

## FRANCE FAILS TO CONFRONT ITS DOMESTIC FAILURES

**Francis Ghilès**, Senior Associate Researcher, CIDOB

*The mounting violence after the police shooting of a teenager in the western Paris suburb of Nanterre offers a mirror image of the increasing polarisation of French political life.*

*In some of France's most deprived urban areas, the unemployment rate is as high as 50% among young people. This desperation has led to the growth of an illegal economy in these areas. The violence in France is a symptom of a deeper problem: the country's economic and social system is failing to provide opportunities for many of its citizens.*



# 771

JULY  
2023

CIDOB **50**  
years  
BARCELONA  
CENTRE FOR  
INTERNATIONAL  
AFFAIRS

Political leaders in Paris are fond of lecturing their European partners on France's democratic credentials (the revolution of 1789). French senior civil servants are particularly prone to this way of thinking. However, such attitudes sit uncomfortably with the hard facts of France in 2023: taxation levels among the highest in Europe; a foreign debt of close to \$3tr run up over the past thirty years during which the country was at peace and, unlike its eastern neighbour, did not have to absorb East Germany; a debt service that costs more than the military budget. The verdict of notation agencies such as Standard and Poors are anxiously scrutinised. Meanwhile in the poorer neighbourhoods, drug dealers who are heavily armed outwit the police. This powerful state cannot control suburbs at the gates of its world-famous capital city.

Unsurprisingly, the rioting which has engulfed suburbs of Paris and major provincial cities such as Lyon and Marseilles offered an image of France very different from what the country's elites like to project. Hundreds of public buildings – schools, town halls, libraries, police stations, were torched by violent mobs of young people (average age 17) who, rightly or wrongly, feel that the land of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* does not offer them a proper education, discriminates against them in many ways, and denies them a sporting chance to get a decent job. These young people also complain of “systemic racism” in the police and gendarmerie. The wave of violence was started by the shooting, at close range of a young man of Algerian origin in the western Paris suburb of Nanterre.

Threats and physical attacks against mayors and locally elected councillors have increased in recent months. Over the past week they have been perpetrated by gangs from the poorer suburbs; earlier this year, notably in Brittany extreme right-wing groups were responsible for this kind of attacks. This mounting violence offers a mirror image of the

increasing polarisation of French political life and the shrinking of the “centrist” parties. Since he became president in 2017, Emmanuel Macron has succeeded in cutting the left down to a shadow of its former self. The *Republicains* on the right have fallen victim to their habit of aping the extreme right of Marine Le Pen whose *Rassemblement National* (RN) party frames the problems of France through the prism of “uncontrolled immigration” – shorthand for immigrants from the countries former North African and African colonies. This propensity to “racialize” problems has been at work for a generation now, and the results are disastrous. Earlier this year, the debate on pension’s reform in the national assembly with parliamentarians hurling insults at each other offered a sorry spectacle.

*Threats and physical attacks against mayors and locally elected councillors have increased in recent months. Over the past week they have been perpetrated by gangs from the poorer suburbs; earlier this year, notably in Britany extreme right-wing groups were responsible for this kind of attacks. This mounting violence offers a mirror image of the increasing polarisation of French political life and the shrinking of the “centrist” parties.*

Mr Macron for his part openly despises the *corps intermediaires* – the thousands of mayors and regional councillors, some of whom have been ringing the alarm bells for months about what they sensed was the mounting frustration of poorer young people and the growing risk of an “explosion”. But France is also paying the price of the decision taken in the 1980s under the presidency of François Mitterrand to relax the standards of the *baccalauréat* exam in the name of social inclusion. This educational “race to the bottom” did not prevent socialist ministers from putting their children into private schools. As younger inexperienced teachers are sent to the poorer areas, the standard of secondary schools in France has increasingly mirrored the areas in which they live. Some estimates have put the number of “lost hours of schooling” due to absentee teachers in the poorer areas at 300 annually.

For Brigitte Granville, author of **What Ails France?** (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2021), the combination of chronic unemployment, a heavy burden of taxation on businesses, and a poorly-functioning education system has created a breeding ground for violence in France. In some of France’s most deprived urban areas, the unemployment rate is as high as 50% among young people. This desperation has led to the growth of an illegal economy in these areas. The violence in France is a symptom of a deeper problem: the country’s economic and social system is failing to provide opportunities for many of its citizens.

Where the police is concerned, a combination of neglect, empowerment and lack of accountability have encouraged brutality. Informed debate about the sorry state of the police can be found on radio stations such as France Culture (Radio France: *Police: Aux Origines de la Crise*), seldom on television. Journalists like Michael Corre of the daily La Croix newspaper or the criminologist Alain Bauer who teaches at the Conservatoire des Arts et Metiers point to a police force which is not “systemically” racist but often badly mismanaged by its political masters; where training is much less thorough than in Germany, where many officers wonder what their real purpose is. They are not alone in expressing concern that hundreds of disproportionate use of force cases have been referred to the *Inspection Générale de la Police* and sanctions remain minimal.

But according to British author, Gavin Mortimer “it was not the 45,000 police and gendarmes on the streets that persuaded the rioters...to stand down”. In his [analysis for The Spectator](#), Gavin points at “the drug groups who decided enough is enough. Having so many boys in the blue patrolling the streets was bad for business and so gang leaders ordered the young hoodlums back to their bedrooms”. Mr Macron was reminded of this uncomfortable truth when he visited a police station in the 17<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris on 3 July.

Even more worrying, because it revives fears which relate to the darkest moments of French history during the second world war and the Algerian war of independence is the fact that two police trade unions, Alliance and UNSA, which account for half of unionised police officers last week referred in a communique to “a state of war” and the need to eliminate “vermin”. Such words would not be disowned by the RN whose victory at the next presidential election cannot be ruled out. Modern French history suggests that letting the police, which are being put on the front line of a broken model, take the law into their own hands is irresponsible.

### **France used to be respected in the world**

Until the 1980s, France was respected in Europe because its political leaders such as presidents Charles de Gaulle and George Pompidou and prime ministers such as Raymond Barre were cautious managers of the state’s finances and reformers. History will note the irony of inequalities increasing after the left triumphed in 1981. Tens of billions of euros have been spent, since the 1980s “renovating” the poorer districts’ physical infrastructure, but nothing has been done to develop the preventive work so essential to policing. Since 2010, austerity has cut culture and sports budgets in the poorer districts around big cities. Rising inflation is making people there desperate. When the right has been in power as under Nicolas Sarkozy, and today under Emmanuel Macron, it quite fails to construct policies which are socially inclusive and advance economic opportunities in the *banlieues* which was the key suggestion of a report presented in April 2018 by the former centrist politician, Jean-Louis Borloo but binned by the president on the day of its presentation. Having created a million new jobs, since the 1990s, in a “decentralisation” process which it did not believe in, the state is obese.

The impact of last week's riots will also weaken French foreign policy. Few countries in Europe will welcome what is happening in France, not least Germany. But Mr Macron will have to rise to the domestic challenge he faces, arguably the most daunting the country he presides has faced since 1958, if he wishes to preserve a measure of influence in Europe.

The often-wanton violence of the riots has left many politicians speechless, but not the mayors. Whatever their political hue, they bring to the towns they manage a deep knowledge and much affection. On July 5, local authorities were received at the Elysee Palace. The question is: will Mr Macron eat humble pie? Maintaining public order in a frightened country is important but acknowledging one's mistakes was always going to be difficult for such a "Jupitérien" president.