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FRANCE'S PERMANENT STATE OF EMERGENCY

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Earlier this month, the French parliament voted overwhelmingly to convert a number of emergency police powers into permanent laws as the country faces up to the continuing threat of home grown terrorism. Three quarters of MPs backed a bill which will allow police officers to continue to use powers that largely mirror those granted under the state of emergency, which was declared after the Bataclan attacks on November 13, 2015, and extended six times, finally expires.

The bill gives police the right to restrict the movement of terror suspects without judicial approval and shut down places of worship if they are deemed by intelligence services to be encouraging terrorism. Police will also be able to raid homes and other places on terrorism grounds after getting a judge's approval. Officers will be able to do so based on intelligence reports that would not necessarily be enough evidence to open a judicial probe.

An unprecedented series of attacks by Islamist extremists has claimed 239 lives in France since 2015, the latest being the fatal stabbing of two women on the steps of the St Charles station in Marseille and the discovery of explosive devices in front of a block of flats in the 16th arrondissement of Paris. A debate on the role of Islam in the radicalisation of French youth and how to counter that threat rages across the French media day in day out with many journalists striking ideological poses rather than trying to understand the very complex nature of modern jihadism.

As he campaigned for the presidency last winter, Emmanuel Macron argued that recent laws beefing up powers for anti-terror judges and the intelligence services were enough to tackle terrorism – more than 4,300 raids, 439 house arrests and 16 closures of mosques carried out during the state of emergency had, after all, produced a paltry 20 prosecutions. The then liberal politician sided with a parliamentary report that concluded that the expansion of police powers had produced only “modest” results. Last year Mr Macron wrote in his book, *Revolution*, that recent laws boosting the powers of counter-terror judges and surveillance tools for intelligence agencies were sufficient to tackle the threat of terrorism.

He has since changed tack, bowing to growing pressure from public opinion, politi-

cians and the media. His minister of the interior, Gerard Collomb, argued that France was “still in a situation of war” as he attempted to diffuse those critics who argued that some of the controls enshrined in the new law go against liberties. Mr Macron belongs to a growing tribe of politicians who will bend to the wind in order to gain votes. There is no better subject to do so than where jihadi terrorism is concerned.

Gerard Collomb refuses to accept what some judges, lawyers and human rights organisations have argued infringes civil liberties and target Muslims and people with North African faces. This type of targeting has resulted in many mistakes over the years and serious harassment of young Frenchmen of Muslim origin. The minister and the president can point to the fact that France is number one target in the west for Isis, accounting for 30% of attacks or foiled plots related to the extremist group according to the Paris-based Center for the Analysis of Terrorism. That is true but the lack of coordination among police and security services often allows suspects to evade arrest and attempts to better organise matters have been very slow indeed. Turf wars are not infrequent in the security services, the gendarmerie and the police. The media are much less interested in such matters, preferring to scare their listeners and TV viewers with high pitch words and blood soaked images. This in turn encourages populism which is also rooted in the growing social disparities across Europe.

There is little sign that this trend in toughening laws and giving the police and security services more power will abet any time soon as the Middle East continues in turmoil and the home grown nature of jihadism in France and the UK remains. Critics however, especially lawyers warn that the new law will further erode the presumption of innocence in matters of terrorism and, as such, will “contaminate” the rule of law and the justice system as a whole. If the police use sometimes flimsy, anonymous intelligence, Amnesty International’s warning that the new legislation will “trample” the very rights Mr Macron was “elected to uphold” will come true.

Stigmatising Muslims is obvious across a broad spectrum of the media, TV debates are full of ignorant clichés about Islam and the whole situation appears to have trapped French politicians in a security spiral which they are powerless to escape from. Slowly reversing the burden of proof on to defendants will not, however, make France a happier place. The country’s leaders would do well to tone down their boats that it was in France that the *Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen* were proclaimed in 1789.