

## **The Unrest in France in 2005 and 2007**

The riots of October/November 2005 in the peripheral housing projects (banlieues) of Paris and other big cities resulted in the destruction of approximately 9,200 vehicles, one accidental death, 2,888 arrests and a cost of more than 200 million euros. The unrest revealed the scope of the social malaise inherent in France's inability to incorporate its disaffected youths of migrant background. The roots of the unrest were to be found in socio-economic and ethnic exclusion experienced by many youths, who have pervasive feelings of anguish and hopelessness concerning their lives and their uncertain futures. French youths of migrant background, primarily Maghrebi and Turkish, were confronted with endemic forms of discrimination in the job market, with unemployment rates in some heavily immigrant areas reaching 40 per cent, nearly four times the national average. Police conducting routine identification regularly used racial profiling, while owners of clubs and bars denied entrance to their establishments to non-whites.

Moreover, episodes of police violence tended to aggravate the strained relationship between migrant youths and the police which resulted in further alienation from the institutions of the Republic. Following a process of ghettoization, certain areas became exclusion zones in which poverty, high unemployment, and an absence of upward social mobility coexisted with petty crime and delinquency. Isolated from the inner cities due to the high cost and relative lack of public transportation, such environments fostered the development of a distinct male-dominated urban culture characterized by unique and creative forms of artistic and musical expression including graffiti and rap music.

Furthermore, this seclusion led to a sense of territorial appropriation by rival bands of youngsters who felt a need to defend their territory against outsiders. In this context, violence and regular skirmishes with the police became an outlet to escape the idleness and monotony of their lives. Gangs provided many youths with a sense of belonging, giving meaning to their lives. Group dynamics of emulation and competition among members and between rival groups appeared to have played a crucial role in the incendiary attacks on cars. Additionally, the presence of the media helped to foster a kind of destructive competition between various youth gangs.

The immediate causes of the unrest consisted of several incidents which occurred in a relatively short period of time sparking angry outbursts. First, the fatal fire at the hotel Paris-Opera in April 2005 resulted in the deaths of 25 persons, most of whom were immigrants who were paying relatively high rent, and had been waiting for years to benefit from more social housing. This incident exposed the precarious and bleak living conditions of many immigrant families. Various associations, whose membership largely consisted of persons of African descent, the same as the fire victims, organized demonstrations.

Second, the French government cancelled several social programmes and subsidies that had been in place since the 1990s including a neighbourhood policing programme which had helped to maintain a relationship of trust between youths and law enforcement officers. Immediately prior to the riots, then Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy vowed to 'clean up the suburbs', starting with La Courneuve (where a boy of 11 years had been tragically gunned down during the spring of 2005) and harshly rebuked the youth of Argenteuil, another Parisian suburb, following an incident on October 25, referring to them as scum. Two days later, the deaths of two teenagers, who were electrocuted in a power substation while trying to hide from the police, triggered the riots.

The riots had no religious connotation. No religious demands were made and the rioters ignored appeals by officials of Muslim organizations to end the rioting. The majority of the participants were not delinquents, but were normal youths angered by their situations and constant harassment. The riots were a spontaneous and genuine movement of disaffected youths aimed at showing their frustration with the French government and a society which they felt had forsaken them. Ironically, the violent protests of the largely immigrant-background youths constituted classically French political participation and mainly involved French citizens.

By 2007, the situation in the suburbs was as before and another spate of rioting ensued. In 2008, newly elected President Sarkozy announced another plan to improve life in heavily immigrant suburbs, the sixteenth in 31 years. But by the end of his presidency in 2012, little had changed and periodic rioting similar to that of 2005 ensued, although these incidents were localized and of short duration.