

Harsh sentences handed out to anti-Sarkozy protesters in France

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The news that Nicholas Sarkozy, the right-wing leader of the ruling Gaullist UMP (Union pour un mouvement populaire—Union for a People's Movement), had been elected president, released last Sunday at 8 p.m., was greeted with profound shock by many in France. Heavy-handed policing and heavy sentencing of young oppositionists in the following hours and days were the first acts of the new Sarkozy era and served to emphasise its authoritarian character.

In the May 6 balloting Sarkozy defeated his Socialist Party opponent Ségolène Royal by 53 to 47 percent of the popular vote

Significant protests and rioting broke out and have continued unabated in several cities up to the time of writing. They express hostility to Sarkozy's plan to increase the already draconian legal and police repression of working class youth and immigrants, as well as opposition to his plan to destroy the French welfare state.

On election night, television coverage concentrated on rejoicing Sarkozy supporters punching the air as they bawled out the "Marseillaise," singing along with entertainer Mireille Mathieu and others at a celebration on the Place de la Concorde. These images alternated with shots of aging pop singer Johnny Hallyday outside Fouquet's, the exclusive Champs Elysée restaurant, where he had been dining with the new president. Hallyday will remain a tax exile in Switzerland until Sarkozy's tax cuts for the rich come into effect.

The television coverage did not mar the evening by showing images of the 'other' France protesting. Reports of the extent of the movement were played down until 5:30 p.m. the next day when the police revealed that 592 people had been arrested the previous night and 730 cars torched.

The press reported that on Monday evening 500

young anti-Sarkozy demonstrators in the Place de la Bastille in Paris and 800 in Caen carried banners saying, "They make our jobs insecure, we organise" (*Ils précarisent, on s'organise*). Similar demonstrations, involving many hundreds of protesters and skirmishes with police—liberally using tear gas and batons and making many arrests—took place in Lille, Toulouse (where police reported 66 vehicle burnings and 22 arrests), Lyons, Tours, Nantes and other urban centres. Some 292 cars were torched.

Tuesday and Wednesday also witnessed continuing protests against the incoming Sarkozy regime.

The French judicial system quickly meted out harsh, exemplary sentences, ranging from one to six months, to youth with no criminal records, accused of attacking the police with a weapon—in many cases, a can. On Tuesday, two youths received six- and three-month sentences "for violent acts" committed during an anti-Sarkozy demonstration in Lyons on Sunday evening.

On Wednesday, in a clearly concerted campaign of judicial intimidation, courts all over France followed suit: in Toulouse, 17 people were sentenced to from one to six months in prison for incidents on Sunday night; in Paris—two four-month sentences; in Rennes—six men were given sentences ranging from 105 hours of community service to three months' jail time; in Bordeaux—seven men were sentenced to from four to six months in jail; in Charlesville-Mézières—two young adults were given prison sentences of four and six months, respectively.

On Wednesday a mass meeting of 800 students at the University of Paris 1 Sorbonne-Panthéon voted for a strike and blockade of the Tolbiac site to protest against the university reforms announced by Sarkozy. On Thursday, the president of the university, now occupied by students, closed it down. News has just come in that

the Tolbiac strike and occupation have been called off. Mass meetings of students at other universities are reported also to be taking decisions for action.

The higher education minister, Francois Goulard, arrogantly called on the head of the Paris 1 site to make sure university courses continued. “It is totally unacceptable that an extremist minority, showing their scorn for democracy, should try to oppose the enactment of the president of the republic’s program,” he said.

The official left has avoided any statements in defence of the victims of police repression and has condemned the protests. The Socialist Party’s secretary general, François Hollande, launched an appeal Sunday for “responsibility and calm.” Bertrand Delanoë, Socialist Party mayor of Paris, declared that “democracy calls for the respect of universal suffrage.” This is parliamentary cretinism of the first order. Sarkozy won an election campaign through deceit and fraud, promising all things to all people, and as a result of popular disgust with the Socialist Party. He has no mandate to carry out wholesale attacks on public education, social programs and workers’ rights.

The first to condemn the anti-Sarkozy mobilisations was Bruno Julliard, a member of the Socialist Party and the chairman of UNEF, the main university students union, stating that the mass meetings of students and demonstrations in response to Sarkozy’s election were “counterproductive” and not “a suitable response.” “There is no reason to call mass meetings in the universities or demonstrations with the sole aim of opposing Sarkozy’s victory,” he said. Julliard played a key role in isolating and depoliticising the movement against the First Job Contract (CPE) last year.

By Tuesday, the left leaders were lining up to disassociate themselves with the protesters and the victims of police and judicial repression. Hollande urged the anti-Sarkozy demonstrators to “stop all violent behaviour”—he made no similar injunctions to the police. Delanoë similarly called for “everyone to exhibit the greatest calm and to reject all forms of brutality ... and acts of violence.” The Communist Party “absolutely” condemned “harmful and politically meaningless acts.”

These are the organizations whose decades-long efforts to demobilize and demoralize the French working class and the socialist-minded youth and

intelligentsia are principally responsible for Sarkozy’s victory Sunday and the violent acts of frustration. They are more than willing to accept the new regime. What chiefly worries the Socialist and Communist party leaders, complacent and self-satisfied to their marrow, is that Sarkozy’s measures will stir up opposition that may go beyond their control.

Sarkozy spent his first post-election days brazenly relaxing on a yacht belonging to billionaire businessman Vincent Bolloré.

For his part, the new president and his associates are making clear that they are more than happy to collaborate with the labor bureaucracies and the Socialist Party in carrying out their “reform” policies. After Jean-Claude Mailly, the secretary-general of the Force Ouvrière union, remarked that “All attempts to pass things by force would backfire,” Sarkozy’s chief of staff Claude Guéant played down talk of conflict.

He told LCI television, “Nicolas Sarkozy has no intention at all of ramming things through.... He has clearly said that he would consult the social partners [unions and employers’ groups] to work out the modalities of a dialogue” that will take place in September.

Moreover, Sarkozy has extended an olive branch to deputies from François Bayrou’s UDF (Union pour la Démocratie Française—Union for French Democracy), as well as sections of the Socialist Party. Guéant hinted that Sarkozy could name some Socialists to his 15-member cabinet. The name of former Socialist Party health minister Bernard Kouchner has been mentioned in various press reports.



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