

FRENCH RIOTS “AN ECONOMIC MESS OR THE END OF THE CIVIC ILLUSION?”

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43



The late surge of riots in almost every corner of France is certainly a French mess; however, it is likely to be both French mess and an unexpected collapse of the French civic illusion that turned out another mess and just exacerbated the whole mess. By definition of the Webster dictionary, what has happened in France in the last three weeks amounts precisely to a mess; a disordered, untidy, offensive, or unpleasant state or condition.¹ By the end of the twentieth day of the riots on November 16th 2005, 126 members of the French Police were injured, the total number of cars torched and that of arrests amount respectively 8,973 and 2,888, and the monetary damage is estimated to be over 200 million euros.² Tensions that started in the Paris suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois have rapidly spread out affecting 274 communes in total.³

The surge of riots overall means a French mess that has deliberately come about over a long period of time due to official negligence of existing social problems and to a series of economic failures of the French government. France's desperate job market with 10 percent general unemployment, 23 percent youth unemployment, and up to 40 percent unemployment among the "other" French has laid the stage for public dissidence against the government and legal authorities. Nevertheless, difficult economic conditions can only be necessary but not sufficient condition for the public to riot against the authorities. After all, France's economic underperformance mainly in terms of creating new jobs is not something new. Among the other EU member states, France has consistently ranked in the top three with its high rate of unemployment. The Economist reports that France has yet again ranked third following Italy and Belgium in youth unemployment with 23 percent.⁴ Similarly, John Van Oudenaren notes, "[t]he largest number of referrals to the Court [to the European Court of Justice

by the EU Commission] concerned France, followed by Italy and then Spain."⁵ France has been the country which has consistently been the least compliant member state with the EU Commission's rules and regulations. Such rebellious attitude has only worsened France's economic performance and specifically its job markets.

More reasonable explanation for the mass public frustration, as the Economist suggests,⁶ could be the French Police's recent practices that heavily focus on small crimes and its officers' rude attitude towards especially colored or the "other" French citizens. Therefore, one could reasonably argue that high rate of unemployment and rude policing practices in combination have caused the riots whereas they have been individually necessary but insufficient to do so. In addition to sparking role of Sarkozy's "Zero Tolerance" policing policy and France's soaring unemployment rates, the enduring legacy of French discrimination and stigmatization of Islam seem to be main causes of the riots.

At a Glance: Economic Underperformance of France

The economic underperformance in job creation is a hallmark of the Chirac government; however it is not authentic to it. It is only a continuum of an enduring legacy that results from France's social state model. The protectionist policies of the social state model hinders competition in the job market and hence creation of new jobs. According to the OECD report on France's economic performance, "[t]he origins of poor labour market performance, a central challenge for French policymakers, lie in a combination of measures themselves designed to protect workers, notably a high minimum cost of

1. See Webster Dictionary for the meaning of the word "mess"

2. See "Nicolas Sarkozy sort renforcé de la crise des banlieues" available at <http://www.lemonde.fr/web/articleinteractif>, cited in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2005_French_urban_violence#Summary_statistics

3. Ibid.

4. See "An underclass rebellion" in the Economist November 12th 2005, p.25

5. See John Van Oudenaren, "Uniting Europe", Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 2005, p.108

6. See "France's Failure" in the Economist November 12th 2005, p.11

labour and strict employment protection legislation, as well high tax wedges on labour; a lack of competition in a number of service sectors further inhibits employment creation.”⁷ The French social welfare system entails complex employment contracts which include heavy burdens for the employers such as compulsory insurance fees and various benefits. Accordingly both hiring and firing become extremely difficult for the French employers. They tend to keep the number of permanent employees as low as possible as they hire low-skilled temporary workers for the same jobs.

Coupled with the facts that the permanent jobs are mostly occupied by the senior French citizens, the French society is rapidly aging, and the life expectancy in France is one of the highest in the world; the increased popularity of temporary hiring among employers only further diminishes the French youth’s hope for employment. Martine Durand and Anne Sonnet of OECD’s Directorate for Employment, Labor and Social Affairs report that the effective retirement age in France has plummeted in the last four decades from the age of 67 to 59 in the early 2000s and resulted in a widened gap between the life expectancy and the retirement age.⁸ The widening gap has consequently increased pressure on the French government for the pension funds. In response to that, the government has introduced the 2003 pension reform, which raised the contribution threshold for entitle to a full pension and promised a bonus for those who remain in the workforce beyond the standard retirement age. As a result of such policies to keep older workforce intact, the youth employment for full-jobs has consistently declined. The French Prime Minister De Willepin notes that 70 percent of all new job contracts are only temporary and half of them last for less than a month.⁹ As a result of the government policies to keep the old in the workforce in order to

alleviate the pressure on public financing, the youth unemployment has rapidly increased up to 23 percent. In addition to general economic reasons, discrimination has exacerbated the youth unemployment (40 percent) within the “other” French communities.

