

French politics after the Paris attacks: polarised and deeply personal

*France will hold regional elections on 6 and 13 December, which are expected to be dominated by the response to the terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November. **John Gaffney** writes that the split between left-wing and right-wing parties in the aftermath of the attacks has been much more profound than following the previous attacks in Paris in January. He also argues that any upturn in President Hollande's approval ratings are likely to reflect broader attitudes toward the role of the President during a crisis, rather than support for the specific actions Hollande has undertaken.*



The French security services are highly regarded throughout the world; and evidence of their excellence is how quickly the identities of the Paris attackers and their whereabouts were established. All the more shocking therefore, that not only were so many lives lost and such havoc wrought, and this by well-trained coordinated units (who knew they were all destined to die rather than surrender), armed with sophisticated weapons in a highly complex operation, the planning and execution of the momentous events went completely under the radar. It seems to be the case too that these commando units were able to travel to and from Syria and around Europe with impunity.

Several of the elements of the Paris attacks on 13 November are new developments: the scale of the killing – 130 dead, 350 injured, 80 critically – the training of the attackers, and the use of suicide belts. Earlier recent attackers such as Mohamed Merah, and the Kouachi brothers were not trying to die, they were trying to escape. Also the targets of the 13 November attacks were not Jews, satirists, off-duty soldiers, or unarmed policewomen, but everyone.

If there was an identifiable category it was the young. The overwhelming majority of the victims were – like the attackers – young people. Another arguably new development was that the attackers were not just trying to kill people but to terrorise a nation. The casualties were real, but the targets were symbolic: places illustrative of the West's 'decadence' such as cafés, sports stadiums (with two targets, France and Germany, as well as the French President at the Stade de France), music and dancing at the Bataclan, the *joie de vivre* targets of western decadence.

One sad irony is that, far from the *joie de vivre*, Paris has been a pretty miserable place for some time and certainly since the Charlie Hebdo attacks in January 2015. All year there has been a sense of almost permanent anxiety throughout the country, and particularly in Paris. The 13 November attacks have taken this anxiety to new heights, or depths, of collective anguish. There has been a series of political, military, diplomatic and other responses to the massacres, but the most consequential is a national anxiety, fear, and suppressed panic of clinical and durable proportions.

There has also been a series of practical responses. A three-month state of emergency is the first (house arrests, increased search powers, electronic tagging, banning certain groups). At the European level, it is clear that security agencies will work together much more in the future. This has public approval but involves an element of disbelief that this was not already happening. At the European level, too, the ease with which the attackers moved around has re-ignited the border issue of whether Schengen works (it does not); all this adding value to the right and extreme right discourse about national security, particularly the Front National who want national borders reasserted.

This is no longer seen as unthinkable. And if this were to happen across the EU, the EU itself would be in question. President Hollande also announced the creation of 5,000 more jobs in the police and gendarmerie, 2,500 more in the legal system, and a halt in reductions of personnel in the armed forces (3,000 per year had been planned over the next three years).

France is in serious economic difficulty as it is. Where even a fraction of the costs of these measures will come from is unknown. At the military level, attacks on Islamic State in Syria by the French Air Force have escalated considerably since 13 November. At the diplomatic level, the sudden cooperation with Russia and now Iran has meant France making Assad's stepping down a condition of cooperation highly problematic.

All of these issues are important and consequential. But the emotional and psychological consequences remain the most problematic and difficult to analyse. And the anxiety of the population felt most acutely is that of the 'Muslim' population itself. An irony and an issue of tactical significance here: this community is the largest in Europe, almost twice the UK figure. The irony is that France's Muslims are arguably the most integrated in Europe. They number about 5 or 6 million (the numbers are not clear; in this secular republic there are only 'citizens'). The overwhelming majority are of North African origin (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia), and about one third of them are practising (many of these only observing Ramadan, for example).

The 'tactic' was and is to 'cleave' this relatively integrated population; and attacks upon this part of the population rise dramatically in periods such as this, as does the divisive volume of Front National rhetoric. The few from this population that are 'radicalised' are usually disaffected youths from France's often god-awful, soul-destroying outer suburbs where unemployment is in places total and opportunities non-existent. The education system in these places – like everything else – is seriously deficient (despite some heroic efforts); and, in places, even the police won't go.

