

Racism in French politics

Racism in France can be traced back for centuries, however most recently, after the decolonisation of France, there was a large influx of immigrants from places such as Algeria, who were nicknamed *pieds noirs*, who took advantage of their French citizenship much to the displeasure of some French nationals (Mittra, 1988). It also follows the anti-Semitic influence the Nazis had over Europe would create a racist undertone in France in that era, however in a more modern age that racism and xenophobia is still strongly felt towards France's ethnic minorities. One of the main influences of this is politics, where political leaders have the use of the media to be a strong voice and promote their views on ethnic minorities. This is where the National Front party has made their stance on French politics, becoming known as an extreme right-wing party due to their initial ties with Mussolini and the Nazis, but most recently their views on immigration (Fysh and Wolfreys, 2003). Although it is not uncommon for right wing extremist parties to appear, the way in which the National Front grew in popularity is rare.

Many factors are responsible for xenophobia and racism in France, and a lot of it can be traced back to politics. Firstly, although some parties may not be racist, governments have neglected the poorer areas of France, namely the suburbs, which are largely populated by immigrants, and so lead to the inequality of citizens and social exclusion (Bowen, 2015). This in itself does not create racism, however it shows the neglect that has led to a high proportion of Muslims being incarcerated (Bowen, 2015), and thereby giving fuel to the idea that immigrants bring crime. As well as this, the repression could be held partially responsible for events such as the 2005 riots which create a sense of hostility between the white French nationals and the poorer ethnic minorities. These fuel political parties like the National Front, which gain a larger public platform for their views and opinions.

It is shown throughout this report that political parties, namely the National Front, gain a wave of increased followers off the back of large events, such as the riots, the attacks on *Charlie Hebdo*, and the more recent terror attacks in Paris. Through a use of clever rhetoric and strategic emphasis on certain policies, politicians are able to appeal to the scared public in order to promote more racist and xenophobic ideas.

The rise of the French National Front

In May 1981, Francois Mitterrand who represented the Republican party was elected to be the French President (Fysh and Wolfreys, 2003). His policies towards immigrants were to integrate them better into the French society by reducing the amount of random checks conducted by the police and to aid them before they found a job through the official channels, as well as creating a ten year, renewable permit for them instead of the different permits for different nationalities (Fysh and Wolfreys, 2003). All these changes seemed positive in order to help economic growth and integrate immigrant workers into France better. Their relaxed attitude towards immigrants was shown through their use of pamphlets that were issued during the 1982 local elections, where campaigners would use the increasing amounts of attacks on the police by immigrants as a reason to entice voters to choose stricter immigration policies, and so Mitterrand's government issued neutral facts and figures in order to decrease the racism (Fysh and Wolfreys, 2003). They were, however, against a lot of propaganda from mainstream right parties who portrayed ethnic minorities as criminals. Unfortunately, throughout his two terms as President, Mitterrand created confusing policies about immigrants, as the work permits he issued created greater pressure on the working class (Mittra, 1988), and so led to social conditions that were rallying support for parties such as the French National Front (Fysh and Wolfreys, 2003).

The economic and social conditions of France had led to increasing tensions between French nationals and immigrants, which fuelled the following of the National Front, led by Jean-Marie Le Pen. Le Pen's policies were very much similar to other right wing parties in terms of the economy, defence and foreign relations, however the main difference was their stance on immigration (Mittra, 1988). The basis of their

opinion of immigration was that French nationals should be prioritised when applying for jobs, and there needed to be a tougher system that deported immigrants with a criminal record, as well as reducing or denying them benefits, and not giving them an automatic French nationality if they came from a former colony (Mitra, 1988). More shockingly, Le Pen stated that he would also aim to deport all immigrants who entered France after 1974, and stated that they should go back home (Fysh and Wolfreys, 2003).

Although these policies may not be racist as such, the way in which Le Pen particularly condemned North African immigrants, claiming that they were the cause of most crime, and the reason why two million French nationals are out of work (Fysh and Wolfreys, 2003). He also created a link between the AIDS epidemic – a taboo subject of the time – and homosexuals, drug users, Africans and Israelites (Fysh and Wolfreys, 2003), ensuring that the general public who listened to him associated that negative stigma of AIDS that had already been greatly hyped by the media, with these ethnic minorities that also threatened their jobs and livelihood. In 1987 he announced that he would be running for the presidential election, and that his main policies were to bring back the death penalty, as well as combat the causes for AIDS and crime, which were immigrants (Fysh and Wolfreys, 2003).

