

France

Military & Far Right (France) - The mask slips: Marine Le Pen backs ex-generals who threaten possible 'coup'

Saturday 1 May 2021, by [DELAPORTE Lucie](#) (Date first published: 26 April 2021).

A letter signed by 23 retired French generals, who warn that the military might have to “intervene” in a “civil war” because of a failure by the French state to crack down on “Islamists”, has caused a political row. Defence minister Florence Parly has warned of “consequences” for any active soldiers on the list of signatories, which includes scores of other senior ranks. Meanwhile Marine Le Pen, the president of the far-right Rassemblement National (RN) party, has given the retired generals her support. As Lucie Delaporte reports, her backing for such views is a stark reminder of what the RN really stands for, after a decade in which Le Pen has sought to soften the party’s image.

A letter signed by 23 retired generals and scores of other former high-ranking officers which threatens the possibility of military intervention over France’s ‘failure’ to tackle Islamists who are causing the country to “disintegrate” has sparked a [political controversy](#). The letter to the right-wing magazine [Valeurs Actuelles](#) published on April 21st eventually led to the intervention of defence minister Florence Parly who said that there would be “consequences” for any signatory who still has an active or reserve role in the country’s armed forces. “The military are not there to campaign, but to defend France and protect the French,” she told [France Info radio on Monday April 26th](#).

But perhaps the most striking intervention came from Marine Le Pen, president of the far-right Rassemblement National (RN) party. In recent years Le Pen has sought to soften her party’s hardline image in a bid to broaden its appeal to voters. But Le Pen backed the retired generals’ warning in the warmest terms, calling it a “letter stamped with conviction and commitment” written by “men who are attached to their country”. Le Pen also made it clear she supported the generals’ “analysis”.

Yet this letter addressed to President Emmanuel Macron, which was published on the 60th anniversary of the failed [military Algiers putsch](#) of 1961, speaks of the possible need for military intervention to confront the chaos that France is supposedly plunging into. The signatories, many of whom are already known for their support for the far right, declared that “these are serious times, France is in peril”. The country is in the process of “disintegrating” because of “a certain anti-racism” whose only aim was pave the way for the “racial war that these hate-filled and fanatical followers want”, they claim. The letter comes in the wake of rows caused by education minister Jean-Michel Blanquer and junior minister for higher education [Frédérique Vidal](#) over the presence of “Islamism” in France’s universities, with the generals stating that the main threat to France today is from those who “speak of racialism, of [indigenism](#) and of [decolonial](#) theories”.

These retired officers, many of whom are approaching their eighties, attack what they call “Islamism

and the hordes from the suburbs” - a reference to the run-down outskirts of some French cities where many of the residents come from an immigrant background - who are “detaching many parts of the nation and turning them into territory subject to dogmas that are contrary to our constitution”.

When it comes to solutions, the generals use slightly more guarded language with a call to President Macron to “apply uncompromisingly the laws that already exist” and say they are ready to “support politicians who take into account the nation’s safety”. But they then state that if their warning is not heeded “permissiveness will continue to spread inexorably in society, provoking in the end an explosion and the intervention by our comrades on active service in the dangerous mission of protecting our civilised values and the safety of our compatriots on national soil”.

They tell the president: “There is no time to procrastinate, otherwise civil war will tomorrow put an end to this growing chaos and the dead, for whom you will bear responsibility, will be counted in the thousands.”

It is hard to read in these words as anything else than an explicit threat of a military coup to ‘save’ the country.

Two days after this letter was published *Valeurs Actuelles* offered column space to Marine Le Pen who [called on the generals](#) to join her. She wrote: “I subscribe to your analysis and share your distress. Like you I believe that it is the duty of all French patriots, wherever they come from, to rise up to put the country right and even, let’s say it, to save it.”

“My difference is in thinking that an appeal can’t be enough to get this failing government out of its shameful habits,” the RN president continued. While the retired officers said their colleagues “on active service” were ready to act, the head of the far-right party feigned not to understand the threat the letter posed. Instead, she argued that people could not simply “remain at the stage of expressing indignation, however strong that is”.

Marine Le Pen made it clear that for her, taking action “required a democratic search for a political solution which must take the form of a plan for an alternative government which has to be approved by the French electorate”. This rather legalistic approach was then immediately undermined by a rather more obscure sentence. “I invite you to join our action to take part in the battle which is commencing, which is a political and peaceful battle for sure, but which is more than anything a battle for France,” she wrote. The use of phrases such as a “peaceful battle” sums up the ambiguities that have dogged the party - which changed its name from the Front National in 2018 - since it was created.

The Left was quick to attack the stance of the retired generals. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, founder of the radical-left La France Insoumise, has already referred the letter to state prosecutors. On Twitter he condemned the “staggering declaration by soldiers who assume the right to call on their active colleagues in an intervention against Islamo-leftists.” The former socialist presidential candidate Benoît Hamon also condemned the “military coup d’État” backed by Marine Le Pen.

Both politicians also pointed to the complete absence of any response from the government to the letter over most of the weekend. This silence only ended on the evening of Sunday April 25th with three Tweets from defence minister Florence Parly criticising both the letter and Marine Le Pen’s support for it. In an op-ed article published in *Libération* newspaper the next day Florence Parly attacked the “20 retired and irresponsible generals who only represent themselves”. Addressing herself to Le Pen, the minister noted: “Wanting to politicise soldiers is an insult to their mission.”

