

France's Internal Security law and the cult of Interior Minister Sarkozy

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On January 23, France's National Assembly passed Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy's Internal Security Law, which had been in preparation since late September of last year. As in its previously proposed versions, the law gives police the option of intimidating poor neighborhoods with draconian sentencing and dramatically strengthens police powers. Ruling circles are also using the law to incite nationalism and generally spread the reactionary atmosphere created by the media cult around Sarkozy.

The law's provisions come in two sections: instituting new crimes and giving the police new powers. The law targets prostitution, making it a crime punishable by two months in jail and a 3,750-euro fine to publicly invite someone to have sexual relations "even passively, by one's attitude." Prostitutes' organizations objected that this would force them to work in back alleys or underground in more dangerous conditions; certain opponents of the law have warned that it could justify police targeting of women simply for wearing miniskirts in public.

It punishes vagabonds and squatters in apartment complexes with six months in jail and a 3,750-euro fine, and gives police the right to confiscate vagabonds' vehicles. Beggars operating in groups face six months in jail and 3,750-euro fines. The law increases penalties for threatening policemen or judges to two years in jail and a 30,000-euro fine.

The law also includes anti-immigrant and racist provisions. It allows the police to target any non-EU citizen "who has committed acts justifying a criminal trial" or whose conduct "threatens public order" for deportation. Previous versions of the bill explicitly allowed police to deport foreigners for participation in political demonstrations. In a bizarre section on "kebabs," the law stipulates that a carryout restaurant can be shut down for six months if it "disturbs public order."

In another indication of the reactionary nationalist atmosphere the bill is intended to stimulate, it makes desecrating the flag or the national anthem punishable by a 7,500-euro fine. Prosecutors can tack on six months in jail if the desecration is performed in a group.

The bill vastly expands police powers. It relaxes requirements for searches and for keeping information about suspects, eliminates the obligation to notify suspects of their right to

remain silent, and extends until 2005 the special powers granted to police by the previous Socialist government after September 11, 2001. It allows for DNA fingerprinting of anyone "for whom there is a plausible reason to believe that they may have committed an offense."

Passage of the bill came after a massive publicity campaign for Sarkozy in the mainstream media. The center-left daily *Le Monde*, while participating in the process, called it "sarkomania." The interior minister has made highly publicized visits to poorer neighborhoods to proclaim his determination to protect every Frenchman, giving interviews with cashiers and small business owners who approve of his measures. He even received accolades from across the Atlantic, in the pages of the *New York Times*.

He had a high-profile debate with the Socialist mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delanoë, whose hypocritical opposition to the bill he demolished by pointing out that many of its controversial parts were taken straight from proposals of and laws passed by the previous Socialist government. The press also generally praised Sarkozy's participation in televised debates with the leader of the neo-fascist Front National (FN), Jean-Marie Le Pen, and the Socialist Elisabeth Guigou, who was Labor Minister in the previous Socialist government.

Amid media speculation that he could be the next presidential candidate of the conservative Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP), Sarkozy has aggressively feuded with other major figures in the UMP. In December he attacked UMP President Alain Juppé, asserting that Juppé had slighted him at the UMP founding congress that installed Juppé as president. Recently he provoked bitter comments from President Jacques Chirac by trying to plan a visit to Algeria before Chirac, the nominal head of French foreign policy, had the time to do so. Sarkozy reportedly leads both Chirac and Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin in opinion polls.

The nature of Sarkozy's base of support is a more or less open secret. He began his political career in the late 1970s as an operative in the ultra-wealthy Paris suburb of Neuilly, of which he has been the mayor since 1983. He became involved in the national bureaucracy of the RPR (Rassemblement pour la République, the Gaullist predecessor of the current UMP) upon being elected representative from Neuilly's congressional

district in 1988.

Throughout the 1990s—when he alternatively held high national office, directed the RPR, and ran for European positions—he maintained links with both the RPR and the free-market Droite Libérale (DL—Free-Market Right), the former party of Raffarin. DL, which dissolved itself last September into the current UMP umbrella party, negotiated political alliances with or harbored crypto-fundamentalists, monarchists, and apologists for the role of the Catholic Church during the Holocaust.