Le Pen used the media attention his party had gained over time in order to “say out loud what people think quietly to themselves” (Fysh and Wolfreys, 2003:48), which would suggest that there had already been the discrimination of immigrants, particularly North Africans, in France. This could be viewed as true as Le Pen did not hide his racial stigmatism, and yet his party still grew in popularity, showing that he used that underlying racism in order to fuel his campaign. After the independence of Algeria, the French dubbed the immigrants who came over as ‘*pieds noirs*’ and saw the move of social xenophobia among the French nationalists, that further supported Le Pen’s campaign.

It was not just the National Front who used racism as a way to gain popularity. The mayor of Toulon, Maurice Arreckx was quoted in *L’Express* saying that France was becoming a “dustbin for the collection of revolutionaries, delinquents and anarchists of all types. We should kick them out” (Fysh and Wolfreys, 2003:45), showing that different parties were upholding the morals set out by the National Front, and perhaps influencing more people to vote for them. Similarly, a communist leader drove a bulldozer into a house containing coloured immigrant workers, which was construed as a strategy to win back the white vote, however they later denied this and claimed that they meant to be showing their support for better housing for immigrants (Mitra, 1988). Whether or not their claim was true, it again brought racism to the forefront of politics, and meant that the government could no longer deny that it was an issue.

The growing unrest in France between immigrants, or the ethnic minorities, and the white French nationals is clear through the rise in popularity of the National Front, and the means by which they got there. Although the political parties did not create racism, they used it as a tactic and potentially amplified any issues by being a public voice and having the power to create change. In 2002 the National Front came second in the presidential elections, just showing how they were different from other right wing extremist parties.

How politics influenced the 2005 French Riots

In November, 2005, three young boys were chased by the Police as suspects of a crime. This resulted in two being electrocuted in an unfortunate accident whilst trying to escape, and one being admitted to hospital with serious injuries (Leonard, 2015). The children were from a poorer suburb that was ethnically diverse, with the boys representing African and Turkish descendant although they were all born and raised in France (Leonard, 2015). This led to confrontations starting between the police and young people, primarily men, which then escalated to cars and local stores being vandalised (Leonard, 2015). Eventually, the riots that had started in Clichy-Sous-Bois had spread to surrounding towns, until after two weeks the Government got involved and implemented the 1955 state of emergency law that meant police had more power and that citizens had to abide by a curfew (Leonard, 2015). The riots eventually died down, however the 20 nights of unrest led to police stations, schools, cars and numerous other institutions being burnt, as well as a large amount of police force against men from ethnic minorities, giving cause for accusations that the French police and government are racist (Sutterluty, 2014).

The tensions between ethnic minorities and the government have always been an underlying problem, and this can be shown by some of the actions the government have taken which have had a huge impact

on ethnic minorities. In 1993, the Socialist party was defeated, and consequently there was a change in policing strategies (Sutterluty, 2014). They were given new powers such as the use of rubber bullets and stun weapons, a move that was picked up by newspapers and portrayed as an effort to deal with the urban guerrillas (Sutterluty, 2014), but mainly meant the ethnic minorities that dominated the poorer urban outskirts. In 2002 and 2003, new laws meant that more behaviour was criminalised and there was a larger focus on delinquency rates (Sutterluty, 2014). Although these particular acts are not aimed specifically at ethnic minorities, the nature of them meant that it affected them more than it affected the richer parts of France that were more populated by white French citizens. The politics behind these acts can lead to unrest and a feeling of mistreatment for the young people with foreign descendants, a factor that may have influenced the need to riot in 2005 when they felt the unfair treatment had peaked.

