

THE CONVERSATION

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A horrific accusation against police reignites anger in Paris suburbs

February 21, 2017 2.46pm GMT



Anger pits young people against police following an accusation of police brutality. EPA/Etienne Laurent

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Protests have broken out in Paris's economically-deprived outskirts (the banlieues) in recent weeks, some of which have degenerated into riots.

The unrest was sparked by a shocking case of alleged police brutality in which a 22-year-old black man was allegedly set upon by four police officers in the north-eastern suburb of Aulnay-sous-Bois. Now one of those officers is under investigation for rape.

Shocking though the incident is, the disturbances speak to a wider problem. They express long simmering anger at systemic police violence and racism. That anger has only been reinforced by this and a string of other recent incidents.

This particular story, however, began when the victim, only identified as Théo, intervened as four policemen carried out an identity check on a local teenager on February 2. Théo, a youth worker with no criminal record, claims to have stepped in without violence; the officers disagree. Regardless, a video of the incident appears to show an altercation.

One of the officers has now been charged with rape, having been accused of thrusting a truncheon into Théo's anus while he was on the ground, causing severe injuries. The officer maintains that Théo's

injury happened accidentally and an initial investigation by the police reportedly found there was “insufficient evidence” to support the claim that it was a deliberate act.

Originally all four officers were under investigation for suspected gang rape, but this was reclassified to aggravated assault. Only after angry reactions from activists and Aulnay’s mayor, the right-wing former policeman Bruno Beschizza, was the charge of rape reinstated against one officer.

Trigger points

A wave of unrest followed the incident. Despite Théo’s calls for calm there were several consecutive nights of rioting, which spread from Aulnay to other nearby towns. Otherwise peaceful protests were also marred by clashes between minorities of protesters and the police. The most serious incidents happened in the town of Bobigny on February 11. Groups of rioters threw missiles at the police, set fire to several cars, and vandalised a departmental council building.



Protesters take on police in Paris. EPA/Etienne Laurent

The protests and riots have been fuelled by the perception that police violence and racism are systemic. Numerous studies support this: the Open Society Institute, Human Rights Watch, and France’s ombudsman all condemn the racial profiling visited upon black and Arab males. According to the ombudsman, men from “visible minorities” are 20 times more likely than their white compatriots to be subjected to identity checks.

Sociologist Sébastien Roché adds that police officers are three times more aggressive during checks on non-white people. Children as young as ten have complained of heavy-handed treatment and racist insults, to which Théo also claims he was subject.

Accusations against police

Defenders of the police note the danger of working in the banlieues. An estimated €1 billion is spent annually in drug deals in the department where Aulnay is located. Last year, 216 policemen were injured while working there.

But this is far from the first allegation of sexual abuse to be levelled at police either. A man from nearby Drancy recently pressed charges against a police officer for rape, also using a truncheon. This too was reclassified as aggravated assault, but after the controversy caused by Théo's case the charge of rape was also reinstated.

A group of 18 young Parisians also recently instituted legal proceedings against police officers for sexual assault and discrimination. They alleged that their genitals were regularly excessively frisked, with several claiming that they were strip-searched in police stations when aged as young as 14. Some officers are accused of inserting fingers into their anuses, claiming to be searching for drugs.



François Hollande

@fhollande

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Théo a réagi avec dignité et responsabilité. La justice a été saisie, il faut lui faire confiance. Elle ira jusqu'au bout.

5:24 PM - 7 Feb 2017

11,056

10,585

Sociologist Didier Fassin, who spent 15 months conducting research within a banlieue police unit, characterises such treatment as a deliberate attempt to emasculate its targets.

Legal action against police officers remains unusual in France. Many believe that they are near-immune from punishment, with the legal system either biased towards them or complicit in hiding their crimes. Such sentiments are particularly strong following the case of Adama Traoré, a young man who died in police custody in Beaumont-sur-Oise, north of Paris, in July 2016.

A 2016 report published by Christian Action for the Abolition of Torture into incidents of police brutality found that from a sample of 89 cases that were brought against police between 2005 and 2015, only seven had resulted in a guilty verdict.

Anger and exclusion

Politicians have expressed sympathy with Théo, but have not engaged with accusations that police discrimination is systematic.

The incident has instead been treated as an aberration by government members like the interior minister, Bruno Le Roux, who called for demonstrators to “trust the legal system” to deliver justice. Members of the right-wing opposition, including presidential candidate François Fillon’s spokesperson, have called for demonstrations against police violence to be forbidden to avoid further riots. Marine Le Pen, meanwhile, labelled rioters “scum” and argued that the police should be granted more power to deal with them.

The recent disturbances in Paris must be understood in this context. As well as anger at recent events, they have expressed a sense that systemic police violence and discrimination remain unchallenged.

The ombudsman has suggested issuing receipts to people subjected to police identity checks, a system which has been shown to reduce racial profiling elsewhere. François Hollande promised to implement this rule during his presidency but the plan was quickly shelved once he came into office in 2012. There are plans to equip police officers with body cameras but they are not legally obliged to use them.

Such measures would not solve the problem, but would at least engage with it. More structural changes, like the creation of an external body to investigate charges of police brutality, are also needed. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the far-left presidential candidate, has made this a campaign promise. Socialist Benoît Hamon has not, but at least favours issuing receipts as suggested by the ombudsman.

The three front-runners continue to disappoint on this issue. Centrist Emmanuel Macron has not mentioned racial profiling, while Fillon and Le Pen focus on harsher punishment for delinquents. The best hope is that Macron will change his position – but it’s a slim one. If not, it seems inevitable that the scenes of recent weeks will be repeated.



France french politics Paris Police brutality