

The Repression of France's Yellow Vests Has Left Hundreds in Jail — And Crushed Freedom of Protest

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Two years since the start of France's *gilets jaunes* movement, hundreds of arrested protesters are languishing in prison, and dozens are still coping with the loss of an eye or a limb. The Macron administration's brutal crackdown brought a level of police violence not seen in decades — and dramatically reduced the right to protest.

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It was like a gory movie, every Saturday on TV, with limbs torn off, people having an eye put out.” For lawyer Arié Alimi, the state response to the *gilets jaunes* demonstrations was a shocking display of police brutality. The movement protesting Emmanuel Macron's neoliberal government met with “a level of police violence previously unseen in modern French history,” confirms Amnesty International's Anne-Sophie Simpère.

When the *gilets jaunes* revolt began on November 17, 2018, with hundreds of thousands of people taking to barricades and roundabouts across France, police had initially seemed overwhelmed. “I thought it was the revolution,” says Youri, sitting with a group of fellow leftist activists from Montreuil, eastern Paris. His comrade Julien remembers a Paris deserted by the police: “There was no more state, the street was ours, not a cop in sight; we could roam through the whole city, we thought we were hallucinating.”

But if in the very first days of the movement the authorities vacillated, before long they turned to crude repression. Week after week over the next year and more, the *gilets jaunes* took to the streets — and the police met them with increasing brutality. “Only” one person was killed, but hundreds were left with serious, even permanent, injuries; over eleven thousand people were arrested; and at least several hundred are still in jail. Through their response, French authorities introduced new norms of judicial repression — both dramatically and permanently restricting the room for democratic protest.

“Worse Than May ’68”

The protests that began two years ago were initially triggered by a planned fuel tax hike. At first, the participants mainly came from less urban areas, where cars are essential means of transportation for many working people. The local roundabout blockage became the meeting point for dissatisfied citizens, donning the yellow vests obligatory for road users (but also many workers), while massive Saturday demonstrations took place in the cities.

Antoine got involved in the local *gilets jaunes* protest in a small town in eastern France. For him, the protest was “definitely against the tax and the hit to purchasing power, but it extended to issues of democracy, local empowerment, and fiscal inequalities. It was not anti-capitalist as such, but anti-capitalist views from people like me were well received.”

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Faced with the sheer scale of the revolt, Youri remembers the cops being “completely overwhelmed” in Paris on December 1, 2018: “For me, this was our window of opportunity, something big could have happened that day.” But he also thinks that this was the moment when the government understood that it faced a genuine uprising: “When they were overwhelmed on December 8 as well, you could already see that they had activated everything to crush it — not just the police, but also their media machine.”

Louise recalls how the media sought to delegitimize the protests by painting them as dominated by the far right and the white middle classes. She nonetheless went out to form her own opinion, at the first protests in Paris. “Many of them were at their first demonstration. They felt completely legitimate to demonstrate, and they were chanting for the police to join. But when they were stopped, they were outraged.” Indeed, the repression was about to intensify.

Asymmetrical Violence

“The police forces’ violent reaction was completely disproportionate,” lawyer Arié Alimi tells me over the phone — emphasizing that the *gilets jaunes* mostly attacked objects, while the police attacked people. For seventeen years an ardent defender of victims of police brutality, he talks with indignation about the “thousands and thousands of people injured, with considerable physical and psychological traumas.” Advocacy officer on civil liberties at Amnesty International, Anne-Sophie Simpère agrees, describing the police reaction as “illegitimate, unnecessary, and completely disproportionate.” She calls the events in December 2018 a rapid “intensification of previously existing, worrying trends in the policing of demonstrations” — citing the use of weapons and a switch from crowd control to aggressive arrests that cause serious injuries.

According to the “[Désarmons-les](#)” (“Let’s Disarm Them”) collective, French police maimed almost as many people in the first six months of the *gilets jaunes* movement as they had in the last twenty years. The main serious injuries were eyes being put out (twenty-four) and hands torn off (five), mostly because of the massive use of weapons classified as war weapons, such as flash-balls and sting-ball grenades. Zineb Redouane, an eighty-year-old woman, was also killed by the police, as a tear gas grenade exploded during a protest in Marseille; in her final hours, she claimed that she had been targeted on purpose. Another 284 head injuries were reported among protesters as well as journalists, who were also often attacked by police.

