

French anti-terrorism law tramples fundamental democratic rights

By Kumaran Ira
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France's Socialist Party (PS) government is ramming through an anti-terrorism law that tramples on fundamental democratic rights, and gives authorities special power to spy on the population and censor web sites accused of supporting terrorism.

On Wednesday July 9, Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve presented the bill at a ministerial cabinet meeting. It is to be discussed in the parliament at the end of this month. The bill would allow the Interior Ministry to impose travel bans on individuals, including minors, to keep them from traveling to Syria or other countries if they are suspected of intending to fight alongside jihadists and of having the potential to commit crimes in France or Europe upon their return.

Such pseudo-legal proceedings undermine basic democratic rights, including the presumption of innocence. The PS is instead giving the state the right to punish individuals without proving that they have committed a crime, or even based simply on the security forces' claim that they might commit a crime at some point in the future.

Downplaying the attack on democratic rights he is carrying out, Cazeneuve said: "This is not something discretionary and arbitrary. There must be a series of indications that a person is determined to travel to a jihadist theater of operations."

"We face a threat of a different kind," Cazeneuve declared. "All these youths who are leaving, who have seen horrible violence, torture, decapitations, crucifixions, numerous murders, and who return destroyed by having been around barbarous violence—they represent a threat to our country. They are prepared to commit acts of extreme violence. We must therefore protect ourselves."

What a cynical fraud! Far-right Islamist opposition militias operating in Syria have carried out murder,

torture, and various other crimes with the support of France, the United States and their allies in a proxy war aimed at toppling Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Without calling off its reactionary and politically criminal proxy war in Syria, however, Paris is proceeding to exploit the disastrous consequences of its war as a pretext to attack democratic rights at home.

The bill comes after the arrest of French national Mehdi Nemmouche, who is charged with the shooting at the Jewish museum in Brussels that killed four people in May. Nemmouche allegedly fought as part of Islamists militias in Syria. At least 250 French nationals and more than 1,000 European citizens are said to be fighting in Syria or Iraq, and around 800 French nationals or residents have travelled to Syria or plan to go there.

In response to this situation, for which the policies of French imperialism and its allies bear the main responsibility, the PS now proposes to hand over to the Interior Ministry unchecked powers, worthy of a totalitarian regime, to block travel, spy, and censor political speech.

Under Cazeneuve's bill, Interior Ministry officials would receive the power to block individuals from leaving France, placing them on wanted persons lists that are to be circulated to the authorities of European countries. Bans last six months but can be extended indefinitely, with authorities able to confiscate and invalidate passports of allegedly radicalized individuals. Such an individual faces three years in prison if they violate the travel ban.

The bill also compels airlines to inform the authorities about alleged radicalized individuals the moment they book a flight reservation. Airlines would also be banned from taking them on board a plane. A passenger name record and a record of a computer

reservation system containing the itinerary of a passenger or a group will be given to European authorities to help identify such persons. If persons targeted under the ban do manage to go abroad, they will be the subject of an international arrest warrant.

Cazeneuve's bill also gives the state draconian powers for monitoring the Internet, including web sites, mail servers and clouds. It allows authorities to demand without a judicial decision that Internet service providers block access to content "provoking or excusing terrorism," including online forums, Twitter and Facebook.

"I would like to block these sites," Cazeneuve said, claiming that the Internet "can incite hatred and murder."

The bill allows police to intercept and record Internet phone calls on programs such as Skype, along the lines of the illegal spying on the American population by the National Security Agency revealed by whistleblower Edward Snowden. Snowden also revealed that French intelligence collaborates with Orange (formerly France Telecom) in collecting all the data of its customers.

La Quadrature du Net, an association promoting digital rights and freedoms, criticized the bill's provisions on blocking websites as an attack on freedom of expression, demanding the government abandon them. Adrienne Charmet, the group's campaign coordinator, declared: "The measures proposed to censor web sites that excuse terrorism directly challenge freedom of expression and the right to a fair trial, two essential components of the rule of law."

The implications of such a bill can only be understood in the context of the capitalist crisis and the profound discrediting of the French political establishment. With the economy mired in slump and mass unemployment, and the PS government the most hated regime in French history since the collapse of the fascist Vichy regime at the end of World War II, the French ruling elite is terrified of the emergence of mass opposition.

While it is justifying its draconian, anti-democratic measures on the basis of fraudulent claims that it is fighting jihadism, the security services' ability to impose travel bans, spy on the Internet, and censor web sites will inevitably be deployed against opposition in the working class.

The attacks on democratic rights in the French anti-terror bill are being implemented throughout the European Union as well. In Milan on July 7, authorities from nine EU countries agreed to share intelligence. EU counter-terrorism coordinator Gilles de Kerchove said that the plan would include better data exchange on suspects and improved screening at entry and exit points on the EU's borders.

On July 9, Deutsche Welle reported: "Up until now, only the validity of passports and identity cards has been checked at border entries. In the future, border officials will access information about previous entrance routes into the country and on potential manhunts for certain individuals."

The EU also proposes measures to increase monitoring of websites. EU Home Affairs Commissioner Cecilia Malmström is already in discussions with Google, Twitter and Facebook about how to block or remove sites deemed to preach Islamism across the continent.

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