

French Ghettos, Police Violence and Racism

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The French called them *Les cités*. The 'ghettos' are specially built for excluded and disfranchised migrants from France's former North African colonies – mostly Arabs and Muslims – and other parts of the world. Clustered on the peripheries of France's big cities, *Les cités* proved to be laboratories for dissent and resistance against oppression. The children of the immigrants who built France after World War II are being pushed further outside the French society.

It is important to emphasise that the French youth who are protesting against police violence and the policy of the French political establishment, are French citizens. They were born into first and second generation immigrants communities from France's former colonies. They are not motivated by religion, and the protest has nothing to do with Islam and Western cliché of "Islamic fundamentalism". It is a protest against oppression and racism. This is the only way the youth can express their anger and frustration at French political establishment which deny immigrants to be integrated in their diversity. Successive French governments failed to come up with a faire and successful integration policy.

The "second class citizens" have been pushed further out of the centres into France's larger suburbs of Paris, Nice, and Lyon Toulouse, Marseille, Strasbourg and other big cities where their parents once provided cheap labour for France's factories. The youth are excluded from the French society, and subjected to brutal and Nazi's-like police harassments, encouraged by racist policies. In its annual report in April 2005, Amnesty International have criticised the "impunity" provided to police and police violent treatments of youth from North African origins during the provocative identity checks. In fact, an Arab or an African man has no right to look a policeman in the face during this deliberate and daily racism faced by young people of colour.

It is the police who provoked the current protests, when it was alleged that two boys, returning from a football match, had been deliberately chased by police into Clichy-sous-Bois substation, and were electrocuted and died. As usual the boys were afraid of the heavy-handed identity checks in the suburbs where French citizens of North African origins live. And the police refusal to apologise for their criminal action of exploding a tear gas inside a mosque. The situation was inflamed by the inflammatory and racist attitude of Nicolas Sarkozy, the megalomaniac French interior minister. Sarkozy attack on the youth as "subhuman" and calling for more Nazi's-like repression to "ethnic cleansing" the ghettos was not helpful. Thanks to the cultural chauvinism of the French society, Sarkozy enjoys the support of 57% of the French voters. These anti-Arabs, anti-Muslims hatreds have taken France into its "anti-Semitism" past with new target, Arabs and Muslims.

A French government-commissioned report presented by Jean-Christophe Rufin, former vice-

president of *Médecins sans Frontières*, to the interior ministry on October 2004 revealed that, mounting racism and “anti-Semitism” in France represents “a radical threat to the survival of our democratic system”. In addition, “racial discrimination is very real in France, but it’s not something that the authorities ever really wanted to face up to” said Peter Ford of the *Christian Science Monitor* in Paris.

It is France dark past and its discriminatory system that need to be clean. “It’s hard to just sit here and watch the rich people driving past in their swanky vehicles. They have everything and we have absolutely nothing”, a 20-years old Zaid told the *Independent* on 05 November 2005. “Ever since Sarko [Sarkozy] came into the government, life has been merde [shit]. He treats us like dogs — well, we’ll show him how dogs can react”, added 16-years old Kamel. Youth unemployment in the ghettos is three times higher than the national average or more than 40 percent.

Furthermore, French of Muslim and North African origins constitute the largest percentage of France’s prisons system, where the treatment of prisoners is hell, and living condition is torturous. Physical and mental violence play a bigger part in the running of [overcrowded](#) prisons. In his recent book *L’Islam dans les Prisons*, Farhad Khosrokhavar, a professor of Sociology at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris estimates that French Muslims make up some 70 percent of a total of 60,775 prisoners in France. Sociologists put the blame on marginalization and towering poverty and unemployment rates among the Muslim-Arab minority. The situation is not unique to France; it is a trend across Western Europe.

Contrary to Sarkozy’s and Western mainstream media allegations that the protest is organised by “Islamists” and the mosques, the protest is a form of youth solidarity against France’s discriminatory system and police brutality towards French citizens from Muslim and North African backgrounds. Muslims all over France have called for calm. Sarkozy should do the right thing and apologise for his racist remarks. The recent law banning on the head scarf (the *Hijab*) in public schools, hospitals and government buildings is a form of extremism. It is not only inciting racism, it is also denying French Muslim women their rights to education. It also shows that France is desperately in need of tolerance to wash the stain of Jean-Marie Le Pen fascist racism.

The recent curfews and emergency measures are the failed tools of France colonial past; what is needed is a change in attitudes. It is the French establishment and the French society that bear the responsibility for this system of conscious racism. Once this system is removed and its roots cut out the French society, France can be proud of its ideal.

It is time France revisits and takes seriously its ideal of *Liberté, Fraternité and Égalité*. France ought to reconsider its fraudulent policies of anti-Arabs and anti-Muslims prejudice. Or maybe France needs another French revolution?

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