Sarkozy proposes police measures after Toulouse shootings

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Yesterday the government of French President Nicolas Sarkozy proposed new anti-democratic laws ostensibly aimed at preventing terrorist actions by "lone wolves" or "self-radicalised" people acting outside organised groups. These measures would punish people for visiting "terrorist" web sites or traveling abroad to receive terrorist training.

La Dépêche reports: "According to the justice minister, the bill will punish people who visit 'habitually and without a legitimate purpose' sites which incite terrorism, just as it is now done in the fight against paedophiles.… We cannot let individuals, often young and impressionable, get saturated with images of beheading and incitement to hatred without reacting. Those who broadcast them should not enjoy impunity either."

Penalties, modelled on those in anti-paedophilia laws, could include up to two years in prison and €30,000 (US$40,000) in fines for "habitual visitors."

This comes amid an avalanche of anti-democratic measures against immigrants proposed after the shooting rampage of Mohamed Merah who, between March 11 and 19, allegedly killed three paratroopers, a rabbi and three Jewish school children in Toulouse and Montauban.

Sarkozy has also announced a 50 percent reduction of legal immigration and threatened to take France out of the Schengen passport-free zone if measures are not strengthened to prevent unwanted immigration from outside Europe and within. He has stated that no concessions would be made for minorities in school cafeterias with the option of halal or kosher food.

Sarkozy's anti-immigration campaign, coming shortly before the April 22 first round of the French presidential election, is to strengthen police powers against political opposition inside France, while poisoning the election campaign with law-and-order prejudices. There is deep opposition in the working class to Sarkozy's social policies: public spending has been further reduced, social rights have been destroyed and unemployment rose sharply. Sarkozy is seeking to turn the election around in the last weeks of the campaign.

The immediate effect of the Toulouse killing on opinion polls was for Sarkozy to catch up with Socialist Party (PS) candidate François Hollande and overtake him as the projected winner of the first round. The latest polls give the president 29.5 percent of the vote against Hollande's 29 percent—though the PS candidate's lead in a second-round match-up with Sarkozy is still comfortable, from around 54 percent to 46 percent.

Above all, however, the law gives the state immense powers to criminalize people who are doing no more than visiting web sites or traveling to Muslim countries. The definition of "terrorism" itself being notoriously vague and subject to political manipulation by police authorities, it paves the way for the criminalization of entirely legitimate travel and Internet browsing.

Sarkozy's exploitation of the Merah affair to push such draconian legislation raises further questions about the highly suspicious conditions under which he carried out the killings. Although a police informer and under close surveillance, Merah managed to continue his alleged murders for nine days, undisturbed by the security forces. (See "Reports indicate Toulouse gunman was French intelligence asset")

He could not stand trial and explain his relations with French security because he was killed in what amounted to a state execution supervised by Sarkozy's interior minister Claude Guéant and the president's internal intelligence director, Bernard Squarcini, who

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ordered the storming of Merah's flat on March 22.

Another reason for exploiting the Toulouse tragedy to stigmatise immigrants and Muslims is to provide a justification for the explosion of French neo-colonial militarism. Opinion polls show that the majority of the French population opposes the occupation of Afghanistan and also rejects the war against Libya. Nevertheless the French ruling class is backing pro-Western forces against the Syrian regime, threatening Iran and considering support of a military intervention in Mali.

Immediately after the death of Merah, Sarkozy pressed home his advantage. In highly publicised actions, aided by a media feeding frenzy, he prevented at least six Muslim clerics and lecturers from entry into France to attend events organised by official, state-recognised Muslim organisations. Police arrested some 30 "suspects", most of whom were quickly released because there was no evidence against them.

The PS completely capitulated to the attempted political coup, joining Sarkozy in a call for national unity and criticizing him from the right. Hollande accused him of being lax on security and promised to outdo him if elected.

On the proposed criminalization of people visiting web sites, the PS focused in its response on criticizing the measures for not being effective enough against terrorists, leaving aside the question of the deeply anti-democratic character of the law itself. The PS's "security expert," Senator François Rebsamen, claimed the project might "prove useless, inefficient, even possibly counterproductive."

Hollande said, "The stakes are too serious to legislate in a hurry, without measuring the consequences of their actions and their effectiveness."

He always refutes accusations of being soft on immigration questions by affirming his law-and-order credentials. He told France 2 TV on March 16, "There'll be a brigade specialised in the struggle against the organised trafficking of illegal immigrants. There's where we must act."

The PS and its petty-bourgeois "left" supporters—the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), or the Left Front of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, which includes his Left Party (PG) and the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF)—are incapable of seriously opposing Sarkozy's new, anti-democratic laws. They have all supported the law-and-order measures Sarkozy used to whip up chauvinist sentiment. These include laws banning the Muslim headscarf in school and the burqa in all public spaces, as well as Sarkozy's war in Libya.

Though he denounced the "rantings of the Le Pen family" in a March 28 speech in Lille after the Toulouse killings, Mélenchon also supports the imperialist policies that underlie far-right, law-and-order politics inside France. In the same speech in Lille, he made a protectionist call for social and environmental visas at the borders of Europe. Mélenchon voted in the European Parliament in favour of the NATO intervention in Libya.

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