

Sweden Rebellions Reveal Deepening Racial and Class Divisions

Immigrant communities from the Middle East and Africa explode in week of fury

By [Abayomi Azikiwe](#)

Global Research, May 27, 2013
Pan-African News Wire

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

Many people in Sweden and across Europe and the world were shocked at the week of unrest which began on May 19 in the suburb of Husby just outside of Stockholm. Known for its social services programs, clean commercial districts and neighborhoods, the unrest which hit not only Stockholm but spread throughout other regions of the country, illustrated the anger and frustration of young people who are largely descendants of people from the Middle East and Africa.

The unrest began when a nearly 70-year-old Portuguese immigrant died in Husby as a result of police actions. The official story was that the senior citizen had welded a machete at officers, however, other sources from the community said that it was not a machete but a knife and that no one had been held hostage as news reports indicated.

The person with the man in his apartment was his elderly wife. It turned out that there had been problems with some youths in the neighborhood and when police arrived the couple was responding to an already tense and hostile dispute within the area.

Although this was cited as the spark which ignited a week of attacks on businesses, the police and firefighting forces as well as arson directed against vehicles and buildings, the underlying reasons were not hard to find. Many youth within this northern European state are unemployed and are subjected to harassment by the police.

During the course of the week the rebellions spread to other cities including Malmö, Gothenburg, Örebro and Åkersberga. Reports indicate that at least 100 people have been arrested and no deaths have been reported since the demise of initial victim of police violence which precipitated the outbreaks across the country.

The center-right government in Sweden has made significant cuts in the country's social service programs over the last decade in response to an economic decline during the 1990s and the overall world capitalist crisis that has hit all of Europe since 2007. The suburban areas around Stockholm and other cities have been largely abandoned by the Europeans and are now home to immigrants and their Swedish-born children from Iraq, Iran, Kurdistan, Turkey, Somalia and other countries throughout the Middle East and Africa.

A new influx of refugees has entered the country from Syria in response to the western-backed war of aggression and regime-change over the last two years. In response to the growing immigrant communities, estimated to be approximately 15 percent of the overall

population, a far-right party has surfaced which is gaining support among the Europeans and seeking to politically exploit the recent unrest that began on May 19.

The anti-immigrant Swedish Democrats, the far-right party, has 20 representatives in the country's 349-member parliament. Jimmie Akesson, the party's leader, has called for the deportation of non-citizens involved in what he describes as criminal activity.

Making matters even worse, Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt of the Moderate Party, expressed no understanding for those involved in the rebellions. Reinfeldt was quoted as calling the young people in the streets "hooligans" and dismissed notions that racism, growing class divisions and lack of opportunities were at the root of the unrest.

However, the opposition Left Party did blame cuts in social services, rising joblessness and increasing poverty as the reasons for the anger and willingness to risk criminal prosecution by young people. Barbo Sorman, a spokesperson for the Left Party, said that Sweden was starting to look like the United States." (New York Times, May 27)

Youth Speak Out Against Racism in Sweden

An article written by Tom Peck on May 26 noted that "Absolute poverty is almost non-existent, but it is not absolute poverty that drives city riots. Sweden's famously egalitarian society, with exceptional welfare provisions, was built by forty years of social democratic government from the 1930s to the 1970s, but an economic crash in the early 90s, and the center-right government in power since 2006 has placed restrictions on it, despite relatively benign economic conditions."

According to a report issued by the United Nations-affiliated Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Sweden has the fastest growing rate of income inequality among all of the 34 so-called high-income states that make up the body. This is a similar pattern within most western capitalist states which in part is the result of government policies that allow unregulated profit-making efforts by the wealthy.

The unrest in Sweden follows similar outbreaks in other European states and Britain. Just two years ago in England dozens of cities were hit by rebellions in response to police brutality and the cut backs in social services that disproportionately impacted Blacks and other oppressed groups within the society.

In Paris beginning in 2005, widespread attacks on private property and the police spread throughout the country. Racism and the lack of economic opportunities were also cited as the cause of the rebellions where like in Sweden, African and Middle Eastern immigrant communities are trapped outside the major cities in suburbs where there are very few jobs and police patrol areas as if they are war zones.

Peck in his article quotes a 13-year-old female Somalian youth, Sadiya, stressing that "People are saying it's because of that man that was killed. I think they want attention from police. The kids that are doing it, they are barely any older than me. Why do they care about unemployment? They're kids."

Another young rapper known as Ken Ring, who is of Kenyan nationality but a citizen of Sweden, was also quoted by Peck noting that "I've never gone to a place in the world where people know what's going on in Sweden. When they see pictures of our neighborhoods they

say, 'No, this is not Stockholm. This is London, this is Marseilles.' Stockholm is a crazy place nowadays."

Barar Mohamed, a 15-year-old youth whose parents are immigrants from Somalia, pointed out that "So maybe I am lucky to be in Europe. Compared to people in Somalia, maybe I am lucky. But I have hardly ever even met them, and this is where I live, and I have to live with police brutality, and I don't have the same chance as the Swedish kids. I am Swedish. I am Swedish." (Tom Peck article)

As the economic crisis persists in Europe and the immigrant communities continue to be used as scapegoats for the decline in living standards and the growing class divisions, more rebellions will take place throughout the continent. Europeans in the working class have no choice but to join alliances with the people of color communities to form a united front against austerity and the assaults on the social service programs which have been the hallmark of these societies since the end of World War II.

Abayomi Azikiwe Editor, Pan-African News Wire

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