

French president exploits terror attacks to suspend democratic rights

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In a speech Monday to both houses of parliament meeting in Versailles, French President François Hollande made clear that in response to the terrorist attacks carried out on Friday by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), he intends to carry through a sweeping assault on democratic rights. Hollande's speech marked a major step toward the imposition of authoritarian forms of rule in France.

The measures proposed by Hollande would give the president the right to exercise arbitrary powers, transfer public authority from civilian institutions to the military and suspend basic democratic rights. The French Republic, if not formally dissolved, would function in a manner that flagrantly violates democratic principles.

Hollande already imposed a state of emergency across the country over the weekend. Now, he is proposing a rewriting of the French constitution to modify the different juridical "states of exception" that exist under French law. Within three months, he aims to have assembled a legal arsenal allowing him to govern France under a permanent state of emergency.

He told the assembled parliamentarians: "We will prolong, you will prolong the state of emergency beyond 12 days to three months. But after the state of emergency, we must be able to struggle against terrorism in a way that is compatible with the rule of law. And since the threat will be a lasting one, and the struggle against IS will take us a long time, outside as well as inside the country, I have also decided to substantially reinforce the methods available to the justice system and the security forces."

He ordered the parliament to work with Prime Minister Manuel Valls to modify the constitution accordingly: "Fully aware of the circumstances, I consider that we must allow our constitution to evolve so that the public authorities can act in conformity with

the rule of law faced with acts of war. The current text has two particular regimes that are not well adapted."

According to Hollande, Article 16 on the attribution of full emergency powers to the president, and Article 36 on imposing a state of siege, are "ill-suited to the situation we face." They should make way to "an appropriate tool upon which to base exceptional measures for a certain length of time, without having recourse to the state of emergency and without compromising the exercise of public liberty."

This last statement, that the government does not intend to compromise public liberty, is a political fraud.

Hollande is moving to overhaul the different kinds of states of emergency in France because his government intends to use the extraordinary powers they grant, and to do so for an indeterminate period. Hollande's remarks suggest the maintenance of emergency powers for as long as ISIS or any other terrorist organization is deemed to threaten France. This paves the way for the imposition of dictatorship.

The state of emergency, under the terms of a 1955 law, allows the state to impose curfews, take "all measures to control the press and the radio," carry out arbitrary searches and seizures in individual residences, ban meetings and organize military tribunals.

In a bellicose speech yesterday, Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve insisted that all the legal tools furnished by the state of emergency would "be entirely and fully used." He indicated that their first application would be "the dissolution of mosques in which people intervene to call for or promote hatred."

Article 16 allows the French president full and arbitrary powers "when the institutions of the Republic, the independence of the Nation, its territorial integrity, or the carrying out of its international engagements are threatened in a grave and immediate way, and the

regular functioning of the constitutional public authority is interrupted...”

Representatives and senators can, however, appeal to the Constitutional Council to challenge the president’s declaration that these conditions are, in fact, met. Currently, despite the horrific toll from the Paris attacks, it would be absurd to claim that ISIS by itself can threaten all the institutions of the French Republic or the independence and territorial integrity of France.

The state of siege, according to a “general outline” published by the French Senate, “is characterized by (1) the substitution of military for civilian authorities in the exercise of police powers; (2) the extension of police powers, as the military authorities may carry out searches and seizures day and night, sequester convicts or the homeless in areas subject to the state of siege, order the confiscation of weapons and munitions, and ban publications and meetings that could trouble public order; (3) the ability of military tribunals to try civilians charged with felonies or misdemeanors against the security of the state, the institutions, or public order.”

According to current French law, however, the state of siege applies only to a portion of the nation’s soil under conditions of war or armed insurrection. These conditions clearly do not apply to a struggle against a clandestine terrorist group such as ISIS, which has at most a few hundred members in France.

Official discussions of the resort to such measures underscore that the capitalist regime in France and in Europe as a whole is entering into a profound crisis. Bourgeois democracy is in a state of collapse.

In launching a war to topple the Syrian regime, the NATO imperialist powers, including France, financed and armed Islamist terrorist militias from which ISIS emerged. They created the conditions for this war to spread to Europe and internationally. Now, far from abandoning the neocolonial war that is feeding ISIS, the imperialist powers are exploiting the tragedy in Paris to launch an all-out assault on democratic rights.

There are few historic precedents for the measures being considered. The last time all the powers in the state of emergency were applied to the entire national territory was during the 1954-1962 Algerian war, as French imperialism tried to drown the Algerian people’s struggle for independence in blood.

Several of the law’s provisions were invoked, however, during the state of emergency declared

against the mass suburban riots of 2005. These eruptions in impoverished immigrant communities followed the death of two youth, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré, as they fled from the police.

Full powers were granted to French heads of state only twice in the last century--to Marshal Pétain as he founded the Nazi-collaborationist dictatorship at Vichy in 1940, and to General Charles de Gaulle in the 1961 “putsch of the generals” at the height of the crisis over French rule in Algeria.

The imposition of policies with such histories underscores the fact that social tensions in France and across Europe are reaching explosive levels. European capitalism is being discredited by its brutal austerity policies and the rapid growth of social inequality, along with its pursuit of ever broader wars, from Ukraine to the Middle East and Mali. It has nothing to offer to increasingly impoverished and discontented populations.

The measures being taken by the French state ostensibly target ISIS, but the main purpose for establishing an authoritarian regime as laid out by Hollande is to repress the working class, the vast majority of the population.

Former President Nicolas Sarkozy has already called for putting 11,500 people who currently have intelligence dossiers under “house arrest with an electronic bracelet, to give us time to evaluate whether they are dangerous.” One of his right-hand men, Laurent Wauquiez, has called for building “internment centers.”

The sharpest political warnings are necessary. The overwhelmingly favorable reaction to Hollande’s speech in the media and the bellicose comments of the bourgeois opposition parties underscore the broad consensus that exists in the ruling class in support of anti-democratic measures. The only real social constituency for democracy is the working class, mobilized in independent struggle on a socialist program for the defense of democratic rights.



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