Sarkozy is very popular amongst voters who cast their ballots for the neo-fascist Front National in 2002. The far-right weekly *Minute* praised him for his “courtesy” during his debate with Jean-Marie Le Pen, which it contrasted with the treatment he “inflicted on Guigou, whom the right universally hates.” It concluded that this had won him “the jubilant sympathy of a section of FN voters.” Indeed, he has forced the FN leadership to mount a campaign denouncing his measures as generally correct, but insufficient—the FN called for the use of military transport ships to deport immigrants.

According to an interview with FN official Eric Iorio in *Le Monde*, the FN is not overly concerned: “Each time the [parliamentary] right has been perceived as taking over our ideas, they have helped us. In 1986 Interior Minister Charles Pasqua said that fear was about to change sides [i.e., from policemen to criminals]. Two years later, Jean-Marie Le Pen got 14.4 percent of the vote in the presidential elections. In 1995, Prime Minister Alain Juppé wanted a return to values. Three years later, the FN was at the center of French political life during the regional elections, obtaining 15.27 percent.”

There is little to add to Iorio’s summary of this phenomenon, except to note that the Front National’s exceptional performance in the 2002 elections directly followed the April 2002 law-and-order media frenzy initiated by Chirac and the parliamentary right and picked up by the Socialists.

Sarkozy’s rise further underlines the bankruptcy of claims that one can block the rise of the far right by voting in the parliamentary right, the political excuse that the Socialists, Greens, Communists and several “far-left” parties gave for calling for a Chirac vote in the presidential elections.

Sarkozy has easily dealt with the half-hearted opposition of the left wing of the bourgeois establishment, but the opposition of the working class is another matter. Sarkozy’s ridiculous populist pretensions and his claims to be working for the good of average working Frenchmen show that he is aware of the massive popular opposition to the type of police repression that he actually is preparing.

Demonstrations against Sarkozy’s law in Paris, including demonstrations by prostitutes’ organizations, gathered several thousand people. The coming struggles over pension reform will again expose a key role of Sarkozy’s newly reorganized police forces, as demonstrated by their treatment of the truckers’ strike of November 2002: a coordinated force for

breaking up strikes or protests and imposing socially regressive deals by threatening or carrying out mass arrests and violence.

The unstable and contradictory nature of Sarkozy’s popular appeal is exposed by the controversy, especially in police unions, over his decision to suspend policemen involved in police brutality cases. The recent and as-yet unexplained deaths of an Argentine and a Somali while waiting to be deported have forced him to temporarily suspend several policemen working at Paris airports, and the beating of Omar Baha forced him to suspend two more.

The Baha case, in which police beat up a bystander in downtown Paris, sheds light on the actual relations between police and the working population. Baha claims that he saw a group of policemen mistreating a suspect while handcuffing him. He walked over and criticized them, threatening to bring them before the Interior Minister. He alleges that the policemen then replied, “We don’t give a f—k about the minister,” whereupon they beat him, breaking his nose, and carried him off to police headquarters.

Significantly, the police union made no attempt to deny the basic thrust of Baha’s account of events, but simply claimed that that was the only thing they could do. They asserted that Baha had “stirred up 150 to 200 people won over to his cause” and that the policemen, “encircled and threatened with an all-out brawl, stood up ... and took control of the situation.”

Police officials claimed, “Anyone can see that in current conditions, police forces are increasingly exposed to anti-police attacks.” In an interview, the police commissioner for the 18th district in Paris, a working-class area surrounding the tourist zones around the Sacré-Coeur church, spoke of particularly violent confrontations during the Ramadan period and indicated that 150 policemen were wounded in the area in 2002. An Associated Press release noted that “in working-class areas and suburbs of Paris, the increased number of police interventions sometimes triggers extremely vigorous reactions in bystanders.”



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