Another major urban center of the movement was Toulouse, southwest France, where Pascal Gassiot took part in almost all demonstrations as a member of the independent “Observatory of Police Practices.” He tells me that “the level of violence was extremely high, with a striking asymmetry in the police response.” Despite wearing recognizable clothing and standing to one side, observers were attacked twenty-seven times by police in Toulouse; four of them ended up in the hospital, including Gassiot himself. “There is absolutely no doubt that they were doing it on purpose,” he tells me: “I was filming a protester being charged over nothing, and I didn’t see the [Brigade anti-criminalité] coming in, with one of them tackling me to the ground.” With his head cracked open and two broken ribs, Gassiot had to be taken to the emergency room. He nonetheless soon returned to his work.

For Gassiot, the police violence obeyed the political strategy of a government full of “class contempt” for rural, lower-middle-class, and poor protesters. “They thought they’d strike a good blow on their mug, and these plebs would go back in their hole,” he sarcastically notes. A veteran radical left activist, the sixty-five-year-old has no doubt that “police violence is on a level unseen since the 1970s, worse than May ’68” when France was on the brink of revolution. “It was like the war in Algeria, but without the dead,” he says — drawing parallels with the state violence of sixty years ago, when police killed dozens, if not hundreds, of Algerians and French communists on the streets of Paris during the colonial war in Algeria.

Bringing the War Home

The infamous Brigade anti-criminalité (BAC) best illustrates this gradual importation of methods of colonial policing into the French mainland, moving first into the banlieues — the working-class suburbs heavily populated by people with a migrant background — and finally extending them across the whole population. As Alimi stresses, it was a former senior civil servant in the colonies who set up these brigades in Paris and its suburbs in the early 1970s. “The BAC were brigades created specifically for Algerian migrant populations,” he explains.

In addition to police brutality, the state moved in to curtail the movement with mass arrests of thousands, judicial harassment, and illegal tactics.

Alimi invokes the long history of police violence against the workers’ movement, saying that we should properly speak of “contemporary police violence, with new methods.” For him, “the working-class suburbs were a laboratory for new practices of police repression introduced by the BAC, with new arrest techniques, permanent control, racial profiling, and new weapons like the flash-balls and grenades. . . . The poor migrant populations were guinea pigs for those methods, that then spread to political activists, social movements, and now to protesters in city centers.” The main architect of this shift was Nicolas Sarkozy, interior minister when he replaced neighborhood police with intervention units like the BAC in 2003, before becoming president in 2007.

“We saw all those things happening long before, in the banlieues: the eyes put out, the serious injuries,” confirms Simpère. She also singles out the BAC as part of a shift in policing from crowd control to a harder, conflictual approach. “There used to be a certain tolerance for disorder,” she says, “but now there is a ‘zero tolerance’ approach, and the BAC itself triggers clashes with demonstrators.” Gassiot also recalls a time when police forces would take cobblestones without batting an eye. “The philosophy back then was that the reaction shouldn’t cause more damage than non-reaction.” He contrasts that with the BAC today, calling them “a bunch of hooligans.” “They jump in the middle of demonstrations to seize banners, like trophies in medieval battles, and provoke clashes; that has nothing to do with crowd control,” he insists.

“State Illegality”

In addition to police brutality, the state moved in to curtail the movement with mass arrests of thousands, judicial harassment, and illegal tactics. Simpère speaks of “very repressive laws that allow almost anyone, including peaceful demonstrators, to be arrested, often ‘preventatively.’” More specifically, she points out the use of two vaguely defined laws that she considers contrary to international law: one punishing the “preparation of group violence,” under which many people with protective gear like goggles have faced judicial persecution; and one forbidding “contempt toward police forces,” used more than twenty thousand times in 2019 alone. She cites the case of protesters in Narbonne prosecuted for this offense, simply because they had a banner denouncing the severe injuries caused by flash-balls.

In early December 2018, the authorities started to widely disregard their own laws. Alimi calls it “state illegality,” a concept he plans to elaborate in an upcoming book: “The state itself becomes criminal,” he explains, “as its representatives decide to deliberately violate the law to prevent the expression of civil liberties.” In addition to mass preventive arrests and illegal searches, he names the case of a state prosecutor calling on his substitutes to keep people in custody for the maximum length in order to prevent them from demonstrating, despite having no evidence against them. “France shifted from a justice system that punishes actions to a justice system that punishes intentions,” he says.

