

France's 2022 Elections and the Colonial Question

RETHINKING **SECURITY** IN THE 2020s SERIES – COMMENTARY

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INTRODUCTION

Approaching its 2022 presidential elections, France's political arena seems to be increasingly revolving around identity and nationalism. While the discursive construction of frenchness is increasingly imposed in assimilationist terms, the complex legacy of colonialism in the country is more than ever spoken about by French citizens of immigrant descent. Two seemingly irreconcilable motions characterize an increasingly polarized national debate.



French President Emmanuel Macron during his speech on “Islamic separatism” – 02/10/2020

1. Colonialism: A Thing of the Past?

Colonialism did not end with the last foreign soldier leaving the last colonized shore. With the technological advancements and social progress, the world has known in the last two decades, it is easy to forget decolonization happened far less ago than how long it has lasted. Algeria, perhaps France's bloodiest liberation war, obtained its independence less than sixty years ago. France colonized Algeria in 1830, totaling 132 years. In comparison, sixty years to heal do not seem much.

Colonialism is, first, a collective trauma passed through generations where some of the firsthand victims remain alive. Its lasting consequences range from genocides, lost patrilineages, environmental disasters, plumed economies, racialized and segregated societies to tenacious stereotypes, idiomatic divisions, conflict-fueling borders, deported populations, etc. Dismissing it as a mere historical episode without having conducted the necessary work for reparation, reconstruction and inclusion is dangerous.

Colonialism also resulted in something that has recently emerged in conversations about racism and police brutality in the West: system racism. Systemic racism does not mean there is an intrinsic hatred towards non-White communities in western societies. It rather means certain negative stereotypes and assumptions about people of color are so pervasive in society they are shared by most White people, without necessarily an awareness of the problem. These stereotypes reinforce White privilege, or the luxury to not care about your own race because it has been constructed as universal and neutral. As institutions and decision-making are principally controlled by White elites, these stereotypes shape the destiny of colored communities.

Systemic racism enlarges the definition of racism. It is not only explicit hateful comments or actions – for the most part unusual nowadays – that constitute racism, to the contrary. The majority of how racism functions is unconscious and unintentional. It is a systematic bias against non-White individuals that impedes their chances of success. It is a reminder the racialized narrative of superiority colonialism was built upon did not simply fade away with time.

Decolonizing minds starts by deconstructing stereotypes, themselves the product of power relations inherited from colonial times. In gender relations per instance, colonial exotism and objectification remain strongly present in France through the hyper sexualization of the *beurette*¹ or through the presumed submissiveness of “Asian” women, a category often uniformized.

¹ French woman of north-African descent in slang. The term has sexist and racist connotations. See: <https://information.tv5monde.com/terriennes/beurette-genealogie-d-un-terme-sexiste-et-raciste-312225>

2. France's problematic relationship with its colonial past

In his 1950's book, *Discourse on Colonialism*, Martiniquan anticolonialist poet and politician Aimé Césaire advances that "a civilization that chooses to turn a blind eye to its most critical problems is a damaged civilization".

French modern civilization, as the case for several former colonial empires, was built upon two irreconcilable tendencies. The aspirations of equality, freedom and fraternity that characterized its Enlightenment era, contrasted with the enterprise of domination, brutality and inequality legitimization that formed the basis of colonialism.

Until President Macron's 2017 statement qualifying colonialization as a crime against humanity², France's official policy tilted towards denial and glorification. Glorification of the "civilizing mission" of colonialism and denial of its crimes. Following the Evian agreements in 1962 which inscribed Algeria's independence, and until 1982, two decrees and three laws have been enacted to forbid any legal procedure against crimes committed during colonialism. It took six decades for the State to begin to acknowledge what colonialism represented for the dominated. President Macron announced the creation of a mission for the remembrance of colonialization and the Algerian war in 2020.³

However, apart from this brief episode, no paradigm shift occurred. The trauma and untold stories of colonialism carried out by French citizens of immigrant descent remain vivid as they are excluded from the national narrative. The non-recognition of the role of indigenous soldiers in France's liberation during World War II is a daunting example of the "whitewashing" of French modern history. Some essential truths as the assassinations of the Moroccan Mehdi Ben Barka or the Cameroonian Félix Moumié, both anticolonialist figures, have not been declassified yet.⁴

Yet, while being unwilling to discuss colonization, France's current politicians and intellectuals do not shy away from the rhetoric of cultural, religious, or demographic invasion (or colonization) to describe immigration and multiculturalism. It is as the white majority was suddenly besieged, struggling to protect its culture and values. This theory is known as the great replacement and have been popularized by influential intellectuals like Éric Zemmour and Michel Houellebecq. Its main hypothesis is that whiteness will become a minority in the upcoming decades in Europe due to a boom of demographics at the advantage of non-white immigrants. Within the French context, this theory is mainly linked to a fear of an "Islamic" population replacement.

