

Note on the situation in France

Precariousness and social tensions at their peak in times of pandemic.

Debate on rights, freedoms and the functioning of democracy.

France has been affected by the COVID-19 epidemic since February 2020 and its population was under strict lockdown from March 17th until May 10th. While the health measures adopted apply to all people living in the French territory, it is clear that their effects were all the more felt by the most precarious individuals and communities, especially during the lockdown : people living in slums, squats or insalubrious housing, homeless people, undocumented people, and people with precarious jobs. For them, lockdown compliance represented a real obstacle to decent living conditions. Loss of income, lack of access to food, hygiene, health, education, etc. Noting the late and insufficient response of the public authorities, civil society organisations doubled their efforts, without being able to make up for the severity of the social distress linked to the pandemic. In addition to accelerating pre-existing inequalities, the current context fuelled social tensions. This crisis also increased the divide between French citizens and their representatives, who were considered to have little credibility, even though the lockdown rules were widely respected. In this context, the monitoring role of organisations defending rights and freedoms was strengthened. Indeed, the state of health emergency served as a justification for repressive measures on the part of the government, as well as a pretext for the proliferation of abuses and violence on the part of the law enforcement authorities.

Police violence and urban revolts

Before the start of the health crisis, the issue of police violence in France had already become a central social issue, following the crackdown on the yellow vests and on the social movement against the pension reform. Social media played an important role in the alert and diffusion of

violent acts occurring in working-class neighbourhoods, where this culture of police violence and impunity is older and has been internalized by the population.

The lockdown situation acted as a magnifying glass on the abusive practices of some of the French police officers, who are in charge of controlling the whole population, and used throughout the territory similar methods to those used in working-class neighbourhoods. Thus, associations taking part in the state of health emergency Monitoring Network (Réseau de veille sur l'état d'urgence sanitaire), as well as partners of VoxPublic involved in the campaign against ethnic profiling (#MaRueMesDroits), sent an open letter to the Prime Minister and the Minister of the Interior to denounce discriminatory police controls and abusive fines. As in previous social crises, the French government and the minister of the Interior minimised these acts of violence and abuse of authority, while maintaining their unconditional support to the police hierarchy, even against French MPs.

During the week of April 20th, following a serious accident caused by police officers against a young biker in a city, urban violence broke out in several towns in the Paris region, as well as in Toulouse, Strasbourg and the suburbs of Lyon. *"Are these signs of a generalized conflagration or a simple outbreak of non-recurring violence?"* asked a journalist from *Le Monde*, while tensions were at their highest in these working-class neighbourhoods under strict police control. On April 23rd, the newspaper *le Canard enchaîné* published an internal note from the prefect of Seine-Saint-Denis to his superiors indicating his fear of seeing "*hunger riots*" erupt, there, in the poorest department in France. As Mohamed Mechmache of the collective Pas sans Nous (a VoxPublic partner), a former association activist involved in the 2005 revolts, pointed out in the press: *"If those who are lucky in life worry about what will happen afterwards, imagine how those who have nothing feel."* »

Precariousness at its peak

Lockdown measures have made social inequalities even more patent, while the health crisis and the economic downturn are exacerbating the difficulties associated with job insecurity, poverty and poor housing.

Today, 4 million people are living in indecent housing or are homeless, according to the figures of the Collective of United Associations, bringing together 36 recognized organizations. Their situation has become particularly critical. In France, five million people live below the poverty line (established at 50% of median income), including 1.8 million children and adolescents (source: Observatoire des inégalités, 2018), to whom should be added undocumented migrants, slum dwellers and homeless people. These people normally depend on precarious work and low wages, and survive thanks to the informal economy, the support of associations, especially those that provide food distributions (Restos du cœur, Food Banks, Secours populaire, etc.), but also by begging, which was difficult during the lockdown.

"The current crisis is severely affecting the livelihoods of the most precarious," notes the Collective of United Associations in a full report. The government's policy is to encourage the retention of employees in employment through large-scale short-time working policies and the support to small

businesses, but many categories of the population are left out of these supporting measures. Thus, temporary workers, seasonal workers, employees whose precarious contracts come to an end, workers in the entertainment industry, and even more so those who were already unemployed or living off of informal income (illegal work), are very vulnerable. Another difficulty is that some families benefited from reduced fee (meals at 1€) for school canteens, which sometimes provided children with the only full meal of the day.

All of this leads to unprecedented phenomena in France, namely a greater recourse of the population to food aid, provided by donations and purchases from the State or associations, but which is unfortunately not sufficient, thus leading families into hunger. For example, in Toulouse, Médecins du Monde identified more than 27 squats with more than 1,000 people and 13 slums housing more than 700 people, while the food aid provided by the State only helps 930 people. A balance sheet that does not take into account the inhabitants of poor neighbourhoods who are also starting to go hungry due to lack of income...

