promised that nothing would substantially change for France. The measures were not applicable to other regions. He also excluded an amnesty for terrorists, like the murderers of Prefect Erignac.

At the same time, he could not risk upsetting the unstable cooperation of the Corsican nationalists, from whose side there was also opposition to the project. Immediately after the acceptance of the proposals in the Corsican parliament there was a new wave of terrorist attacks.

On August 7, the former nationalist leader Jean Michel Rossi and his bodyguard were shot in their local café, *L'Ile Rousse*. Only one day before, on August 6, the so-called “summer university” of the nationalists took place in the Corte, the “historical capital of Corsica”, where Jospin's proposals were celebrated as an achievement of the armed struggle. They were regarded as a first step on the way to the complete separation of Corsica and were linked with the demand for a universal amnesty.

Further terrorist attacks followed the assassination attempt on Jean Michel Rossi. A car bomb exploded in the courtyard of the Corsican agency for economic development in Ajaccio, and few days later the building of the Sub-Prefecture in Sardène was hit by a rocket. Although nobody claimed responsibility for these and other attacks, and the cease-

fire which had been in operation since December 1999 was not officially lifted, the initial arrests suggest that the attacks were committed by Corsican separatists who do not agree with the partial autonomy proposals.

The Corsican separatists are divided into rival cliques and their high-profile involvement in criminal activity has cost them a large part of their influence in the population.

Their recent history began with the establishment of the FLNC (Front de libération nationale corse - Corsican national liberation front) in 1976. This was preceded by a conflict between Corsican wine producers and the *Pieds noirs*, former French settlers from North Africa who had set up in Corsica after France had withdrawn from Algeria 1962. In protest against the preferential treatment granted the *Pieds noirs*, Corsican farmers under the leadership of Edmond Siméoni occupied a vineyard in Aléria in 1975, and a bloody struggle with the police ensued. The establishment of the FLNC followed, modelled on the Algerian Liberation Front (FNL) that had been directed against France. In 1989 the underground armed organisation *FLNC Canal historique* was set up.

The Corsican nationalists degenerated rapidly from the early 1990s. A series of internal struggles developed concerning the so-called "revolutionary tax", a source of finance that was often collected by means of armed robbery and bank jobs. The large sums of money this brought in were invested in real estate and in gambling operations from Italy to Africa. Mafia-style operations were undertaken with weapons and drugs, as well as money laundering. Corruption was used to tie high-ranking politicians into the separatists' networks, including those on the mainland. In 1995, on average one assassination attempt on Corsica was carried out each day. There was a series of attacks on the French mainland, which killed 8 and left 159 injured.

In the course of the 1990s, most of the separatist groups' original fighters ran away and were replaced by purely criminal elements. Jean Michel Rossi, the ex-leader of the separatist *A Cuncolta*, murdered at the beginning of August, had abandoned the armed struggle a few years earlier. One day before his murder he explained in an interview with the weekly paper *Marianne*: "a lumpen proletariat followed the students, farmers and teachers of the seventies, which one had to try and provide with a minimum of political consciousness." He said that today's movement had "neither a head, nor a cadre, nor a consistent and credible project". Their rank and file was ready "for any adventure".

The so-called "left" separatists of *A Manca Naziunale*, supported by the *Ligue communiste révolutionnaire* (Revolutionary communist league—LCR) of Alain Krivine, do not offer an alternative. In the LCR newspaper *Rouge* they are presented as a "patriotic left-wing movement", whose representative Serge Vandepoorte criticised Jospin for missing the real target of "de-colonialising" Corsica. "The national rights of the Corsican people must be recognised!" demands *A Manca Naziunale* in its program.

Not one of the Corsican separatist groups represents a progressive force. They correspond to the aims of rival bourgeois and petty-bourgeois cliques, who see their own economic interests being impaired by French domination on the island. It is towards them that Jospin's partial autonomy plan is addressed.

For the mass of the population this plan will bring no improvement at all. Despite constant high subsidies, most Corsicans live in great poverty. The island mainly depends on tourism and food exports. In August 1998, based on per capita income, Corsica ranked 143 out of 196 European regions. Fully 95 percent of all Corsican firms have less than 10 employees. Out of a total population of 250,000 there are 15,000 unemployed and 30,000 employed in "precarious" low-paid or temporary jobs out of a workforce of 100,000.

Earlier autonomy concessions have not changed these conditions; rather they have intensified social polarisation.

At the beginning of 1997, after a wave of assassination attempts, Jospin's predecessor Alain Juppé declared Corsica as a *zone Franche*, a fiscally favoured foreign trade zone. This regulation, which continues to the end of 2001, releases a large number of Corsican employers from paying trade taxes and social security contributions. The Corsican parliament agreed the *zone Franche* by a small majority (26 to 24 with one abstention). Employers in the northern Corsican city of Bastia alone were able to save 36 million francs in tax payments in the first year.

The Jospin government has not touched these tax benefits for Corsican enterprises. They proved substantially more attractive than the concessions employers were granted in connection with the introduction of the 35-hour week throughout France. Of 360 enterprises on Corsica where the 35-hour week would be applicable, only 13 have introduced it. In 1998 Corsican business enjoyed tax exemptions worth 250 millions francs.

It appears that the Corsican parliament will use its extended powers in order to help the free market make further breakthroughs, even if this goes against the interests of the population.

This can be seen in the conflict surrounding the privatisation of Corsican merchant shipping. On January 1, 2001 the state-owned shipping lines between Corsica and the Continent—SNCM (Société nationale Corse Méditerranée) and CMN (Compagnie méridionale de navigation)—were put up for private investors. In response, in May the shipping lines' staff struck for the third time in five months, as 700 of 2,500 jobs will be lost. In their dispute the Corsican sailors stood side by side with their colleagues from Marseilles, who had initiated the strike.

A strike by airline staff last December against the effects of privatisation revealed the same picture: The airline CCM (Compagnie aérienne Corse Méditerranée) was 60 percent owned by the Corsican parliament and was actually in the hands of Corsican nationalists, having been created after the liquidation of Air France on Corsica. The 476 striking CCM employees and 150 employees of Air France gained support from SNCM and CMN sailors.

The promotion of autonomy serves the purpose of undermining solidarity between Corsican and French workers, who can only defend their interests by acting together. It also threatens to provoke ethnic tensions. This became clear when the separatist party *Conculta* discussed its plans for the future. The *Conculta* leaders generously stated that the half of the island's inhabitants who were not of Corsican descent would be able to remain in the future, as long as they integrated themselves "into the Corsican community".

Jospin's indulgence towards the Corsican separatists has little to do with concessions to the Corsican population. If he has accepted a crisis in his own government, then above all this is because the situation on Corsica became untenable for the French state.

The French state maintains extensive security troops on the island, from simple policemen to the paramilitary CRS (Compagnie républicaine de sécurité) and the secret service. On Corsica there is one policeman for every 241 inhabitants, while the national average is one per 437 inhabitants. The *gendarmerie*, the core of the French state presence on the island, has twice as many officials per inhabitant than on the mainland—and this is even though Corsica does not rank among the most "sensitive areas" as far as "normal" crimes are concerned.

Things cannot continue in this way as far as the Corsican and French bourgeoisie are concerned. In addition to the fact that much of the substantial subsidies from Paris and Brussels seep into the hands of the rival cliques, the instability caused by terrorist attacks is considered a factor negatively affecting inward investment.

For his part, Chevènement fears that giving way to the Corsican separatists could weaken the authority of the state in mainland France as well, where it faces ever-stronger pressure of social protests.



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