

France's state of emergency—Sarkozy threatens mass deportations

By Antoine Lerougetel
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French Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy has given a clear racist coloration to the state of emergency, which was imposed at midnight on November 8. The following day, he explained to the National Assembly his instructions to the *préfets* (regional central government officials), whose task it is to carry out the police repression of the suburban youth revolt that has been raging in France's council estates for over two weeks

"I have told the *préfets* that foreigners, who are legal or illegal immigrants, who have been indicted, are to be expelled immediately from our territory, including those who have a residence permit," Sarkozy said. "When one has the honour of possessing a residence permit, the least that you can say is that you won't get yourself arrested provoking urban violence."

The National Bar Council (barristers' organisation) has pointed out that legal obstacles stand in the way of Sarkozy's reactionary order for mass expulsions. Sarkozy's representatives replied that it was a matter of "ethics ... We know that there will not be large numbers expelled, but it is unacceptable that people possessing a residents' permit should be setting cars alight and striking policemen." They hope the measure will intimidate: "Their dossier will be branded," said a lawyer, "the sanction could well affect the person for many years. He won't have a chance of getting even a tourist visa."

Sarkozy thus restored the "double penalty," which he had previously alleviated. That is, condemning an indicted immigrant resident both to his court-imposed punishment and also to banishment from France. He informed the National Assembly that 120 foreign nationals have been condemned for violence in the revolt, not all illegally residing in France.

The head of SOS-Racisme, an anti-racist group,

announced it has filed a complaint with the Council of State, France's highest administrative body. Dominique Sopo said, "Nicolas Sarkozy's proposal is illegal." He called it a "mass deportation."

Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of the neo-fascist National Front, who received 18 percent of the vote in the runoff for the presidency in 2002, has enthusiastically endorsed Sarkozy's actions. He said that he was "very appreciative of the permanent tribute being paid to [him] by Messrs Villiers [Philippe de Villiers, ultra-conservative Catholic monarchist] and Sarkozy, by taking up the slogans and the proposals of the National Front, and thus braving official monolithic thinking."

Sarkozy has gained the ascendancy over the old Gaullists round Chirac, and wrested the chairmanship of the party from the president's supporters through extreme law-and-order and anti-labour policies and calculatedly insulting denunciations of the youth of the council estates. His harsh crackdown on illegal immigrants has also been a means of attempting to poach Le Pen's supporters. As the youth riots flared up, he faced criticism from the Chirac-Villepin camp for having provoked the youth by referring to them as "scum" and "gangrene."

The imposition of the state of emergency was not opposed by any National Assembly deputy, including those of the Socialist and Communist parties. The measure gives Sarkozy, as minister of the interior and France's top policeman, arbitrary police powers in those very estates which he pledged, in the weeks before the outbreak of the revolt on October 27, to clean up with Karcher machines (industrial pressure washers). This has encouraged him to increase his witch-hunt of immigrants.

Sarkozy has resumed his right-wing populist rhetoric

after a few days of discretion. Questioned in a television debate on Thursday evening, he reiterated his insulting terminology. “They are scum and hooligans, I’m adamant,” he said, claiming to be the protector of the inhabitants of the estates from delinquents. He was particularly hostile to Adil, a young man from an estate in the North Paris suburbs, and the football star and former captain of the French national team, Lilian Thuram, who questioned the police violence.

He challenged Thuram’s right even to express an opinion on the subject. “What is Lilian Thuram getting into this for?” he sneered, “Lilian Thuram is a very great football champion who is doing very nicely—and this is no reproach—but what concern is it of his? It’s a long time since he lived in such neighbourhoods.” He went on to pour scorn on intellectuals claiming to “describe reality as it is ... with the words of people ... and not just those who have 18 years of university studies.”

He vigorously denied and, with the help of the program’s moderator Arlette Chabaud, rode roughshod over accusations—by people from the estates—that the police were insulting, racist or violent. This flies in the face of the video, widely screened that day on national television, showing the intense police beating of a young man in police custody. Of the eight policemen suspended in the case, five have been charged with violent behaviour aggravated by two circumstances: acting in a group and “being committed by people wielding public authority in the exercise of their functions.” Sarkozy has ordered a police investigation into the case.

In the two weeks since the youth revolt began, the police have made 2,234 arrests and some 6,000 cars have been torched. Thursday night registered a 4 percent drop in car burnings throughout France compared with the previous night: 463 cars and 221 arrests. So far insurance companies have put at €200 million the cost of damages they will have to cover.

Prison sentences have been meted out to 217 adults and 56 minors. Police have detained 1,462 persons; 329 have been tried immediately. There are 281 minors who have gone before children’s judges. In Marseilles, 13 children aged between 10 and 13 have been arrested since the beginning of the week.

The social eruption among the youth, politically inarticulate as it may be, is a harbinger of intensified

class struggle. By imposing a state of emergency, the French ruling elite has moved toward police-state measures. It recognizes that reducing the living standards and rights of workers to make French big business competitive on the globalised world market requires assaulting democratic rights and legal niceties. The council of ministers was due to meet at the end of this week to extend the 12-day period stipulated under the 1955 law allowing emergency rule.

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