

The Yellow Vests Rebellion, Fierce Political Opposition in France. Emmanuel Macron's Harsh Hikes in Fuel Prices

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Global Research, November 25, 2018

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Oil and Energy](#),
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*Governments and ruling regimes tend to face revolution in the face of harsh hikes in prices. Margaret Thatcher's rule in Britain was rocked by the poll tax. In France, the once enthusiastically embraced **Emmanuel Macron** has decided to leave the ground rich with challenges against his administration. The Yellow Vests, the gilet jaunes, have decided to take up the chance protesting with such intensity it has led to death and serious injury.*

The pretext was an old one. An increase in carbon taxes was imposed in 2017 as part of a push to support renewables.

“Support for renewable energy,” announced the environment ministry, “will be increasingly financed by a tax on fossil fuel consumption.”

In 2018, the amount rose from 30.5 euros to 44.6 euros per ton, rising to 55 next year. Diesel and petrol have been affected, a matter that proves less of a problem for those in city environs, serviced by public transport, than rural areas, where the car remains essential.

“Macron has to understand,” [came](#) the familiar sentiment from demonstrator Patrick Perez, “that Paris is not France.”

Macron is now being accused of being icily out of touch, a self-conscious creature of arrogance who insists on the dignity of his office even as he attempts to dismantle the pride of others. But his current approval rating – with 25 percent, [according](#) to Ifop, is strikingly accurate, given the [share of the vote](#) he garnered in the first round of the 2017 presidential elections. A mere 24.01 percent favoured him, with Marine Le Pen of the National Front breathing down his neck with 21.3 percent, followed by the Republicans choice of François Fillon with 20.01 percent and the left wing Jean-Luc Melenchon with 19.58 percent.

In the second round, France duly divided along the lines of favouring Le Pen or fearing her, hence Macron's deceptively bolstered victory. The grand centrist was born, a person who had been [warned](#) in 2008 by friends that joining the Rothschild investment bank would mar his political prospects. The “Mozart of finance” is finding the job of governing France a far more complex prospect than the cold business of debt restructuring, mergers and acquisitions.

He has shown himself to be a keen moderniser, if a frustrated one, of the French labour market, earning the ire of unions and the spluttering contempt of the French labour movement. Like other French leaders, he has also stumbled into observations more fitting to amateur anthropology, suggesting that the French “Gauls”, by way of example, were a stubborn lot resistant to the influence of other labour models. (He is rather keen on the Nordic example.)

To his Romanian hosts, he [explained](#) with the relief of someone away from a troubled home that France was “not a reformable country... because French and women hate reform”. Many leaders had failed in the effort to buck this trend. To his Danish hosts, he was similarly [heaping](#) upon the French some manured derision while praising his audience in Copenhagen. “What is possible is linked to a culture, a people marked by their own history. These Lutheran [Danish] people, who have lived through the transformations of recent years, are not exactly Gauls who are resistant to change.”

But part of the issue with tarnished presidential popularity has been a diminishing of a position that always demanded a certain, high-peak majesty. The French president, gravitas and all, was also a European, if not global statesman. Macron’s predecessors, Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande, were also victims of the 2000 referendum which reduced the period of the presidency from seven years to five. (This is not to say these characters were not, in of themselves, defective in character or policy.) Then, as now, the French authorities also faced a national revolt over high fuel taxes.

While seen as a necessary mercy for a modern time, *le quinquennat* had the added effect, according to historian Jean Garrigues, of encouraging the leader to be seen as temporary commodity, easily purchased, irritably used, then disposed of. “Voters no longer believe in ideology, they consume and then reject their elected representatives, including the President of the Republic.” A clue was in the 2000 referendum turnout: 70 percent preferred to stay away from the polls. “A little yes, but a big slapdown,” came the observation of *le Parisien*. As ever, the French, masters of the strike, had initiated something similar at the ballot box.

The Yellow Vest movement is not a Gallic shrug but a shaking roar. The initial target was increased fuel taxes, but the indignation has become a broader church of disaffection on living in general. It is also being given a ringing endorsement by political opportunists who argue that the movement has no political roots. Le Pen has been there, fanning matters while providing Christophe Castaner, the interior minister, a distracting if shaky alibi. “The ultra-Right is mobilised and is building barricades on the Champs-Élysées.” For him, such protests are the work, not of a broad movement but a few *casseurs*, or troublemakers.

Macron is doing his level best to avoid confronting the movement, but his Prime Minister Edouard Philippe is attempting to bribe the protesters into silence, or at the very least a more timorous form of disagreement. Energy subsidies to 5.6 million households, up from the current number of 3.6 million, are being proposed. France’s poorest families will also see fuel credits directed to those whose livelihood depends on car travel. These measures, alone, will be no panacea for Macron’s declining influence.

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