2 https://www.lepoint.fr/presidentielle/emmanuel-macron-la-colonisation-est-un-crime-contre-l-humanite-15-02-2017-2105177_3121.php

3 https://www.francetvinfo.fr/culture/patrimoine/histoire/grand-entretien-pourquoi-la-france-a-t-elle-du-mal-a-regarder-son-histoire-coloniale-en-face_4133107.html

4 Ibid.

3. France’s Upcoming Elections: A Political Chessboard Sliding to the Extreme Right

Ideas previously constrained to extreme-right milieus are mainstreaming into France’s current political game. The most recent is the offensive conducted against “Islamist-leftist”⁵ ideas in universities, namely a presumed proximity between leftist and Islamist ideologies, by none other than Frédérique Vidal, France’s education minister.⁶ Islamo-leftism was born out of a criticism of anti-Zionist stances within the French Muslim community and a section of the French left, conflated mistaken for antisemitism. It then integrated the narrative of French far-right leaders, repetitively used by Marine le Pen.⁷ The national center for scientific research (CNRS) issued a statement denouncing the maneuver lacking any scientific base, reminding “Islamist-leftism” is nothing more than a “political catchphrase”.⁸



Protest demanding the resignation of Education minister Frédérique Vidal following her attempt to hamper with academic freedom – 25/03/2021.

Some worrying tendencies in parallel can be observed: the increasing demonization of French Muslims, the latest being the ban of veiled mothers from accompanying children on school trips⁹; the banalization of the link between

5 Islamo-gauchiste, an expression in French debates

6 In February 2021, France’s education minister expressed her intention to launch an investigation into “Islamist-leftist” ideas in French universities. See: https://www.liberation.fr/idees-et-debats/islamogauchisme-frederique-vidal-perd-ses-facultes-20210217_7TOKDM2M2FE6DLH5RULC2D55T4/

7 <https://www.rtl.fr/actu/politique/l-emission-politique-benoit-hamon-qualifie-d-islamogauchiste-par-marine-le-pen-7787178897>

8 <https://www.cnrs.fr/en/islamist-leftism-not-scientific-reality-0>

9 <https://www.sudouest.fr/culture/religion/loi-separatisme-le-senat-interdit-le-port-du-voile-aux-accompagnatrices-de-sorties-scolaires-1853707.php>

migration and terrorism; the increase use, and understanding, of *laïcité* – France’s version of secularism – as nationalism; the extent of discussions in the media about Islam, its compatibility with French society, French identity and the necessity to protect the latter from “invaders”; and the constant othering of non-white immigrants. Perhaps one telling example of the ridiculousness of some claims is the declaration of the interior minister Gérard Darmanin about his shock to see exotic food in supermarkets, linking it to what he calls *communautarisme*, also known as “community separatism”.¹⁰

This overall pattern has concrete electoral consequences; Marine le Pen’s party remains the main challenger¹¹ for the 2022 elections despite its leader’s poor performance in the 2017 presidential elections, specifically the second-round debate. The equation that opposes frenchness to wearing a veil is now explicitly expressed by mainstream politicians¹², even self-claiming leftist leaders¹³. Per instance, Audrey Pulvar, a politician of color running a campaign on an antiracism platform tweeted in 2019 that the veil is a tool for female inferiority and submission.¹⁴

By kicking it out of the door, the colonial question and stereotypes inherited from it returned from the window. Only a real willingness to heal wounds and write a collective story would build for a genuinely inclusive society. A wish that does not seem to be concretizing anytime soon, especially as the country is approaching elections.

10 https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/entry/darmanin-choque-par-la-cuisine-communautaire-dans-les-hypermarches_fr_5f8f5414c5b62333b23ff166

11 https://harris-interactive.fr/opinion_polls/intentions-de-vote-presidentielle-2022-mai-2021/

12 <https://www.causeur.fr/lydia-guirous-assimilation-en-finir-avec-ce-tabou-francais-198246>

13 President Macron is the former minister of economy, industry and digital affairs in the government of the socialist François Hollande.

14 <https://www.valeursactuelles.com/societe/manuel-valls-et-audrey-pulvar-se-prononcent-contre-le-voile/>

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