

France: the Pandemic and Black Lives Matter

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On Saturday 13 June, a street demonstration against police violence and racism will take place in Paris. The call comes from the *Comité Adama Traoré*, from the name of this young black who died in 2017 with suspicion of chokehold by police. Tragically, Adama Traoré's last words were, while being pinned down on the ground by three gendarmes: "I can't breathe'.

Saturday demonstration will come a few days after that a massive meeting before the Palace of Justice, Paris, also organised by the *Comité Adama* gathered tens of thousands of people, most of them young, many of them descendants of immigrants. Similar demonstrations took place in many France's large cities.

There is no doubt that French young people, in particular those living in suburbs of the large cities are in the process of a massive mobilisation. A leverage for this mobilisation is the international solidarity with what happens in the US. The sister of Traore, Assa Traoré, told protesters that "what's happening in the US has shone a light on what's happening in France". Those committed to international solidarity, an inherent component of the working class, should appreciate the turning point in the world conjuncture reflected in the chain of demonstrations against racism throughout the world.

Police and military as the backbone of the political power

Universality of societies confronted with racism still goes through national peculiarities between countries. In France, the overcentralized, Bonapartist regime heavily draws upon military and police institutions. Since the Paris attack on 2015, France has been living under permanent state of emergency that corrodes civic liberties [1]. Incidentally, the two constitutional watchdogs, the Council of State and the Constitutional Council [2] validated the aggravation of restrictions in individual freedoms by comparison with the law passed in 1955 on the state of emergency (during the Algerian war). And, confronted with an uninterrupted series of mass street demonstrations (yellow vests) and social strikes (against the pension reform and by healthcare workers against the destruction of the public health system), the government was fully dependant on police to contain protesters. The violence of police against demonstrators was so high, including permanent injuries for victims that protests came from the Commissioner for Human Rights, the European Parliament and UN Human right experts.

French police has a long record of xenophobic attitude. The most tragic event - not to speak of the Vichy police which did the job of rounding Jews and transferred them to Germans - was on 17 October 1961, when Paris police chief Maurice Papon ordered police to crack down on thousands of Algerian protesters. Dozens of bodies were later pulled from the River Seine. Papon was a former high civil servant serving during the Vichy regime but de Gaulle was complacent enough to appoint him as Prefect of police (Papon was later awarded very important ministerial jobs) .

In the 1961 mass slaughter and in dozens of other cases of deaths following police interventions in

the last decades, a total impunity has been the rule. Meanwhile, the police became more extreme-right oriented (according to polls, almost 60% of policemen/women vote for Le Pen's *Rassemblement national*).

"We are at war" Macron repeated six times in his 'speech to French citizens' when he declared the country's lockdown (March 16, 2020). It is not only rhetoric. The "state of health emergency" that the government now strives to maintain until October, has been accompanied by a further centralisation based on the military institution. The Council of defence convenes a small set of key ministers and of course the Chief of the Defence Staff (the head of armed forces). The Council of defence, chaired by the President, takes decisions which then are ratified by the Council of ministers, which meets just after [3]. Moreover, that the role of Parliament is further weakened by the state of health emergency reflects the structural asymmetry existing in France between the executive and legislative body. Checks and balance, a basic attribute of a parliamentary democracy, hardly exist in France's 5th Republic.

Economic distress and political crisis

According to OECD and EU forecasts, France will be severely hit country by the post-pandemic crisis. The official (and largely underestimated) 2019 high rate of unemployment (8.1%) is expected to increase to 11.8% in 2021 [4]. Social unrest will increase in next months, combining on-going social protests from healthcare workers with mobilisation of other sections of the working class hurt by layoffs.

The most worrying for the government is still the eruption of the young generation on the political scene, because their demands directly challenges the deeper nature of France's state institutions and how bleak are their prospects if nothing changes.

French police and military institutions have become more essential to the preservation of social relations in the last years. The last Tuesday declaration made by the Minister of Interior that a 'zero tolerance for racism' should be tolerated in the police is a rhetorical claim made in an attempt to defuse the anger of the young people. It still infuriated police unions, which are fully supported by their top management. Yesterday, they have publicly said that they do not trust their minister any longer. It is likely that the Minister, a very close ally to Macron, will be forced to resign in coming weeks.

A political crisis is looming, which adds to the social and economic crisis. And history teaches us how highly inflammable is the mix of economic/social and political crisis.

France in the world space

I have documented in other papers that the positioning of a country in the world space is based on both its economic capabilities (its 'competitiveness') and its military might. In the context of the post-pandemic crisis, France will have to cope with a further deterioration of its economic performances on the world market, and in particular in Europe. This background is a key for understanding not only the repeated attempt of French governments to promote their defence agenda in the EU, but also the strengthening of military-security institutions in France.

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Footnotes

[1] Platon, Sébastien: From One State of Emergency to Another -Emergency Powers in France, VerfBlog, 2020/4/09,
<https://verfassungsblog.de/from-onestate-of-emergency-to-another-emergency-powers-in-france/>.

[2] “France: LDH (League of Human rights) denounces the Constitutional Court decision not to control the impact of emergency laws on the respect of civil liberties”, 3 April 2020,
<http://civicspacewatch.eu/france-ldh-denounces-the-constitutional-court-decision-not-to-control-the-impact-of-emergency-laws-on-the-respect-of-civil-liberties/>

[3] Arthur Berdah, « Le Conseil de défense, lieu favori d’Emmanuel Macron pour des arbitrages en série » (Emmanuel Macron picks up the Council of defence as the main policy-making body), *Le Figaro*, 19 May 2020.

[4] Banque de France, « Macroeconomic projections », 9 June 2020.