Even if the riots had not been anything to do with race initially, which seems unlikely, the Minister of Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy from the Union for a Popular Movement Party used it to his advantage to create an image of those who rioted and condemn them for it. The government's response to the riots was to firstly de-legitimise the riots as an unpolitical act, and merely just an act of vandalism (Leonard, 2015), and secondly the use of colour-blind racism towards the rioters was an attempt to discredit the accusations of racism and repress them without sounding racist whilst doing so (Leonard, 2015). The main idea behind colour-blind racism is to label certain groups with 'code' words that are not necessarily racist, however they are negative and are applied to a specific group, such as calling a group of Africans 'gang members', therefore not specially being racist, but creating an adverse impression of that particular ethnic group (Leonard, 2015). Sarkozy was the main speaker for the unrest in the suburbs, even before the riots he had stated that the 'beurs' (European born people that have descended from North Africa) were causing the high levels of criminality in the area, and so needed to be "washed away with a high-pressure cleaner" (Sutterluty, 2014:42). During the riots he continued to label them with words such as 'scum' which reiterated his need to 'clean' the suburbs (Sutterluty, 2014). This was broadcasted around France, along with strong images of the riots, and so greatly influenced the minds of the public about the type of people who lived in the suburbs, and did not give an insight into the reasons as to why they were rioting (Leonard, 2015).

However, Sarkozy's words did not represent the French government as a whole, and he came up against opposition from the Delegate Minister for the Promotion of the Equality of Chances/Opportunities, who criticised Sarkozy's use of labels and threats of police intervention (Leonard, 2015). Unfortunately, this did not have an impact on future statements made by Sarkozy who carried on using colour-blind racism in order to create a campaign for further Republican order, claiming that these riots will lead to the rise of gangs and mafias (Leonard, 2015). The use of this 'us' verses 'them' attitude could be seen as a political tool to gain the following of the white French citizens that do not experience the same discrimination as the ethnic minorities, and see the riots as a threat and a negative impact in their lives. Sarkozy even went so far as to say that there needed to be more deportations, and that the rioters should be sent back to where they came from, overlooking the fact that most rioters were second generations and were French citizens, therefore not having anywhere to 'go back' to (Leonard, 2015).

The language used by Sarkozy during this time is very similar to tactics used by the French National Front Party, such as creating the sense of threat and insecurity caused by the youths in the suburbs of France, highlighting the idea that they threaten the "'good' citizens of France" (Leonard, 2015:9). It was in fact, Marine Le Pen, the daughter of the party leader who requested that France used their 1955 State of Emergency Law for these riots, which could potentially be a tactical move that links the rioters to the people of Algeria, who the law was originally created for (Leonard, 2015) showing yet another hint of discrimination by the French Government.

Therefore, it has been said that the government did not act in a regular fashion towards these riots, particularly when compared to other riots such as in 2006 when students protested against a government decision, and also burned cars (Leonard, 2015). Instead of being labelled as 'thugs' and 'scum', the students were painted in a positive light as simply a political generation. The main difference between the people who participated in these riots is their ethnic background, as most of the students were white French citizens (Leonard, 2015).

A political view on the Charlie Hebdo attacks

At the beginning of 2015, two men forced their way into the offices of the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and used rifles to kill 12 people that worked there after the satirical magazine published a

caricature of the prophet Mohammed. This was not the first time the magazine had produced controversial material that could be taken offensively. In 2007 a French court ruled that even though some of their images are provocative, they were not offensive towards a specific group of people, but were aimed at beliefs and therefore was deemed to be freedom of expression instead of racist (Bowen, 2015). This could be one of the reasons for the growing tensions between the extreme Islamists that claimed the attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* and the magazine. Another aspect that would increase the tensions is the political way in which French Muslims have been treated, where there has been a contradiction of attempts of inclusion, such as making halal meat more readily available, and yet in 2004 religious signs were banned from schools (Bowen, 2015). For whatever reason those men decided to kill the journalists of *Charlie Hebdo*, it was agreed that this was a significant turning point in the French's attitudes towards Muslims (Chrisafis, 2015).

As a nation, France was deeply divided, and it was clear that it needed to find a way to live together (Bowen, 2015). The phrase 'Je suis Charlie' (I am Charlie) was adopted by millions as a sign of solidarity and unity across France, a potentially positive move in terms of the racism that existed there. However, there were those who found the cartoon offensive, and did not support *Charlie Hebdo*, but also did not support the attacks, and therefore the phrase gave a false sense of solidarity (Bowen, 2015). Different slogans of 'I am Ahmed' (a Muslim police officer that was also killed during the attacks) and 'I am a Muslim, a Jew, and French' as an attempt for real unity (Bowen, 2015). This phrase, however, just highlights further that Muslims, Jews and the French are not one entity, and that there is still a significant divide, which could have a negative impact on the politics of France.

