

French Socialist Party presidential candidate backs police in Toulouse shootings

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In a Europe 1 radio interview yesterday, Socialist Party (PS) presidential candidate François Hollande refused to make any political criticism of President Nicolas Sarkozy's handling of the shooting spree allegedly carried out by Mohammed Merah in Toulouse and Montauban.

The killings took place over nine days, between March 11 and 19, and resulted in the deaths of seven people, including three Jewish schoolchildren.

Hollande was forced to raise token criticisms of various aspects of the police investigations, as high-ranking intelligence officials have raised serious questions and made statements alleging that Merah was a French intelligence asset.

Highly irregular breakdowns in security, reminiscent of 9/11, were allowed by Sarkozy's trusted appointees in the security and police organizations. Despite Merah's frequent dealings with the police, he was allowed to continue his alleged rampage, apparently undetected, for 9 days. (See, "Reports indicate Toulouse gunman was French intelligence asset"). These questions include:

- Why did it take so long to identify and catch the killer?
- Why did police kill Merah in the assault on his flat last Thursday?
- What is the significance of Merah's long relationship with police intelligence chief Bernard Squarcini?

Hollande admitted that it would have been better to catch Merah alive and obtain information from him.

However, when interviewer Jean-Pierre Elkabbach asked Hollande about his public homage to the police unit that killed Merah, Hollande said he would do the same again: "The police did their job. I salute their work ... the police did their job remarkably."

When Elkabbach asked if Hollande wanted to comment on the political leadership that had overseen police operations, Hollande responded indignantly: "Do you really think that I'm going to get into that debate today, while the investigations are being made, about the judgment I will make of [Interior Minister Claude] Guéant? ... My responsibility is to ensure that France is protected."

Guéant supervised operations, in close contact with Sarkozy, and was therefore directly responsible for the decision to storm Merah's flat and kill him. Experts have suggested that this was unnecessary and that he could have been captured alive.

Hollande persisted in covering up for Sarkozy and his police henchmen. Asked if he thought that police made errors in their conduct of the case, he said that he would "demand full light be shed ... after the elections." He added, "I'm in no hurry."

Elkabbach reminded Hollande that he had previously pledged to remove Sarkozy's appointed police bosses, asking if, on taking power, he would remove the director general of the National Police, Frédéric Péchenard. He replied: "There's no reason to replace him straight away."

Of Bernard Squarcini, who faces accusations of illegally monitoring phone records of journalists investigating illicit financing of Sarkozy's 2007 election campaign, he said: "We will look into the functioning of his service."

Without criticising the vast increase in police powers to spy on the population and criminalise opposition, he asserted: "I do not wish to judge those who carried out the operation. ...What counts is to be able to make our surveillance and intelligence services more effective still."

With his sycophantic praise of Sarkozy's cops and

spies, Hollande is giving a green light to Sarkozy to exploit the killings to hijack the political agenda in the run-up to the elections, which are to be carried out amid an atmosphere of law-and-order hysteria benefiting Sarkozy. Hollande's decision not to challenge what approximates a political coup by Sarkozy is all the more remarkable, as the fallout from the Toulouse shootings is undermining Hollande's position in the elections.

Already this is reflected in the opinion polls: the second round voting intentions in December were 60 percent for Hollande and 40 percent for Sarkozy. Yesterday *Le Monde* reported that this lead had fallen to 53.5 percent for Hollande to 46.5 percent for Sarkozy, though the paper oddly claimed that the shootings had no impact on the election. A poll yesterday put Sarkozy ahead in the first round with 28 percent. Hollande was said to be trailing at 26.5 percent.

Rather than attempting to challenge Sarkozy's law-and-order offensive, Hollande tried to emphasize the extent to which the PS has also given extensive powers to police. He reminded his listeners that a law passed in 2001, under the PS-led Plural Left government of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, gave the state the right to spy on Internet users. This, he claimed was a key tool in locating Merah.

Hollande and the "left" of the French political establishment are deeply complicit in the anti-democratic law-and-order policies championed by Sarkozy, as well as his anti-worker social cuts. Sarkozy and the PS both rely on law-and-order rhetoric and the repressive powers of the police to suppress popular opposition to an unpopular political agenda of social cuts and war shared by both the social democratic "left" and the conservative right in Europe. This underlies Hollande's cowardly capitulation to Sarkozy and his henchmen.



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