

French government seizes on London bombings to escalate attack on civil liberties

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French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy has taken advantage of the outrage and confusion produced by the July 7 bombings in London and the failed attempts of July 21 to further his law-and-order agenda.

The government's new anti-terrorist bill will be presented to the cabinet immediately after the summer break so that the new measures can be in place by the end of 2005 or the beginning of 2006. It will include a battery of video surveillance measures modelled after the British system.

At present, France has 20,000 surveillance cameras in use, whereas in Great Britain there are nearly four million. Sarkozy aims to match the level of surveillance in London, where it is estimated that on an average day a Londoner is filmed at least 300 times by dozens of different circuits. He also wants the legal time limit for the storage of information from these cameras to be extended. At present, it may not be kept for more than a month.

The chief commissioner in charge of Paris's police video surveillance system, Pierre-Edouard Colliex, asserted in *Le Monde* August 5, "It is very useful for following a particular event, an accident, a demonstration, or to keep an eye on an official visit with important people."

It is clear that the French government has very much in mind the need to control the social explosions that can arise from chronic unemployment, for which it has only cosmetic proposals, and the gutting of the welfare state.

Two days after the London bombings, France reinstituted border controls, in particular with England. It is activating the security clause of the Schengen agreement of 1985 and 1990, which abolished frontier checks between most European Union countries.

European ministers responsible for policing and

security met in Brussels July 13 to "accelerate the implementation of the EU anti-terrorist plan of action" decided upon after the Madrid bombings in March 2004. José Antonio Alonso of Spain declared on arrival at the meeting that "The European security area must be built, irrespective of the crises which the European Union is going through."

Sarkozy and Pascal Clément, the French minister of justice, voiced particular support for European-wide legislation harmonising police access to telephone and electronic data. According to the plan presented last year by France, Ireland, Sweden and the UK, a large variety of communications would be involved: fixed and mobile phones, texting, e-mails and other computer communications. "This must be given absolute urgency," stressed Sarkozy, despite reservations expressed in France over the costs to operators and the invasion of privacy.

The strengthening of the cooperation of the EU's police forces in the repression of immigrants and asylum seekers is exemplified by the meeting of the ministers of the interior of the G5 (Germany, Spain, France, Italy, the UK) on July 4 and 5 in Evian, France. They laid down plans to join forces and organise joint charter planes to expel foreigners.

Sarkozy and the government of Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin are using the opportunity created by the London and Sharm-el-Sheikh bombings to extend and deepen police surveillance and repression of France's five million Muslims, and immigrants in general. The hype in 2004 around the anti-Muslim law against the wearing of the Islamic headscarf in public schools went hand in hand with a wave of summary expulsions from France of imams on the basis of police reports alone, without any legal process. In one case, an imam from Vénissieux, Abdelkader Bouziane, was

alleged to have expressed reactionary views on the right of a husband to beat his wife. A local paper, *Lyon Mag*, which interviewed Bouziane, found itself in court for “defending” or “propagating” such views.

In an interview with the daily *Libération* of July 19, Sarkozy declared, “We must be far more harsh with those who recruit young suicide bombers...it’ll be zero tolerance.” He pledged to engage in “preemptive detection” of those supporting “terrorist radicalisation.” It is necessary to “collect as much intelligence as possible and as broadly as possible, on groups, individuals and places,” he added.

Most sinister was his statement, “I am going to reactivate the procedures for withdrawing nationality for French imams who express violent or fundamentalist ideas, systematically deport those who do not respect our values and who are not French.” The withdrawal of nationality as government policy, to the knowledge of this writer, was last used in France against Jews and opponents of the Occupation by the government of Marshal Pétain, which collaborated with the Nazi occupiers during World War Two.

Libération of July 30 reports that the *Renseignements généraux* (RG, the political police) “have already targeted some 10 imams in the Lyon, Marseilles and Paris areas,” and tracked down some 10 “ideological leaders” who gather round themselves “young people in a situation of deprivation and social failure,” as well as “nearly 40 religious venues under Salafist influence,” with “ideas expressed that range from ‘classical fundamentalism’ to the most violent doctrines.”

Kamale Kabtane, rector of the Great Mosque in Lyons, pointed out that “when a Catholic priest denounces an unjust situation somewhere in the world, he is doing his job. But an imam cannot say that the wall that is being built between the Israeli and Palestinian peoples is unjust because that would be taken as an appeal for violence....”

Newspapers have reported police searches and intrusions into Muslim homes, in the name of “investigating terrorist activities,” in which innocent families have been subjected to humiliating and brutal treatment and insulting language from officers.

In this climate, Sarkozy unveiled, in July, a series of proposals for regulating immigration to France. He demands of his immigration services a 50 percent rise

in expulsion rates of “illegal” immigrants—to 23,000 in 2005. Marriages will be assumed to be for convenience, to get around legal obstacles, unless otherwise proved. Procedures will be tightened and documentation more carefully scrutinised for those seeking to live in France from non-EU countries. Sarkozy also wants tighter controls on tourists coming from “high-risk” countries.

He has adopted the slogan “Chosen immigration, not inflicted immigration,” saying that from now on, “it’s a question of accepting the people that we want.” While denying that he is imposing quotas based on race or country of origin, he proposes a system that would serve the interests of France’s employers: quotas for different categories of qualified workers, who would be willing to perform work under conditions and at wages unacceptable to French workers.

Villepin declared July 27 that the proposed anti-terrorist measures “will in no way infringe upon the fundamental principles of our laws.” The prime minister distanced himself from the British “shoot-to-kill policy,” indicating that “no authorisation will be given to the security forces to shoot except in legitimate self defense.”

In France, where every policeman carries a firearm and has little compunction in drawing it, there is no such myth as that of the kindly English bobby, and to the question, “Who is going to protect us from the terrorist?” there is the concomitant, “Who is going to protect us from the police?” Every year has its tally of police killings, largely of immigrant youth, on the streets of France.

Civil liberties groups in France have expressed disquiet at the new raft of government security and anti-immigrant measures. Alain Weber of the Human Rights League (LDH) in *Le Monde* August 5 deplored the new plan: “They are taking advantage of the legitimate emotions aroused by the London bombings in order to strengthen the intrusive means of monitoring citizens.... All political powers need sensational events to disregard individual liberties.”



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