For *Valeurs Actuelles*, which last week led on a call for “insurrection” by hardline nationalist politician [Philippe de Villiers](#), the letter and the reaction to it undoubtedly represented a successful public relations exercise. Yet for Marine Le Pen, who for the last decade has sought constantly to make her party appear ‘respectable’, such clear support for talk of military intervention is quite embarrassing.

The profile of the signatories whom the RN leader applauded in her article highlights precisely what the party has always sought to hide: its deep collusion with the most radical fringes of the ultra right. Welcoming the threat of a coup d’État revives a repressed memory for a party that was founded by Marine Le Pen’s father Jean-Marie Le Pen alongside former pro-Nazi militia and one-time figures from the paramilitary [Organisation Armée Secrète](#) (OAS).

Many of the ex-army officers who signed the letter are already involved with the far right, and some of them have for years called for an intervention by the army in what they see as an inevitable civil war.

The man behind the letter, Jean-Pierre Fabre-Bernadac, aged 70, who writes a blog called Place d’Armes, is a retired captain in the gendarmerie; though it is under control of the Ministry of the Interior, the gendarmerie in France is a branch of the armed forces. His Facebook profile regurgitates standard material from the far and extreme right, passing on articles from the far-right website Boulevard Voltaire and sharing conspiracy theories about the fire that ravaged Notre-Dame cathedral in Paris in April 2019.

An appeal launched by Fabre-Bernadac in 2016 gives a flavour of his political views. “Have you been insulted, threatened or worse through having ideas that are close to those of the Front [National]? Don’t stay hidden any more, get in touch with me,” he wrote on his personal page. By then he had already written an article on the [royalist Politique Magazine website](#) explaining why a “civil war” was brewing. At that time the cause of this looming war was not “Islamism” but the “multicultural ideology which ignores the reality of an impossible cohabitation”.

Another signatory who is familiar in the murky far-right online world known as the “*fachosphere*” is retired general Christian Piquemal, who was removed from the army lists five years ago for his far-right activism. He was arrested for having taken part in a banned demonstration against “the Islamisation of Europe” on February 6th 2016, an anniversary that is still marked by some on the far right. He has since joined the French-based [National Council of European Resistance](#) whose president is the anti-immigration writer [Renaud Camus](#).

At the time of Piquemal’s arrest his friend and fellow signatory General Antoine Martinez set up a support committee. Martinez, who was in the French air force, was involved in the creation of the ‘Volunteers for France’ or VPF movement, set up after the terrorist attacks of November 13th 2015, to “defend French identity” and “fight the Islamisation of the country”. Mediapart has revealed that the ultra-right group [Action des Forces Opérationnelles](#), several of whose members were arrested in June 2018 for planning an attack on Muslims, was a more ‘radical’ manifestation of VPF.

In 2018 General Martinez was behind a letter accusing President Emmanuel Macron of “treason” for signing a [United Nations-sponsored pact on immigration](#) brokered at a conference in Marrakesh. Signed by ten generals – including some who have signed the *Valeurs Actuelles* letter – that letter warned the French president in the most menacing terms. It said: “In deciding alone to sign this back you add one extra reason for outrage to the anger of a people who have already been mistreated. You’re guilty of a denial of democracy, even treason in relation to the nation.”

That 2018 letter was signed by General Didier Tauzin who tried but failed to gather the necessary

signatures to stand in the 2017 presidential election. The investigative weekly *Le Canard Enchaîné* later revealed that during the '[yellow vest](#)' protest crisis of late 2018 and early 2019 the general told President Macron on Facebook: "We are a handful of generals who are quite prepared to come and teach you how to do politics. And eventually take your place if you want to leave, which I think you're going to do soon."

The fact that at least three of the signatories of the *Valeurs Actuelles* letter have direct links with the RN is proof of the porous relations between Marine Le Pen's party and generals who dream about military interventions. General François Gaubert, who became a member of what was then called the Front National in 2012, became a candidate for the party in Parliamentary elections in the Hérault *département* or county in southern France and is today a RN councillor on the Occitanie regional council in the south.

General Emmanuel de Richoufftz was briefly a RN candidate in the southern French town of Graud-du-Roi in the municipal elections held in 2020, before ultimately supporting the Eurosceptic Debout La France party instead. Meanwhile retired general Norbert de Cacqueray-Valménier, 73, was part of the list of RN candidates in Vannes in western France in the same election. This list was also supported by General Didier Tauzin.

By backing soldiers attracted by the idea of a military intervention Marine Le Pen runs the risk of seeing all her efforts to make the party seem respectable vanish into thin air, with her protestations of love for the Republic reduced to little more than a sad farce. Yet it has not endeared her to all of the signatories of the letter either. In fact, Jean-Pierre Fabre-Bernadac's far-right blog Place d'Armes published a stinging response to the RN leader, highlighting her ambiguities.

"It is, to say the least, clumsy to launch a 'soliciting' operation for electoral ends," declares the blog, which says it is "open to all soldiers ... who love France". "She could simply have said she was in step with our concerns. Moreover, she can rest assured that we won't confine ourselves simply to calls to action. Our work has hardly begun and we won't quit until we have reached our goal: to save our country from destruction."

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P.S.

- Mediapart. April 29, 2021:
<https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/290421/mask-slips-marine-le-pen-backs-ex-generals-who-threaten-possible-coup>

- The original French version of this article can be found [here](#).

(Available on ESSF too).

English version and additional reporting by Michael Streeter