The political response to the attacks was, for the most part, very similar to the nations response; a mixed one. It was imperative that once the attackers were identified as being extreme Islamists, the government would need to emphasise the importance of changing policing and security (Chrisafis, 2015). The French Prime Minister, Manuel Valls, stated that this was France's 'apartheid', and emphasised the urgency of the problem (Bowen, 2015). The main issue with his statements were that firstly, it was very similar to his speech made about the 2005 riots and made no changes after that, and secondly, by comparing it to the apartheid, it is once again giving violent connotations to an ethnic minority that are already associated with the rare extremists, and so innocent people are being tarred with the same brush. The two main issues that were sparked by the attacks were the need for inclusivity, but also the call for tougher immigration. Some party leaders called for tougher measures to be taken on publicly wearing a headscarf, or the serving of Halal food, particularly in schools. They wanted diversity to stay outside of France and to not be visible (Bowen, 2015). This is just another example of politicians using a wave of catastrophe to fuel their desire to repress different religions and ethnic minorities in France. However, on the other hand, inclusivity was seen as the only realistic way that would help keep tensions low in France, and would show the public that it was important to accept diversity (Bowen, 2015). The main criticism of this approach is that it is seen as a "multiculturalist weakness in the face of terrorism" (Bowen, 2015:19), and as the attacks would have injected a lot of fear into the public, it would lack support as they would not feel as if they are being protected by these sort of terrorist attacks. Therefore, as seen in the 2005 riots, some politicians took the opportunity of these attacks to exploit the public fears and carry on with racist intent of condemning an ethnic group for the attack.

The National Front was one of the parties that saw the attacks as an opportunity to gain support. They used the new wave of fear towards Muslims to reiterate a theory that predicts that soon enough Muslim birth rates will mean that they will become a majority in France in the near future (Bowen, 2015), and although this theory has been discredited, the National Front has once again linked Muslim attacks to immigrants and the threats that they pose to French nationals. Marine Le Pen, the current leader of the National Front, also claimed in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks that France should stop spending as much money on the minority communities, as they already claim far too much (Bowen, 2015). Unfortunately, these tactics have been having a growing effect on the French population, with demonstrators taking to the streets after the attacks in order to take a stand against the growing xenophobia experienced in France that have allowed the National Front to be such a significant party (Chrisafis, 2015). The growing support for the National Front has meant that there are more of the party's MP's around France, and attacks such as the *Charlie Hebdo* ones have been highly condemned which will only increase their popularity (Chrisafis, 2015).

It is important to remember that although the attacks on the journalists at *Charlie Hebdo* were unjust and criminal, they were responding to growing repression and racism that every day Muslims in France

faced. It is a very small minority of extremists that would resort to such violent, however the racist political reaction from some parties may well lead to further repression, and so potentially could lead to more extreme actions. There appears to be a negative circle, where each act of violence by a repressed group only fuels the repression and xenophobia in France.

How the Paris attacks created further political division.

On the 13th November, 2015, just 10 months after the attacks at the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, France was hit by multiple terrorist attacks in different locations, killing 130 people. The attacks were claimed by the terrorist group ISIS in response to the airstrikes in Syria that France had conducted. Regardless of the intention of the attackers, the public and political responses to it once again put France in a state of uncertainty and mistrust towards certain ethnic groups. Some of the attackers were revealed to be of French nationality, however they had been radicalised outside of the country (Downing, 2015). Despite this, Muslims in France were once again being opened to racism as they were associated with the rare radicals that do not support their views, but claim the same religion.

Initially, there was a lot of concern for the Muslim population, and fear that they would be held responsible for the attacks (McVeigh and Grahma-Harrison, 2015). The attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* were still recent in the French's minds, and racist Islamophobic attacks had risen from 133 incidents reported to the authorities in 2014, to more than 400 incidents in 2015 (Chazan, 2015), showing that racism in France had increased greatly in the wake of the attacks, and since these recent ones were on a much larger scale, Muslims had every reason to be concerned. President Hollande ordered for more police protection outside of Mosques (Vidon-White, 2016) in order to maintain his policy to encourage integration within France, however even thoroughly integrated Muslims still feared for their safety as they believe that racist groups will exploit the attacks (McVeigh and Graham-Harrison, 2015). Women in particular were targeted if they wore a headscarf (Downing, 2015), something that had been a contentious issue in the past and held much political debate when they were banned in schools in 2004. According to opinion polls, French voters were in favour of a new law that would mean any person found to be a terrorist that had dual nationality would be stripped of their French citizenship (Chazan, 2015) which shows another political move against immigrants.