This judicial repression has led to unprecedented numbers of arrests, with more than eleven thousand detained and more than three thousand convicted. “The courts were working like a production line,” recalls Gassiot, “with speedy trials on Mondays for those arrested on Saturdays.” Alimi counts about seven hundred to eight hundred *gilets jaunes* currently in jail — and he has himself defended many of those arrested. “They have been victims of an incomparable judicial violence and discrimination; they’ve been treated like animals,” he says. Unusually for France, even people with no criminal records were sentenced to jail time. “They were lower-middle-class people endangered by poverty; they were simply trying to keep their head above water, but they were pushed down — and drowned.”

Police Impunity

This swift and merciless justice against the *gilets jaunes* contrasted with the lack of judicial reaction to police brutality. Despite the thousands of acts of violence against protesters — many of them proven by solid video evidence — the available information reveals that only seven police officers have been convicted. All of them received suspended sentences, with no discharge. Simpère describes the cases as “largely symbolic,” expressing her “serious doubt that there will be sentences corresponding to the seriousness of injuries.” Alimi is less diplomatic, calling the few convictions “crumbs thrown to the people to calm popular anger.”

During the first months of the crisis, as blood was being spilled every week, the government maintained a hard line in denying the existence of police violence, even refusing to use the word. Challenged on the issue by a citizen during a debate in March 2019, President Emmanuel Macron snapped back: “Do not talk about repression and police violence — those words are unacceptable in a state with the rule of law!” According to widely respected French daily [Le Monde](#), citing insider sources, this unshakable political support for repression came from a genuine fear in December 2018 that rank-and-file police might abandon their post — and let the uprising prevail.

While the climate of police impunity might be linked to the high political stakes, my interviewees note that this lack of accountability has been pervasive for decades. The “police of the police” — the infamous Inspection Générale de la Police Nationale (IGPN) — is widely derided as a “whitewashing machine,” systematically clearing up on behalf of its colleagues. Simpère points out that “there is a clear conflict of interests when police officers have to monitor other police officers, and also when magistrates who are working in close collaboration with the police are the ones who are supposed to lead investigations against the police.”

In a cynical twist, this year’s second anniversary of the movement is marked by government plans to pass a new ‘Global Security Law’ which will greatly extend police powers.

Alimi goes further, stressing the whole systemic structure enabling police impunity in France. He says it starts with police officers and their hierarchy “who never acknowledge any act of violence and put into place a set of dissimulation measures every time there is any violence, including the systematic faking of official reports.” He then goes on to point out the lack of judicial independence in France, where “prosecutors are under the authority of the Justice Ministry, and see themselves as protecting public order, which leads them to protect the police.” This translates into prosecutors lying and blocking inquiries, among other things, by reacting more than thirty days after events, once footage from public cameras has already been erased.

Despite facing this “judicial wall,” Alimi says that amateur videos are changing the game. His team has imported techniques from groups like Black Lives Matter, making online calls for videos and witnesses. “Those videos have shattered the administration’s lies and have revealed dissimulation techniques.” As for judges, Alimi also points out that some are starting to recognize the need for real investigations into police work, but he says that it is too early to make an honest appraisal of investigations into police violence against the *gilets jaunes*. “We will know in two to three years,” he says, “then we can make a final assessment of those investigations, and maybe even talk about a transformation of the approach to police violence.”

A Cynical Commemoration

In a cynical twist, this year’s second anniversary of the movement is marked by government plans to pass a new “Global Security Law” which will greatly extend police powers. It also wants to ban the circulation of images of police interventions, if this “aims to cause physical or psychological harm” to officers. In practice, such a catch-all restriction will block any circulation of amateur videos of the police. The law also stipulates a dramatic extension of police rights to surveil, including the deployment of drones. “We’re moving toward an authoritarian democracy, where the state can see without being seen, where state violence is tolerated despite being illegal,” says Alimi.

As for the *gilets jaunes*, police repression severely broke the back of the movement in the first six months. Yet protests continued even afterward, building ties with other social struggles, like in recent demonstrations against the pension reform or alongside health care workers. Yet a climate of fear established by the government has dissuaded many from demonstrating. As Julien says: “It’s freaky when you’re at a demonstration and you hear the distinctive smacks of flash-balls; people start panicking.”

But today, on the two-year anniversary of the movement, the activists I spoke to will be in the streets to demonstrate against new repressive laws. When I ask them for an overall assessment of the movement where many of them met, they tell me: “It was beautiful!” “Yes,” Louise jumps in, “and it’s still going on!”

André Kapsas

P.S.

- Jacoin. 11.17.2020:
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/11/gilets-jaunes-yellow-vests-protests-france-police-brutality>

Activists indicated by first name only have been given pseudonyms.

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