

France: A call to arms by right-wing military forces. Is the French Military a Threat to Democracy?

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An open letter by retired generals warns French president Emmanuel Macron that unless he clamps down on anti-racist movements, the armed forces will step in to “restore order.” In a country with a long history of military coups, the spread of far-right talking points is undermining democracy.

On April 21, nearly one thousand active service members of the French military joined dozens of retired French generals in signing a [letter](#) that stops just short of calling for a [coup](#) against the elected government in the name of “putting an end to chaos.” Published in one of France’s leading far-right magazines, [Valeurs Actuelles](#), the letter is a call to arms by right-wing military forces — and has already won the [backing](#) of Rassemblement National leader Marine Le Pen.

The letter begins saying that the “hour is grave, and France is in peril” — threatened by “mortal dangers.” Specifically, this danger is “disintegration,” the loss of the imagined timeless integrity of the France of yesteryear. Who and what do the signatories blame for this disintegration? To the surprise of no one who’s been paying attention to the rise of right-wing nationalism and nativism in the Global North, the culprits identified by the soldiers are anti-racists and people of color — particularly those who practice Islam.

Here, the article sheds any veneer of even the “color-blind” variant of racism so typical in French public discourse, and parrots disgusting white nationalist talking points. It argues that Muslims, rather than being legitimate citizens or residents of France, are a “horde” of foreigners whose ideologies and practices threaten France’s natural identity. The signatories claim that the areas around several major French cities have been transformed by their nonwhite residents into zones of “lawlessness” that shake the foundations of the French Republic. They chide the politicians for their supposed inaction and timidity — decades of police and law enforcement [abuse](#) notwithstanding — and argue that the army cannot stand by and allow this to continue. Here, minorities’ very presence is a threat to France’s nationhood.

The article concludes with a warning. As “violence mounts daily,” unless the French government does as the soldiers suggest and cracks down hard on not just crime but on the very existence of nonwhite French residents, they and their “comrades” will be forced to mount an “intervention,” a “perilous mission to protect the values of [French] civilization.” This is the only way to avoid a “civil war” — with politicians held accountable for the resulting death toll.

Such a threat is not without modern precedent in France — indeed, the country’s current constitution originates in a coup d’état attempt that took place in 1958. Amid the colonial war in Algeria, a group of high-ranking officers used military pressure to bring down the parliamentary

Fourth Republic and return General Charles de Gaulle to power. Then, on [April 21, 1961](#), with the battle for French Algeria almost lost, a further generals' conspiracy attempted a coup against De Gaulle. The military rebels seized Algerian cities in the name of their junta and even landed paratroopers in mainland French airports before they were stopped by other French Army forces.

The fact that the signatories of the *Valeurs Actuelles* article chose to publish their article on the sixtieth anniversary of this event — as well as the similar attachment to anti-Muslim and racist violence — makes their threat of an intervention in French politics all the more real. The fact that these contemporary military leaders are also backed by Le Pen — the leader of the French right and almost certainly Macron's main opponent in the 2022 presidential election — means their position has a mainstream backing that the generals in 1961 arguably lacked.

Poisoning Democracy

It is too soon to say what will come of the publication of this letter, or Le Pen's support for it. Some polling data shows that a [majority](#) of respondents support the letter and its authors. The government has replied with strident [opposition](#), warning that the letter's signatories might face prosecution. Even retired members of the military are generally not allowed to publicly express political or religious opinions in France. Whatever the result of this particular right-wing intervention, however, it is a perfect example of the afterlives of attempted coups and other disruptions that even the most established democracies face long after they are restored.

Even in Europe, there were several military coups in postwar [Greece](#), and as recently as 1981, there was an [attempted coup](#) in Spain, soon after the restoration of constitutional monarchy. Both these military uprisings echoed their country's long histories of civil war and political violence. In the Americas, the 1973 coup against the socialist president Salvador Allende ended civilian government in Chile for nearly two decades, ending what was at the time among the longest uninterrupted electoral, parliamentary systems in the world — with far more years of democratic rule in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than, for example, France itself.

The lesson is that whether or not a coup is successful, its consequences reverberate in national politics for years, even decades. Politicians live with the knowledge that their position is not just contested but under violent threat by the military and militias, and feel real pressure to cave in to their demands.

This warning is especially relevant in the United States, which earlier this year saw the first credible threat to its continued functioning as a democracy (such as it is) since the Civil War. Despite mounting prosecutions against those who participated in the storming of the Capitol building, this event changed the tone of US politics. Whether or not the events of that day could have actually succeeded in the end of elected government in the United States, that was their goal — and when the antidemocratic right wing learns the power of political violence, the lesson echoes for generations.

Just as the French coup of 1958 was followed by the attempted one in 1961, the events of January 6, 2021, will set a precedent that the right wing will not soon forget. Organized opposition to the rights of the oppressed, people of color, and the Left can only be met with the organized power of those whose rights are being threatened and whose lives are at stake. Staying strong in the face of that danger is difficult. But countless examples show such resistance is both possible and necessary.

Craig Johnson

P.S.

- “Is the French Military a Threat to Democracy?”. Jacobin. 05.03.2021:
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/05/french-military-generals-letter-valeurs-actuelles-right-wing-co-up-rassemblement-national-le-pen-macron>
- Craig Johnson is a PhD candidate in history at UC Berkeley.