Another irony and a mystery. The irony is that these (usually) young men are not religious, are more often than not from socially difficult backgrounds, and are often involved in petty criminality and 'bad company'. The mystery is the speed and intensity of their radicalisation with its devastating consequences. In France, as elsewhere, this is now the focus of intense research. The rhetoric and persuasion of the radicalisers clearly plays a major role, but so too does alienation and undiagnosed psychosis.

French politics after the attacks

One of the political consequences of the government's recent measures is that they are not seen as a kind of 'triangulation' (stealing the right's policies) but a sense that these measures were something Hollande and the government should have done before. In spite of their complexity, the 'ease' with which these attacks were successfully carried out raises real anxieties about the government's grip on the situation.

It is difficult for criticisms in this area given the public's general uncertainty of the real processes going on and because of the desire, at least, for national unity (despite the French always banging on about fraternity or solidarity, they are not very good at it). But the Left-Right split after the 13 November attacks is much more profound and vocal than after the Charlie Hebdo massacres in January.

There are two inter-related phenomena which characterise the reaction to the attacks and, although not exclusively French, have real resonance in French politics and society. The first involves the personalisation of politics. As is always the case with, for example, the tabloid press in the UK, inordinate emphasis was placed upon the character, origins (and until he was killed, whereabouts) of the assumed 'mastermind' of the attacks, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, rather than upon the underlying issues and upon understanding why the attacks happened.

This is reflected in the personalisation of politics overall which is acute in France, and is a complicating factor in the overall situation. François Hollande has used conflict situations (Mali, Centre-Afrique, Charlie Hebdo among others) to raise his own (very low) standing with the French. For a whole series of reasons, in particular a stagnating economy and high unemployment, he is France's most unpopular President ever. Declaring on 14 November that France was 'at war' reflected accurately in part a new reality, but also a political, rhetorical assumption of the mantle of a war leader.

In all of his declarations since the attacks, the presentation of himself as the protagonist in this 'story' has been inordinate: overuse of the first person pronoun, constant reference to himself as the originator of all decisions – emergency, policy-related, military, diplomatic decisions, the immediate assertion that France – reflecting his state of

mind – would be merciless ('impitoyable'), the representation of himself as not only the central domestic but also international actor – the mediator between Putin and Obama (when the real actors here are Sergei Lavrov and John Kerry), and so on.

Hollande is aware that in the aftermath of all the conflicts/attacks since his election in 2012 his popularity ratings have risen. Recent polls also indicate a near 100 per cent public agreement with the security and diplomatic measures and initiatives being taken. All of this personal performance – and the misinterpretation of its significance by the actors involved – becomes part of the overall political process and leads to mistakes and misperceptions. This was very apparent in Hollande's depiction of the Syrian chemical weapons crisis of 2013 as being a direct conflict between himself and Assad. Its purpose was to enhance the standing of the French President. It actually had the opposite effect, but also interfered significantly with France's room for diplomatic manoeuvre in the two years that followed.

To assume, moreover, that a rise in popularity is related to action rather than function is also a mistake. The French presidency is a modern expression of the medieval idea of the King's Two Bodies, one sacred, anointed, one profane, real. The French President is the personalised expression of France itself and therefore, in times of crisis, national unity. It is not him but his 'embodiment' of the office that is being rallied to.

The second observation relates to the media and its relation to politics – gestured towards by the constant pictures of and reports on Abdelhamid Abaaoud – and the visual and narrative nature of politics today. It is almost like a new form of politics. Now with the iPhone, things don't exist unless they are videoed, professionally or otherwise. Islamic State is, of course, a macabre past master in this dark art; but all 'events' are now portrayed in this way (and minute by minute). In the case of the Paris attacks, paradoxically, it probably saved lives.

The attack on the Bataclan Theatre was staged as part of an enduring drama which would heighten the sense of anticipation and anguish. The immediate massacre of everyone would have 'resolved' the drama. For the perpetrators, the drama of atrocity is more important than the atrocity itself. More than this, these are dramas, 'stories' in both a real and constructed sense. The media worldwide now does this with all incidents of this kind; but again, in France, because of the way the protagonists are characterised, events such as these are narrated by the media like chivalric tales with a deep structure of villainy, heroism, trials and deliverance.

What Paris endured on 13 November 2015 was a drama, a tragedy in fact, in both senses: on the one hand something heartbreaking and on the other an 'act' performed by all the actors involved; the attackers, the victims, the politicians, and the media; and with the world as an audience.

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