President Hollande declared France to be in a state of emergency, and stated that the attacks against France were an act of war (McVeigh and Graham-Harrison, 2015). His main issue was similar to the one facing him in the aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, that he needed to address the terror threat that radicalised people were presenting, but also to protect the Muslims that were not associated in any way (Downing, 2015). As mentioned before, he heightened police presence outside Mosques, as well as giving the police more powers that allowed them to do things such as searching houses without warrants, and to increase the border controls in order to catch those responsible for the attacks (Newman, 2015). Hollande was quick to condemn the attacks but also protect the safety of any innocent ethnic minorities that may be persecuted for the attacks.

The National Front refrained from attacking President Hollande for his actions after the attacks, however they were now being listened to more as their previous concerns about increased immigration and the ever growing threat of attack had now become a reality (Vidon-White, 2016). Polls taken after the attack showed that the National Front's popularity had surged to 40 per cent (Dearden, 2015), a significant increase, and a common pattern now established in the National Front's rising power. This increase was once again off the back of fear of immigrants, an issue that the National Front was unrelenting in their policies. In a statement by their leader, Le Pen, she declared that France needed an immediate halt on the migrants that were coming to France from Syria (Newman, 2015), as President Hollande had promised would happen. This tactic would lead to further xenophobia in France, despite the terrorists being of French nationality. Despite Hollande's attempt to neutralise racism in France, and to keep ethnic minorities safe, the National Front were a more powerful voice, with their early on predictions of the 'dangers' of immigration, and their quick habit of turning a disaster such as the Paris attacks into evidence to support their theories and policies.

The majority of political parties in France were quick to condemn the attacks as a minute minority of radicalised people, and did not blame any other minorities for them, however the National Front were, for a small time, the only voice that seemed to offer the people of France a solution to protect them

from these types of attacks in the future, which would explain why they gained so much popularity in the polls. In another poll, however, it was found that almost half of all voters believed that if the National Front were to be elected in the upcoming elections, it would be the worst possible outcome (Dearden, 2015), showing that the wave of support may only be temporary in the wake of terror events.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there seems to be a significant correlation between racism, politics and extreme events happening in France throughout the 21st Century. Significantly, the National Front is at the forefront of racist politics and using pre-existing racial ideas to gain popularity, as well as affirming the need to control immigrants and the threat they pose to French nationalists through the rhetoric used. Although they have been of particular focus, other politicians have used similar colour-blind racism when trying to evoke a change, and have also significantly labelled ethnic minorities as ‘thugs’ and being in the middle of an ‘apartheid’. This negativity is particularly damning for the small ethnic minority population of France, who do not have such a strong political voice. It is also interesting to see how government policies have influenced the poorer areas of France, which are mainly populated by ethnic minorities, and have created further social exclusion. This could be said to be the main cause for all three of the main events discussed. In the 2005 riots, the unfair deaths of the three boys brought about a need to riot for change, and their deaths in turn could be said to be caused by unjust and harsh policing of those areas that would have been implemented by the Government. It would have been the last straw for an increasingly socially excluded group. In terms of the radicalised French nationals that were responsible for the terror attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* and later on in Paris, the large number of Muslims in prison are said to be more exposed to extremists that convert them (Bowen, 2015), and so again, government policy would have made that set of conditions a possibility. Whether or not these policies were intentionally racist towards these minorities, the aftermath of the events were quickly taken up by politicians in order to fuel a racist and xenophobic campaign in order to exclude immigrants from France. Therefore, it would appear that the events were as a result of neglect from the government, but were used as an advantage by parties such as the National Front and politicians like Sarkozy in order to gain popularity, and created a stronger campaign. Not all politicians and political parties saw these events as an opportunity to exploit the public's xenophobic fears, and attempted to use it as an attempt to build relations and integrate different cultures into France, however there is no denying that the politics in France has an underlying sense of racism.

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