In the slums of Calais and Grande-Synthe, the current living conditions of around 1,500 people remain totally undignified and are described as degrading by the main observers (United Nations, Défenseur des Droits). Associations with which VoxPublic collaborates, such as Utopia 56 and the Migrants' Hostel (L'Auberge des Migrants), had great difficulty maintaining their humanitarian mission in the last weeks of the lockdown. Several volunteers from the association Utopia 56, were fined for not respecting the lockdown, when they were distributing food, while the daily dismantling of the exiled people's camps also lead to serious tensions.

We must therefore expect in the coming months, despite the end of the lockdown and perhaps the end of the pandemic, a serious and lasting increase in poverty in France, in a context where associations are already largely saturated, lacking resources and recognition of their work by the French authorities.

The debate on rights, freedoms and the functioning of democracy

On March 23rd, a law proposed by the Government and adopted by parliamentarians established a "state of health emergency", a series of exceptional measures giving the executive branch extraordinary powers to govern by decrees. This legal mechanism was modelled on the state of emergency provided by the Constitution in the event of serious crises, which had recently been used following the terrorist attacks of November 2015. While the first round of municipal elections had taken place on March 15th, despite requests for postponement, the second round could not take place and remains suspended until today, with no new date announced. The entire institutional and democratic life of the country has therefore been put on hold since the beginning of this pandemic.

French civil society quickly got together to monitor and play a warning role on the possible abuses of this state of emergency, which undermines many public freedoms and fundamental rights. The State of Health Emergency Monitoring Network, of which VoxPublic is a member and facilitator, currently brings together national associations for the protection of freedoms, but also field actors

supporting vulnerable populations, academics, lawyers and two unions of legal specialists: the Union of Lawyers of France and the Union of the Magistracy. Their concerns have been growing in this period of exceptional powers given to the executive (government, prefects), especially since many local elected officials have taken freedom-destroying decrees, sometimes completely unrelated to the prevention of the health crisis, but dictated by a security logic, such as curfews.

The question of tracking in France

With the stated aim of slowing down the progress of the COVID-19 epidemic, France plans to set up a system for tracing the persons in contact with infected people using a phone application that would be non-mandatory. *"The developers of this type of application ensure that they are respectful of privacy, but this notion remains vague,"* experts say in a note pointing at the risks of this new mass tracing technology. The association La Quadrature du net (a VoxPublic partner and member of the National coalition of associations' freedoms and the State of Health Emergency Monitoring Network) [points out](#) threats to individual liberties as well as a risk of "security acclimatization", explaining that *"the application encourages people to subject their bodies to constant surveillance, which will reinforce the social acceptability of other technologies, such as facial recognition or automated video surveillance, which are currently widely rejected."* »

Towards a recomposition of the French political landscape?

In many European countries, governments have taken "bold steps". These include the regularization of undocumented migrants in Portugal, the prohibition of dismissals and the creation of a universal income in Spain, or Denmark's decision to exclude actors guilty of tax evasion from economic support funds. On the opposite, the French crisis management is marked by short-term steering, except in economic matters, with the desire to ensure the recovery of the economy at any price, including by supporting the most polluting companies. Support to vulnerable groups has not been spontaneous. It took insistent calls from civil society to ensure that measures, which are notoriously insufficient, were taken.

Thus, regarding food aid, *"we are going to go further"*, announced Christelle Dubos, Secretary of State at the Ministry of Solidarity and Health, on April 23rd, before describing an aid plan of 39 million euros, 25 million of which will be intended to support the associations that distribute food, either by enabling them to buy food or by helping them to bear the expenses implemented to deal with the specificities of the period. 14 million will be used to support food aid in the territories where the population struggles the most, for example in Seine-Saint-Denis, *"which is the most affected territory"*, acknowledged Christelle Dubos.

This crisis could therefore accelerate the reshaping of the French political landscape. On the right, The Republicans' party wants to be associated with the government in crisis management, while at the local level, the elected members of this party have distinguished themselves by their outrageous security measures. The French far right, led by Marine Le Pen, has been less than vocal about what

it would have done had it been in power, focusing on criticising the government's notorious shortcomings (lack of masks and tests).

The second round of municipal elections, which was scheduled for March 23rd, has been postponed to next fall. It is possible that the Head of State will not wait until that date to form a government with a broader political base, including politicians from both the left and the right.

Finally, it should be noted that, leading to the municipal elections, citizen lists from social movements and yellow jackets had emerged almost everywhere, but they did not make an electoral breakthrough. It is these same militant networks that are currently behind the incredible initiatives of solidarity towards the inhabitants (<https://covid-entraide.fr/>) of both cities and the villages, which contributes to the reinforcement of their anchoring on the territories and with the population. Some of these networks have the idea of proposing a programme focused on territorial resilience (agriculture, energy, care), the relocation of jobs and an ecological transition.

Conclusion

It is true that precariousness and social tensions are at their peak, but the fact remains that this context has given rise, in France and elsewhere, to new solidarity initiatives that the government could support and replicate, so that tensions have a chance to ease. It is in this critical environment that VoxPublic continues to play its role in supporting civil society actors who actively denounce social injustice and discrimination.

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