

French government prepared coup if Le Pen won presidential election

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According to an extraordinary report published yesterday in *L'Obs* magazine, top members of France's Socialist Party (PS) government prepared to launch a coup d'état if Marine Le Pen of the neo-fascist National Front (FN) won the May 7 presidential run-off.

The purpose of the coup was not to keep Le Pen from taking office. Rather, it was designed to crush left-wing protests against Le Pen's victory, impose martial law, and install Le Pen in power in an enforced alliance with a PS-led government.

"No one dared imagine what would happen the day after the run-off if Marine Le Pen won. A social explosion could be expected," wrote *L'Obs*. It explained, "The strategists who conceived this plan B supposed that after the National Front victory, the country would be on the verge of chaos: state of shock, Republican demonstrations, but above all extreme violence, especially coming from the ultra left."

"The plan was never written down black on white, but everything was really ready," *L'Obs* wrote. "Its execution was so precisely planned that a handful of members of the government, chiefs of staff, and top state officials can still describe it from memory, step by step. ... To be sure of the details, *L'Obs* verified its report with three different sources in the outgoing government and in institutions of the state."

The plan reportedly entailed launching massive police operations to put France on lockdown, and a PS power grab set into motion by a refusal of Prime Minister Bernard Cazeneuve to step down. A top state official involved in the plan told *L'Obs*, "The country would have been totally shut down. The government would have had only one priority: ensuring the security of the state."

To be clear, this signifies the imposition of a police-

military dictatorship in France. Basic democratic rights are already suspended under the terms of the PS government's state of emergency, which has been perpetually extended since it was first imposed after the November 13, 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris. Police are authorized to arbitrarily detain individuals, ban protests and consign individuals to house arrest. The plan clearly entailed the full use of these powers to impose martial law and permanently suspend the normal functioning of the state.

Police authorities in each of France's 100 departments had been in contact with the Interior Ministry to prepare for a post-election crisis. These discussions indicated that police were "afraid" of the situation after a Le Pen victory, *L'Obs* writes, citing a domestic intelligence memo already reported in *Le Parisien*: "Far-left movements that are more or less rooted in the population will doubtless try to organize protests, some of which could lead to serious disturbances."

As these discussions were unfolding, *L'Obs* reports, police officials and police trade unions were demanding total freedom to use potentially deadly weapons against protesters, apparently including stun grenades and rubber bullets. "The instructions given not to use one or another weapon have become intolerable," wrote one police trade union official.

Within the state machine itself, Cazeneuve's refusal to step down was intended to "freeze the political situation," according to one of the sources of *L'Obs* and, exploiting a loophole in the French constitution, launch a constitutional coup against the newly elected president.

"At first," *L'Obs* writes, "it was planned that the head of government would not submit his resignation. Of course, for a prime minister to remain in his position is

contrary to Republican tradition, but his resignation is not in fact imposed by the constitution. In the next step, the parliament would be assembled in extraordinary session. A date was even chosen: May 11. The agenda would have been the national crisis provoked by the violence that followed the elections. The deputies would have been asked to give the government a vote of confidence.”

In short, the National Assembly would have been told to give a pseudo-legal stamp of approval to a coup hatched by the police and intelligence services behind the backs of the French people. This transitional government was to last as least as far as the legislative elections of June 11 and 18, assuming that the new authorities would have allowed those to proceed.

What *L'Obs* is describing would have been the most serious suspension of normal democratic procedures in France by the security forces since the Algerian war, when officers loyal to the Algerian colonial lobby seized power in Algiers in May 1958. They then launched a coup, Operation Resurrection, to topple the government in Paris. General Charles de Gaulle stepped in, seized power and ordered his supporters to rewrite the French constitution, laying the basis for France's current Fifth Republic.

The media silence on this report in *L'Obs* yesterday evening was deafening, even though the magazine is a well-respected publication, and there is little reason to doubt its reporting. However, the report has the most far-reaching political implications and immediately raises serious questions about the administration of incoming President Emmanuel Macron.

Are there other scenarios besides the election of Le Pen in which the police and intelligence agencies would suspend constitutional rule and impose martial law?

If the Interior Ministry now treats as existential threats all left-wing protests at which violence might occur—whether by protesters or by police provocateurs—are similar plans being made to repress protests that will erupt against Macron's policies, whether on war or social austerity? Will police react to constitutionally protected rights to strike and protest with attempts to suspend constitutional rule and install a dictatorship?

The quarter century of relentless austerity in France and across the European Union (EU) since the Stalinist

dissolution of the Soviet Union has profoundly transformed European capitalism. As economic inequality and social anger reach unprecedented levels, the old political and social relations are breaking down. The brutal repression of protests against the unpopular PS labour law, imposed without a parliamentary vote amid the longest-running state of emergency in France's history, is a sign that French democracy is in an advanced state of collapse.

Under these conditions, the attempts to downplay the significance of the *L'Obs* story by PS officials contacted by the magazine, as well as by *L'Obs* itself, are complacent and false. Their assurances that the planned operation was constitutional and would have rapidly led to a restoration of the normal functioning of the Fifth Republic are not worth the paper they are printed on.

Outgoing PS Prime Minister Bernard Cazeneuve himself has given credibility to the *L'Obs* story of a coup plot by the PS, as he said he had “no intention to desert the front at Matignon [Palace, the prime minister's residence] if Marine Le Pen won the presidential election.” Contacted by *L'Obs* about the coup plot, his staff said he had “never ever mentioned such a plan” to them.

As for *L'Obs* itself, it insisted that the coup plan was constitutional. Taking as good coin the coup plotters' assurances that they would have handed over power, the magazine concludes that it would have led to a “brief interim period without precedent in the history of the Republic.”

In fact, if the police-intelligence apparatus attempted to put such plans into effect, they would be openly breaking with the constitutional order and paving the way for an even more extended break of the ruling class with democratic forms of rule. It would be a prelude to a violent confrontation with the working class, where there is still a profound commitment to democratic rights.



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