

France: drumhead tribunals and threats of police state repression

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The French government's response to three nights of anti-police rioting in Paris's poorer north suburbs has been a ruthless assault on local inhabitants and on democratic rights. With 1,000 policemen already deployed against rioters, President Nicolas Sarkozy gave two bellicose speeches yesterday—one in front of 2,000 massed policemen at the corporate La Défense district, another on prime-time national television—threatening stiff jail terms for rioters and promising massive equipment purchases for police. At the same time, the courts are passing draconian sentences in drumhead tribunals against youth picked up by police on suburban streets, often on the flimsiest evidence.

The riots were sparked by the deaths of two youths in Villiers-le-Bel Sunday afternoon, in a collision between their motorbike and a police car. According to testimony of residents, the policemen fled the scene, leaving the two youths to die. The General Inspectorate of the National Police (IGPN) issued a report Monday largely clearing the police of responsibility, but the report itself was found to be in contradiction with a video of the accident and the accounts given by Villiers-le-Bel's inhabitants.

In Villiers-le-Bel and surrounding areas, still sectioned off by police after a night without rioting, inhabitants expressed their frustration. One of them told the daily *Le Monde*: "The police, this is all theater; they're coming here with weapons and ski masks." *Le Monde* carried disturbing pictures of policemen, inexplicably dressed as civilians and wearing ski masks, but carrying shotguns and assault rifles with infrared sights, guarding intersections.

Police surveillance helicopters, flying low, shone powerful headlights down on streets and buildings. One resident commented: "You'd think we were at war, they're provoking the youth." Another yelled, "Hey, you, extra-terrestrials!" at the circling helicopters.

Prime Minister François Fillon confirmed that the purpose of the deployment was to intimidate the population: "The situation is much more calm than the two previous nights, but all that remains, we well know, very fragile and we need a major dissuasive force in the area to prevent what

happened the previous night from re-occurring."

The identity of the youths dragged off the streets and given summary judgments in French courts confirms that what is taking place is not a crackdown on violent gangs, but the terrorizing of working-class youth from oppressed layers of the population. Thirty-nine youths are still being watched by police, according to the daily *Libération*, and eight have been judged so far.

Cédric is a part-time plumber finishing vocational school, with no police record. Accused of throwing Molotov cocktails at police, he said he "panicked" when he was caught in a volley of tear-gas grenades while walking home from his 20th birthday party and tried to escape by scaling a barricade. Prosecutors demanded that he be sentenced to 30 months in jail, causing "stupor in the courtroom," according to press accounts. Cédric's lawyer responded by pleading that the judge "only consider the actual contents of the case" against her client. Cédric received a one-year prison sentence without parole.

Two teenagers, Jean-Mathieu and Alan, one on a short-term contract as a shipping package preparer and another a part-time warehouse stocker, received three-month prison terms without parole for being found with packs of candy they said they found on the street. They were taken directly to prison from the arms of their parents. Neither one had a police record.

Noël, a 21-year old part-time security guard, was the only youth tried yesterday with a police record—for driving last year without proper auto insurance. The police accused him of torching cars with gasoline and "busying himself with the burning cars." The prosecutor announced, "The facts are clear," adding that "unless you subscribe to a massive conspiracy theory, there is no reason to doubt [police] accounts." Noël's lawyer pointed out that a burning car gives off powerful smells that "get into your hair, your clothes," whereas his client bore no such traces. Noël was the only accused youth to be released.

As one defense lawyer, Laurence Benitez de Lugo, told *Le Monde*: "There is a desire for a firm, immediate response

which is not arrived at serenely.” To speak more plainly, the French courts are carrying out politically-motivated show trials in a blatant assault on the democratic rights of the accused and, by extension, of the entire French population.

Sarkozy and his officials are deliberately stoking panic by slandering the inhabitants of Villiers-le-Bel, distorting the seriousness of the riots, and calling for drastic increases in police powers and equipment.

In an address to the nation on TF1 television’s prime-time 8 p.m. news bulletin, Sarkozy provocatively denied that there was any “social crisis” in the suburbs and claimed that recent events were the result of “hoodlum-ocracy.” He said that youth opposing police in Villiers-le-Bel were “drug traffickers.”

Sarkozy delivered similar comments in somewhat expanded form before an assembly of 2,000 policemen at La Défense in the west Paris suburbs. He said, “The right response to the riots is not more money on the taxpayers’ tab. The right response is to arrest the rioters.” Stressing that there was no social crisis in the suburbs, he demagogically attacked “those who would lecture us” about social issues but “don’t know what it’s like to be in uniform, facing rabid gangs.”

One can appreciate the level of shamelessness in Sarkozy’s comments by noting that, as of April 2007, his presidential campaign was on the record as supporting a “new Marshall Plan” for the poorer suburbs, a reference to the US financial assistance that helped rebuild Western European capitalism after World War II. Of course, being committed to budgetary austerity and appealing to the anti-immigrant vote, Sarkozy never seriously intended to carry out such a plan. However, the denial of elementary reality—that the poorer, immigrant suburbs in France house the most oppressed layers of the working class and face a massive social crisis—is a qualitatively new element of French politics.

Despite having recently succeeded in using the trade union bureaucracy to end a strike by rail and energy workers against pension cuts, Sarkozy’s regime faces a deteriorating political situation. According to a recent poll carried out by Sofrès for the conservative daily *Le Figaro*, Sarkozy’s approval rating has recently dipped below 50 percent for the first time in his presidency. The approval rating for his prime minister, François Fillon, has fallen to 44 percent.

Ruling circles are highly conscious of the fact that public sector resentment over salary and pension cuts extends to within the police force, and particularly the *gendarmerie* military police—who are responsible for policing rural areas, state security, and military police duties in foreign interventions of the French armed forces. As members of the military, the gendarmes are denied union representation.

However, several detachments of gendarmes participated in the November strikes against pension cuts. They also resent the fact that the police are substantially better paid.

In his speech at La Défense, Sarkozy promised to convene a “joint working group” to study how to “erase” the distinctions between police and *gendarmes*. However, his main method for appealing to the police forces was the promotion of hostility towards the suburbs and stoking an atmosphere of civil war.

Referring to the fact that several policemen were hit with pellets fired from hunting rifles belonging to unknown persons during the Villiers-le-Bel riots, Sarkozy promised the policemen that those who have “taken the responsibility of firing on public officials will find themselves before the Assizes”—France’s criminal courts.

He then called for a massive increase in the use of video-surveillance cameras, high-range flash-ball guns, and Taser electric guns. Making it sound as if every high-rise residential complex was firing on police, he added that surveillance helicopters would have been invaluable in finding “stocks of weapons on the roofs of apartment complexes,” and called for the purchase of more such helicopters.

There is a definite political logic to such inflammatory language. As far as Sarkozy’s patrons in French business circles are concerned, his task is to eliminate the social concessions granted to the French working class, which are hurting the competitiveness of French business and which his predecessors over the last decade tried but failed to fully dismantle. They are fully conscious of the powerful social tensions that such a policy will release.

Thus, shortly after Sarkozy’s election, economist Nicolas Baverez wrote in the right-wing *Revue des Deux Mondes*: “The 2007 election [won by Sarkozy] is the last opportunity, the last chance to modernize our country without a civil war.”

The government’s handling of the Villiers-le-Bel crisis should be taken as a signal that, in the face of growing political opposition to Sarkozy’s rule, the French ruling elite is increasingly considering the option of civil war against the population.



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