

France: state of emergency extended for three months

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The decision of the French government to extend a state of emergency, imposed November 9 for a 12-day period, for an additional three months is a grave threat to democratic and civil rights. There is no modern precedent in France for such an arrogation of emergency powers.

The pretext for the extraordinary measure is the wave of violent protests against police repression by immigrant youth in the impoverished slums that surround Paris and other French cities. The riots began on October 27 and have waned in recent days.

The elemental eruption of anger over entrenched poverty, discrimination, police abuse and overtly racist remarks by Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy has been met by the authorities with massive police repression. Some 3,000 arrests have been made since the rioting began, and 1,700 CRS riot police have been garrisoned in the slum neighbourhoods.

Now the Gaullist government of President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin is seizing on the unrest to establish a precedent for authoritarian forms of rule with vast implications for the democratic rights of the French population as a whole.

The state of emergency was extended under the provisions of a 1955 law that, until this month, had not been invoked for half a century. The decision was taken on the morning of November 15 by the Council of Ministers, and voted for in the afternoon by the National Assembly. It arms the French state with repressive powers normally associated with civil war conditions.

The measure was passed in the Assembly by 346 to 148. The Gaullist UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) and the centre-right UDF (French Union for Democracy) voted in favour, while the Socialist

Party, the Communist Party, the Left Radicals and the Greens voted against. The Senate, controlled by the UMP, will endorse the decision on Thursday.

Under the provisions of the law, the government can instruct the police to carry out raids and mass arrests. The government can ban demonstrations and censor the media. The police are authorized to search houses and restrict the movement of individuals without having to give any proof of a valid reason for these actions.

The 1955 law was a product of the brutal colonial subjugation of Algeria, and has never before been implemented in France itself. The Gaullist government has invoked it now to prepare its repressive forces for major social and political confrontations with the working class.

President Chirac, in presenting the extension of the state of emergency to the cabinet, stressed the “strictly temporary” nature of the measure. The extraordinary length of the extension, however, belies these words.

Liberation, a publication close to the Socialist Party, carried an editorial November 16 with the headline “Police State?” It expressed the fears within sections of the ruling elite that such measures will not succeed in containing the rebellion: “Indeed, the minister of the interior has to be very blind to think that emergency legislation can be an effective remedy for the rage which has set the suburbs alight. Or that the state of emergency can cure the ills of racism, unemployment, and the injustices which are at the root of the French malaise... The prolongation is futile, and could turn out to be dangerous.”

In an effort to whip up support for the police measures, the government is seeking to inflame racist and anti-immigrant sentiments. When he presented the extension of the state of emergency to the National Assembly, Interior Minister Sarkozy announced that

procedures had been initiated to deport ten foreigners involved in the rioting. He has pledged to expel any foreigner involved in the disturbances, whether or not they have residence permits. In fact, only a relative handful of those arrested are foreigners.

The CRS chief officer, Christian Lambert, told the press that his forces would spearhead a new form of policing: “We will win back these territories... It will not be a police force just simply to say hello to the shopkeepers, but a police force to patrol and secure districts... The minister chose to send the CRS to the toughest places. We are highly trained, experienced and hardened public servants.”

The rioting has been portrayed entirely as an immigrant question, but, in fact, the social unrest among workers against the privatisation of public services and other attacks on living standards is uppermost in the government’s mind. Last month a one-day general strike brought the largest crowds of workers and youth onto the streets of France in many years, and on November 21 national rail workers are slated to go on strike against government privatisation schemes and attacks on wages.

The government has used the youth revolt to test how far it can go. The riot police deliberately provoked the youth in the Paris suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois on October 31 to keep the unrest simmering. The regime then imposed the 12-day state of emergency and instituted curfews. It also shut down Internet sites. Next, on November 12, came a 22-hour ban on all gatherings and demonstrations in Paris. The following day the plan to extend the state of emergency for three months was announced.

Throughout this entire period, the trade unions, the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the Greens and the so-called “far left” parties—the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire and the Lutte Ouvrière—have refused to demand the withdrawal of the riot police or call for a struggle to bring down the Gaullist regime, thereby emboldening the government to step up its repressive measures.



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