

The state of emergency and the collapse of French democracy

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The measures being taken by the government of President François Hollande in response to Friday's terrorist attacks in Paris constitute an unprecedented attack on democratic rights.

The Socialist Party (PS) government has declared a state of emergency and mobilized more than 100,000 security personnel throughout the country, including regular police, gendarmes, paramilitary riot police and military forces. It is impossible to walk the streets of any major city without running into individuals decked out in camouflage or dressed in black, toting automatic rifles. These paramilitary forces have been given the power to raid any home and arrest or kill anyone declared a threat, with no opposition from within the political or media establishment.

Now Hollande is proposing to amend the French Constitution to allow the president to decree emergency rule, extendable indefinitely, and vastly expand the powers granted to the army and police. The proposal, published online, provides the legal basis for transforming France into a presidential dictatorship.

The existing 1955 law grants the president and the security forces far-ranging powers during a state of emergency. They can carry out warrantless searches and seizures, impose curfews and ban public assemblies, detain and order the house arrest of anyone "whose activity proves dangerous to security and public order," and dissolve any organization linked to people under house arrest that "participates in, facilitates or incites" disturbances of public order.

The changes introduced by the Socialist Party's constitutional amendment make the law even more ominous. President Hollande has declared that he intends to renew it as long as France faces a threat from any terrorist group similar to ISIS, i.e., for an indefinite period of time.

An examination of the amendment makes clear, however, that the measures are not about fighting ISIS, which in any case emerged from the NATO powers' own policy of sponsoring Islamist militias as proxy forces to wage war for regime-change in Syria. The horrific attacks in Paris are the pretext for implementing dictatorial measures that cannot be rationally explained by the threat posed by ISIS.

Under the cover of fighting ISIS, the French state is giving itself absolute powers against anyone it calls a threat to "security and public order." This vague, all-embracing category has long been used against the constitutionally-protected right to strike and protest—as in the Socialist Party's decision last year to ban protests against the Israeli state's war in Gaza.

The legal changes introduced by the PS document effectively make any expression of oppositional sentiment potential grounds for arrest. Instead of allowing police to detain persons whose "activity proves dangerous for public security and order," the amended law allows them to detain anyone "who gives reason to believe that his behavior constitutes a threat to security and public order." The PS explains that this allows police to target "people who attracted the attention of police or intelligence services by their behavior, friendships, statements, or plans."

The implications of these proposals are immense. To arrest and detain someone, police will have to do no more than assert that they believe that this person might conceivably disturb public order at some future time, based on something this person said or posted on social media, or on someone with whom he associated.

A statement suggesting sympathy with calls for strike action against a wage cut or factory closure, for a protest against war, or for any number of legal activities would be grounds for detention and house arrest.

It is worth recalling that the law the PS is now proposing to expand was drafted in 1955 to provide the legal framework for France to carry out mass torture and repression in a failed attempt to crush the Algerian people's struggle for independence in the 1954-1962 war against French colonial rule. This brutal war cost the lives of between 250,000 and 400,000 Algerians. It anticipated and fed into deep social tensions within France that erupted in the general strike of May-June 1968.

The current moves to effectively dismantle democratic rights in France are motivated by a similar crisis of class rule. First, as its ultimately unsuccessful attempt to ban last year's Gaza war protests showed, the PS government is desperate to suppress all opposition to the militarist policies of French imperialism. In the aftermath of the Paris attacks, Hollande has moved rapidly to expand France's bombing campaign in Syria, part of the efforts of the French ruling class to assert its interests on a world stage.

Second, bourgeois democracy can no longer handle and adjudicate the immense and increasingly uncontrollable social tensions of contemporary capitalist society. In all of the advanced capitalist countries, including France, the state is controlled by tiny, super-wealthy elites who view rising discontent among broad masses of workers with hatred and fear.

The Hollande government epitomizes the domination of the financial aristocracy. Elected on promises that "austerity was not our destiny," Hollande soon proved to be a pro-austerity politician presiding over surging unemployment and a "zero growth" economy.

The PS turned to a strategy of trying to divert social opposition to reactionary domestic policies by means of a foreign policy based on militarism and war. As Hollande launched a war in Mali in 2013, one official told *Le Point* that the PS hoped it would be their version of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's Falkland Islands war: a "military adventure that ensured her re-election in 1983." Wars across France's old colonial empire, however, have only contributed to the growing social tensions within France.

The political dynamic in France is mirrored in every major capitalist country. Since the "war on terror" began in 2001, governments throughout the world, led by the United States, have sought to erode and dismantle basic democratic rights. They have

participated in the "extraordinary rendition" of prisoners for torture, mass warrantless wiretapping and extra-judicial drone murder. The domestic deployment of heavily-armed military units is now common.

From the police suppression of the 2011 youth riots in London to last year's heavily-armed crackdown on protests against the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, these measures are ever more clearly directed at the suppression of class struggle.

There is virtually no constituency for the defense of democratic rights within the political or corporate establishment. That task falls to the working class, which retains a deep commitment to democratic principles. However, there is no room for political complacency. The ruling class is moving very far with dictatorial measures to deal with internal crises for which it has no solution.

The defense of democratic rights and opposition to police-state forms of rule must be rooted in the independent political mobilization of the working class, based on a struggle against imperialist war and social inequality and their source in the capitalist system.



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