At a Glance: Enduring Legacy of Discrimination in France

The statements by both French officials and the rioters who took the streets prove that along with economic difficulties ethno-religious discrimination has been main cause of the riots. In this regard, the riots mark the end of civic illusion that has long portrayed France as a beacon of civic values such as respect for human rights, equality and democracy. The September 2001 report, *Racial Discrimination: the Record of France*, by Human Rights Documentation Center (HRDC) demonstrates that discrimination is deeply embedded in the French society.¹⁰

In theory, discrimination seems unlikely in France. In accordance with the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man, the Constitution of France and the Penal Code of 1994 criminalize any racially discriminatory act or practice. In addition, both legal institutions prohibit the collection of data based on racial and religious differences. However, interestingly enough, whereas one would expect the effect of such legislations to be an official respect and protection towards ethno-religious diversity, the effect turns to be a complete official denial of the existence of certain minorities within the French society. Article 2 of the French Constitution eliminates the idea of minorities; accordingly the French government argues that France is a country in which there are no ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities. Such twisted interpretation of civic equality has continuously brought France in odds with the Human Rights Committee (HRC). The HRC argues, the fact that equal rights are granted to all

7. See *Economic Survey of France 2005* published on June 16th 2005 available at <http://www.oecd.org/document>

8. See Martine Durand, Anne Sonnet “France: Jobs and older workers”, *OECD Observer* No.251, September 2005

9. See “An underclass rebellion” in the *Economist* November 12th 2005, p.24

10. See “Racial Discrimination: The Record of France” by Human Rights Documentation Center (September 2001) available at <http://www.hrdc.net>, cited in <http://academic.udayton.edu/race/06hrights/GeoRegions/Europe/France01.htm>

individuals before the law does not preclude the existence of minorities in a country. Similarly, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance has censured France on the same account.¹¹

In practice, however, racism and xenophobia exist at critical level within the French society in the attitudes towards immigrants, minorities and foreigners. The HRDC report suggests that a majority of French citizens blame the immigrants for increases in unemployment, crime and decreasing educational standards.¹² About 40 percent of the French population supports forcible repatriation of unemployed immigrants, and 22 percent supports forcible repatriation of all immigrants. Moreover, regarding tolerance towards minority groups, the 2000 Eurobarometer survey indicates that 19 percent of the French respondents were classified as "intolerant", 25 percent as "ambivalent", 31 percent as "passively tolerant", and 25 percent as "actively tolerant". Similarly, only 31 percent of the French respondents support laws outlawing discrimination against minorities.¹³

Muslims are the forerunners among those exposed to discrimination in French society. The HRDC report that the French government inhibits the Muslim religious associations from receiving state funding by acting up on the 1925 law banning all state funding of religious institutions except for those, which have cultural ties to the French community. In addition, while the government provides state supervision to Catholic, Protestant and Jewish schools, it does not do so to Muslim schools. Similarly, notes the report, while there are Catholic, Protestant and Jewish chaplains in the French army, there are no Muslim chaplains. Discrimination also continues in the job market. In his report on France, Maurice Glele-Ahanhanzo, the UN Special Rapporteur on Racism, notes that the greatest discrimination in hiring is experienced by

immigrants from Africa, followed by Turkish and Southeast Asian immigrants.¹⁴ Similarly, the Economist reports that job applications from young men of the stigmatized neighborhoods end up unread in the bin.¹⁵ Lastly, different from other EU member states, France does not grant its minorities political representation in its parliament.¹⁶

France Needs to be Civilized...

The recent riots have demonstrated the severe level of discrimination within the French society and the bankruptcy of the French economic model. The French Police's tough policies have only been trigger for the riots, which were due sooner or later anyway. The lesson should be that it is crucial for France to eradicate discrimination against minorities by adopting civic values and to reform its soaring economic model. The French government and elite's attitude toward immigrants and foreigners is nothing but a shame while nowadays the world communities are embracing diversity and fostering intercultural dialogue to an extend that has never been experienced in the human history. Every social phenomenon produces both general and specific implications. The general implication of the recent French riots is the affirmation of that unemployment coupled with social isolation leads the disadvantaged communities to rise against the legal authorities. The specific implication of the riots is that the French government and the society elite is far behind the true civilization; the true civilization that instructs man to respect fellow human beings regardless of their socio-economic status, race, religion and ethnicity. The recent social conflicts within the French society have once again confirmed that France is still heavily under influence of its historical discriminatory character. It is the time for France to look inward and incorporate the universal civic values into its very society; the universal civic values that it has frequently preached and yet failed to practice.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid. cited in the report.*

14. *Ibid. cited in the report.*

15. See "An underclass rebellion" in the *Economist* November 12th 2005, p.24

16. *Ibid.* p.25