

French National Assembly overwhelmingly backs extension of police-state measures

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The National Assembly, the lower house of France's parliament, voted overwhelmingly Thursday to approve a three-month extension of the state of emergency declared by French President François Hollande in the wake of the November 13 Paris terror attacks.

The legislation enables warrantless searches and seizures, the detention of individuals without an indictment, and bans on demonstrations and protests, and suspends freedom of association.

The bill authorizes the placing under house arrest, and tracking with a location device, of "any person with respect to whom there are serious reasons to believe that his behavior is a threat to safety and public order." Notably, there is no reference to terrorism anywhere in the bill. All of its provisions are couched in the language of preserving "public order," meaning that any organization suspected by the police forces to be opposed to their interests, including political parties and workers' organizations, may be targeted for warrantless state repression.

The legislation passed the lower house by an overwhelming majority of 551 votes for and six votes against, with one abstention. Every major parliamentary grouping and party, including the ruling Socialist Party (PS) and the Greens, voted overwhelmingly for the measures.

Significantly, every single deputy of the Left Front, which includes the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) and the Left Party (PG) of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, voted in support of the measure. The three PS and three Green deputies who voted against represented tiny fractions of their respective parliamentary voting blocs.

Bruno le Roux, the leader of the Socialist, Radical, Citizen and Miscellaneous Left voting bloc in the National Assembly, spoke in support of the measure on the floor of parliament: "I think French people are

ready for a certain, totally relative restriction of liberties, that is controlled and limited to a specific timeframe."

The unanimity of the vote expresses the fact that there exists within the political establishment no constituency for the preservation of fundamental democratic rights.

The human rights organization Amnesty International issued a statement on the police-state measures being imposed in France, warning that "the emergency powers currently being rushed through parliament provide for a sweeping extension of executive powers at the expense of essential human rights safeguards."

"Time and again we have seen emergency measures extended and codified until they become part and parcel of the ordinary law, chipping steadily away at human rights," said John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International's Director of Europe and Central Asia.

The legislation constitutes one part of the sweeping expansion of police-state measures proposed by Hollande in the wake of the November 13 attacks. Hollande has called for a subsequent vote to amend the French constitution to further enshrine police state powers, by allowing the president to rule France indefinitely in a permanent stage of emergency.

Under Law no. 55-385, created in 1955 during France's war with Algeria, the president may declare a state of emergency for up to 12 days, with a longer period requiring parliamentary authorization.

Hollande has called separately for measures for stripping the citizenship of dual nationals convicted of terrorism and the creation of "de-radicalization centers" for Muslim youth.

French Prime Minister Manuel Valls praised the legislation as "the fast response of a democracy faced with barbarism," adding: "This is the effective legal response in the face of an ideology of chaos." He said

that the measures were “modern and effective tools to fight the terrorist threat.”

The new emergency powers follow the massive expansion of state spying authority in June in the aftermath of the attacks on the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*.

Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel called on Belgium’s parliament to pass similar measures, which would allow state authorities to force anyone on its terror watch list, which currently includes some 800 people, to wear ankle bracelets. Michel also proposed the mandatory registration of all passengers boarding high-speed trains and planes, and the expansion of warrantless searches.

The vote came as the massive police crackdown in France and Belgium continued unabated. Under the authority granted by the state of emergency declared by Hollande on Friday, French authorities have carried out 414 raids and made 60 arrests, only some of which were connected to the November 13 attacks. Police in Belgium have carried out some 200 more raids since Friday, bringing the total number of raids in the two countries to over 600.

French authorities confirmed Thursday that the alleged leader of the attacks, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, was one of two people killed in a massive police and military raid that put the Paris suburb of St. Denis on lockdown Wednesday.

The raid, in which the police fired over 5,000 bullets, left Abaaoud’s body so riddled with bullet and explosion wounds that he had to be identified through fingerprint analysis. One other person died in the raid.

The police crackdown was accompanied by an escalation of the French combat mission in Syria. Hollande announced an “intensification,” or “surge,” of airstrikes against Islamic State targets in Syria and Iraq after a defense council meeting. Earlier Thursday, Peter de Villiers, the French Army Chief of Staff, met with his Russian counterpart Valeri Guerassimov to discuss a “coordination” of French and Russian military operations.

French officials, who sealed the country’s borders in the wake of Friday’s attack, called on other European nations to implement similar repressive measures against refugees.

“Every country, especially those bordering France, needs to assume its responsibilities,” French Prime

Minister Manuel Valls said Thursday.

The Paris attacks have been seized upon by governments throughout Europe and North America to promote a further crackdown on refugees and xenophobic attacks on Muslims. On Thursday, the US House of Representatives passed a bill that would significantly curtail the admission of refugees into the United States.

On Wednesday, David A. Bowers, the mayor of Roanoke, Virginia, approvingly invoked America’s history of interning Japanese Americans in concentration camps during the Second World War and indicated that similar measures are called for today. Donald Trump, the frontrunner for the Republican presidential nomination, said Thursday that he would not rule out forcing Muslims to carry identification documents indicating their religion.



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