



PERSPECTIVES

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The “Yellow Vests” in France: Social Protest, Violence, and Antisemitism

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The “yellow vest” (*gilets jaunes*) demonstrations pose a difficult challenge to the French government and nation. They have revealed great public anger and frustration and have spread throughout the country with no sign of abating any time soon. They have also been marked by widespread acts of violence, including severe cases of antisemitism. The escalation of the demonstrations, despite President Macron’s efforts, raises a fear of anarchy that could deteriorate into civil war. For French Jewry, the mounting antisemitism is reminiscent of dark processes in Europe on the eve of WWII.

France is undergoing one of the most challenging periods of its modern history. On every Saturday since November 17, 2018, tens of thousands of protestors have marched all over the country denouncing President Emmanuel Macron and his government as well as the police. They demand more democracy, more influence, and more equality in the society, the economy, and politics.

The demonstrations began with pensioners in northern France protesting a rise in fuel prices. From there they spread throughout the country, including Paris and the main cities, while growing ever more violent.

The fuel-price hike was the catalyst for the expression of deep, long-simmering bitterness and anger among people in the periphery who a) feel a decline in purchasing power, b) receive poorer governmental services than citizens in the center of the country, and c) lack efficient public transportation. They feel, in short, that they are the victims of a disconnect between the central government and the periphery. They believe they are systematically short-changed by government corruption and by social elites that, in their view, enjoy preferential treatment.

In addition, the demonstrations reflect the profound frustration of large sectors of the French public that are denied proper representation in the parliament by the electoral system. This was notably evident in the May 2017 presidential elections, which saw the lowest voting rate since 1969 with over 25% not voting and over 11% casting invalid ballots.

Far-right demonstrators claim that Macron's election was a means of preventing the election of Marine Le Pen; and indeed, in the second round of the elections, about 11 million people voted for Le Pen. In the June 2017 parliamentary elections, Le Pen's National Front (Front National, or FN) increased its strength from two representatives to eight of the 577 members of parliament. This does not reflect the party's real support in areas outside the large cities, where anger over France's economic and security situation translates into very substantial backing for FN.

After the elections, Le Pen declared her intention to mount a fighting "patriots'" opposition to an establishment that, as she puts it, favors "Mondialism." Support for her party, which has adopted the name National Rally (Rassemblement National, or RN), has grown during the "yellow vest" demonstrations, and it now leads the polls for the European Parliament elections slated for May 26, 2019. La Pen has claimed that a victory in those elections would constitute a sort of dress rehearsal for French presidential elections and a "democratic" opportunity to compel Macron to change his policies. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the far-left party Unbowed France (La France Insoumise, or LFI), which has 17 representatives in the parliament, also calls frequently for a "nonviolent" civil revolt.

The "yellow vest" demonstrations reflect disappointment with the young president. During his election campaign, Macron kindled hopes by touting far-reaching economic reforms. But the reforms he has espoused while in office have sparked widespread criticism that has made them difficult to implement. Macron has also had trouble carrying out legislative initiatives on key issues such as illegal immigration and crime in the suburbs. And despite his ambition to be a president of both the right and the left, he has drawn harsh criticism from both sides. His reforms are perceived as benefiting the rich, and he is seen as exceedingly arrogant for calling himself "Jupiter."

Amid the dramatic political polarization between extreme left and extreme right, the weakening of the parties of the center, and the almost complete disappearance of the parties of the past, Macron has failed to present a real alternative. His new party, The Republic on the March (La République en Marche, or LREM), which won a respectable majority in the June 2017 parliamentary elections, includes many delegates who lack either political experience or a significant electoral base. Even before the "yellow vest" riots, public support for the president had declined dramatically to 29% (in September 2018). At the start of December 2018, when the mass demonstrations began, support for Macron sank to a new low of 23%.

The “yellow vest” demonstrations, by contrast, have garnered considerable public and media sympathy. Historically the French have tended to romanticize popular protest such as the student demonstrations of 1968. Demonstrations and strikes by workers’ organizations, too, have usually won public sympathy despite the difficulties they cause and the violence that sometimes accompanies them.

The “yellow vest” demonstrations differ from those of the past. They have gone on for a long time and are occurring all over the country, and it is not clear when they will end. The “yellow vests” have yet to present a leadership and a set of coherent demands, making it difficult to negotiate an end to the crisis. The signs waved at the demonstrations speak of general demands for justice and economic equality, high taxes on the wealthy, and a “referendum by civil initiative” (Referendum d’initiative citoyenne, or RIC) on basic questions of government and economy. But because of sharp disagreements among themselves, the “yellow vests” have failed so far to create a new political framework and have been unable to come up with a list of candidates to run in the European Parliament elections.

The wide public support for the “yellow vests” is beginning to erode. The demonstrations have caused damage to public and private property, with shops ransacked, cars burned, police officers attacked, main roads blocked, and attempts to break into public buildings and governmental offices.

