

France - Shooting of a teenager: why it's time for French politicians to stop defending police violence

Monday 3 July 2023, by [SALVI Ellen](#) (Date first published: 29 June 2023).

The killing of 17-year-old Nahel by an armed police officer in the Paris suburb of Nanterre has made headlines in France and across the world. It has provoked angry reactions in the streets and from a number of politicians. But as Ellen Salvi writes in this op-ed article, the youngster's death has also been the subject of some shameful comments, of falsehoods, efforts at justification and attempts to play it down. She argues that for the last 20 years successive governments and a rampant far right have denied a stark reality: that of a society that is sinking as it forgets its fundamental principles and the values that stem from them.

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The same anger and the same disgraceful reaction. The death of Nahel, aged 17, who was shot and killed at point-blank range by a police officer on Tuesday at a roadblock in Nanterre in the western suburbs of Paris, should have brought everyone together in agreement. No “yes, buts”, no justifications, and certainly no attempts to play it down. In a political and media world that is even slightly in possession of its faculties, these types of public expressions ought to be seen for what they are: the garbage of human thought.

Yet nearly 20 years after the tragedies of [Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré](#) – their deaths at a power substation in Clichy-sous-Bois near Paris provoked widespread rioting across France in 2005 – nothing has changed. In fact, the situation has got worse, through the impact of a far right that is even more powerful, spewing out its ideas and its lies in all the television studios where they are welcomed with open arms. In their trail we see the impassive faces of those who are political leaders in name only. Elected representatives who have no other moral compass than that of denial. And who, along the way, have forgotten what really matters.

On previous occasions the politicians trotted out included police commander turned Emmanuel Macron-supporting Member of Parliament [Jean-Michel Fauvergue](#), another Macron loyalist MP [Laurent Saint-Martin](#) and [Gilles Le Gendre](#), who was president of Macron's Parliamentary group at the National Assembly. But they could just as well have had everyday names such as Pierre Dupont, Jacques Boudou or Nicolas Martin, for the outcome would have been the same. For more than five years, microphones have been thrust in front of individuals destined to be forgotten who have disputed to the point of absurdity the existence of police violence and have distorted concepts - in

this case, of [sociologist Max Weber](#) – that elude them.

Emmanuel Macron and his predecessor as president, François Hollande, at the Élysée, February 25th 2022. © Photo Carine Schmitt / Hans Lucas via AFP

The day after the tragedy at Nanterre, it was another MP for Macron's ruling Renaissance party, Caroline Abadie, vice-chair of the National Assembly's law committee, who displayed shameful reasoning. She told the [LCP](#) Parliamentary channel: "After all, the police have the right to use force. We're subject to the rule of law, we must remember the fundamentals, when there's a police roadblock, you stop, simple as that." She added: "One must also bear in mind these basic principles."

A police officer had just killed a young man of 17. "His intention to kill was in no doubt as it follows on from the audio on the video [*editor's note, taken of the incident*] where he states before he fires: 'I'm going to put a bullet in your head'," said the victim's lawyer, Yassine Bouzrou. The officer was immediately placed in custody while an investigation for 'voluntary homicide' was opened. So as this is an issue of "basic principles", let's talk about them.

The police are there to serve citizens and them alone, their rights and their freedoms. Their first mission is as a guardian of the peace for the whole of society. They are subject to the Republic, to its fundamental laws and to the values that these laws articulate. Yet in recent years, through cowardice and nervousness, successive governments have chosen to position themselves "behind" the police rather than to stand in front, leading and commanding them.

The grim, real effects of excessive zeal over security

In 2016 Bernard Cazeneuve – who was interior minister then prime minister and who now sees himself as a saviour of the Left – had pushed for legislation under President François Hollande – the other man who sees himself as the Left's saviour – to make it easier for the forces of law and order to use their firearms. This policy has had a real and grim impact; since the reform came into effect in February 2017 the number of fatal shootings by the police has continued to rise.

At the time the independent rights commissioner – Le Défenseur des Droits – Jacques Toubon had expressed alarm about the legislation, the former president of the human rights group the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme (LDH), Michel Tubiana, had criticised what he called a "licence to kill", while rebel socialist MP [Pouria Amirshahi](#) had tabled a motion at the National Assembly in a bid to scrap the law. But in vain. Voices of reason had already been drowned out in a public debate still dominated by the approach to law and order shown by Hollande's predecessor Nicolas Sarkozy and its drift towards security crackdowns.

One has to remember this context to understand, six years later, how unbearable it is to see François Hollande "sending Nahel's mother and all his family my deepest grief" on [Twitter](#). One should also bear in mind President Emmanuel Macron's past comment "Don't speak about repression or police violence, these words are unacceptable under the rule of law" and that of his interior minister Gérald Darmanin who said "I choke when I hear the words police violence".

Words but no deeds

The president of the Republic and the interior minister have changed their tone markedly in the last 24 hours. While restating the presumption of innocence for all suspects, Gérald Darmanin was

forced to admit on Wednesday, while being questioned in France's Senate, that the acts carried out the night before at Nanterre "did not conform to the legislation and to the national police's ethical training".

The Ministry of the Interior also announced in a [statement](#) that it was "studying ways" to disband the far-right police union France Police, which published a Tweet – since deleted – congratulating the police officers involved in Nahel's death. Condemning "strongly these comments that go against our republican values", the ministry has formally flagged the Tweet and referred it to the prosecution service in Paris.

Emmanuel Macron, who was on a visit to Marseille in the south of France, [himself spoke](#) of an "inexplicable" and "unforgivable" tragedy and appealed for "calm so that justice can take its course". The prime minister Élisabeth Borne also spoke of actions which "clearly seem not to be in line with the rules of engagement". Faced with the video footage of the incident and the initial findings of the investigation, it is difficult to take any other view. But words are not enough.

This is because for years nothing has been done to seriously combat the abuses committed by the forces of law and order. Indeed, quite the opposite. The police unions have seen all, or virtually all, of their demands met. In [May 2021](#) Gérald Darmain even stood side by side with them during a demonstration staged under the windows of the National Assembly. "All professions have a genetic failing: with the police it's impunity," [says](#) Jean-Pierre Mignard, the lawyer who represented Zyed and Bouna.

Over time politicians have given up uttering the slightest criticism of the police. They have realised that simply raising an eyebrow can provoke the wrath of the police unions. On Wednesday the police union [Alliance](#), which sent its support to "colleagues injured last night" without a word for Nahel and his family, in fact attacked the comments made by the head of state and demanded that the "presumption of innocence be respected and not trampled on".

Under pressure from the political and media far right, relayed by those on the Right, a section of the so-called government left, the majority of specialist commentators, fundamental principles and indeed any principles at all have gradually disappeared from our daily life. They have been replaced by the indigestible mush served up by the CNews television commentator [Charlotte d'Ornellas](#) and the Euro MP [Jean-François Bellamy](#) from the rightwing Les Républicains (LR).

This situation is not merely pathetic. It is also dangerous. For by relinquishing and attacking the rule of law, successive governments and their mouthpieces have established a society in which everything is equal and nothing is serious. Not even the very worst.

Ellen Salvi

29 June 2023 à 13h19

P.S.

• Mediapart. 29 June 2023 à 13h19 :
<https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/290623/shooting-teenager-why-its-time-french-politicians-stop-defending-police-violence>

- The original French version of this op-ed article can be found [here](#).

English version by Michael Streeter

Les articles d'Ellen Salvi sur Mediapart :

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