The acts of violence and vandalism are perpetrated by radical leftists, radical rightists, anarchists, and rioters from the suburbs who join the demonstrations, which are supposed to be conducted nonviolently, along a particular route, and with police oversight. At certain stages, usually when a demonstration is about to disperse, the radical elements clash with the police and stray into streets that are not part of the approved route, where they engage in plunder and destruction. The radicals chant anti-establishment slogans that demand not only Macron’s resignation but also a complete overhaul of France’s governmental and economic system.

During the protests, extreme leftists direct their attacks at shops, department stores, banks, insurance agencies, and cars, which they see as signifying the capitalist establishment. They have likewise tried to damage national symbols such as the Arch of Triumph, the National Assembly, and the Senate. On January 5, 2019, four “yellow vests” used a forklift to break through the gate of the building of the government spokesman, Deputy Minister Benjamin Griveaux, who was evacuated in a state of panic by security officers. The incident stirred outrage among the authorities as well as the public, and about a month later those involved in the assault were arrested.

Another incident that sparked an outcry occurred on February 9, 2019, when a demonstrator set fire to a car of the Vigipirate forces, who are charged with safeguarding citizens against terror attacks. The demonstrators also damaged a fence near the Eiffel Tower that was designed for protection against terror. These acts of

violence drew harsh responses, particularly with many in the country concerned about terror and fearing the possible return of dozens of French citizens who joined ISIS. In an attack with a gun and a knife near the Christmas market in Strasbourg on December 11, 2018, an Islamist terrorist killed and wounded many.

The French government's response to the demonstrations has included concessions and attempts at dialogue on the one hand and a toughening of police methods on the other. While condemning the violence, Macron has accepted responsibility for the situation while emphasizing, rightly, that the problems had been developing for many years before his presidency.

Macron has rescinded the fuel-tax hike that was supposed to be part of the reforms aimed at limiting the harm wrought by global warming and at making a transition to green energy. He has also announced measures to increase the purchasing power of disadvantaged sectors, such as canceling the decision to increase taxes for most pensioners, canceling taxes on overtime work, and increasing the minimum wage by a hundred euros. In addition, Macron took part in public debates throughout France on various sectoral problems and expressed readiness to hold a referendum in which – notwithstanding what the demonstrators demand – it will be the government that decides which questions will be included. He has said, however, that he will not support a simplistic referendum with yes-or-no answers. Macron's measures gained a positive response from the French public, as evidenced in January 2019 when his approval rating rose to 35%.

Alongside the economic sweeteners, the French authorities adopted tough tactics toward violent demonstrators including water hoses, tear-gas grenades, and even rubber bullets, which severely wounded some demonstrators and provoked condemnations of the Interior Ministry and the police. At the beginning of January 2019, PM Édouard Philippe initiated stringent legislation aimed at fighting violent demonstrators, including banning face coverings, opening criminal files against those taking part in unlicensed demonstrations, charging vandals for damages, and checking the files of participants to identify weapons and dangerous objects.

Despite the sweeteners and Macron's willingness to consider demonstrators' demands, the violent demonstrations have not stopped, and the prevailing assessment is that they will continue. The ongoing Saturday demonstrations have resulted in injuries to hundreds of police officers and civilians and the deaths of 18 civilians. Thousands have been arrested and quickly put on trial. Very heavy economic damages have been inflicted on public property and on many French citizens. Economists have estimated that the financial sweeteners will cause a loss of over 10 billion euros in revenues, apart from all the damage to public and private property.

In many cases, too, the violent demonstrations have included severe acts of antisemitism. Both far-right and far-left demonstrators have vilified Macron for

ostensibly supporting Jews or for being controlled by them. On November 2, 2018, a far-right demonstration in Strasbourg that passed close to the Great Synagogue included jeers directed at the worshippers. A Jewish-owned bagel store was covered with Nazi symbols and taunts. On February 16, 2019, radical demonstrators attacked the philosopher Alain Finkielkraut with screams and curses, calling him a “dirty Jew and Israel supporter,” and the police had to whisk him away to his home. Finkielkraut said the attackers were Islamists and also spoke of the “self-righteousness” of extreme leftists who support them and accede to their antisemitism with seemingly moralistic justifications about opposing racism and “occupation.”

Such incidents have aroused severe criticism and shock among the authorities, the media, and much of the public. On February 19, a mass demonstration against antisemitism was held in Paris – just hours after some 80 graves were desecrated in a Jewish cemetery near Strasbourg. A 74% increase in French antisemitism over the past year, particularly involving the “yellow vest” demonstrations, has induced deep anxiety among French Jews, who say condemnations and counterdemonstrations are not enough and call for strict punishments instead.

The acts of violence and vandalism have undermined confidence in the government’s ability to ensure the peace of its citizens, and have damaged France’s image and status in Europe and the world. Continued violent demonstrations could lead to anarchy and even to civil war between the radical left and the radical right. The mass demonstrations could also become a model for attacks on other democratic regimes in Europe and beyond.

France will have to decide quickly and resolutely on issues involving limits on freedom of speech and assembly. The cynical and distorted abuse of those freedoms undermines the basic rights of the silent majority and jeopardizes security, freedom of movement and occupation, property, and the stability of the democratic regime.

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