



By: TA | AP Insight

Policing of school protests clouds Macron's final months



On one side, legions of determined **teenagers protesting** for their future by blockading schools and taking part in marches that have sometimes spiraled into **violence**.

On the other, one of the largest internal security forces in Europe, deployed by the government of an unpopular and **outgoing president**.

The result, playing out almost daily outside high schools and on the streets of France, is a nationwide storm of unrest.

The mayhem of recent weeks — with mass arrests and hundreds of injured — has sparked an uproar in a country steeped in a centuries-old **culture of protest**.

Even some police have turned on the government's handling of the demonstrations.

Discontent shrouds Macron's final months

For President Emmanuel Macron, who leaves office in May, it's hardly the dream ending to his decade in power.

He has faced a **succession of protest** movements that sapped his popularity and fueled broad criticism of how his ministers use police against demonstrators.

With the high schoolers, the outcry has grown particularly loud. That's partly because the vast majority of the 8,000 people arrested in recent weeks are under 18 and because police riot-control weapons are blamed for life-changing **injuries** suffered by some young teens.

The protesters' push for **better-resourced schools**, particularly in poorer Paris suburbs and other cities and towns, also has a sympathetic audience as France hurts from record poverty and record **public debt**.

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But police complain that they're facing violent rioters who are latching onto the protests and using the crowds as cover to attack officers, pelting them with rocks, fireworks and other projectiles and wreaking havoc with fires, vandalism and other destruction.

By the government's count, more than 900 officers and more than 150 teachers and other school staffers have been injured.

More demonstrations, by a variety of groups with broader complaints beyond schools, are planned Saturday.

French history partly explains why protests are veering into confrontations between riot police and some demonstrators who come ready to fight in masks and black clothes, says Walid Hrar, a police officer and union representative in the northern suburbs of Paris.

"This is the country of the French Revolution. Everyone boasts about it, in fact. Some political parties don't hesitate to say that we need to disobey the law. That's what Robespierre and other revolutionaries taught us in 1789," he said.

"France always tends to react rather than anticipate," he added. "In other words, we're always going to extremes."

Attention focusing on police weaponry

The police have drawn sharp scrutiny for their efforts to control crowds using a variety of so-called non-lethal weaponry, particularly grenades and other projectiles, but also tear gas, water cannons and riot shields equipped with powerful strobe lights.

"We're sending poorly equipped, untrained public security police officers to violent demonstrations who are likely to become agitated very quickly out of anger and fear," said Jean-Marie Godard, an author who specializes in French policing.

Hrar said some of his police colleagues "aren't specialized in crowd control and aren't equipped for it. We send them in because we need the manpower, so we have officers wearing uniforms that aren't flame-resistant. And if you're hit by a firework mortar and your uniform isn't flame-resistant, you can catch fire. We also have officers with worn-out helmets. We have shields that aren't suitable."

You'll inevitably end up in direct physical confrontation. When that happens, there are injuries on both sides - Walid Hrar

He said officers who haven't been given permission to use riot-control projectiles and grenades sometimes struggle to keep attackers at a safe distance.

"So unfortunately we make do," he said. "You'll inevitably end up in direct physical confrontation. When that happens, there are injuries on both sides."

His Alliance police union announced this week that it is filing a legal complaint against the state, accusing it of endangering lives. It alleged that officers are being issued with vague and contradictory orders, leaving them "isolated, betrayed, abandoned, exposed to violence."

Probes of alleged misconduct grow

French Interior Minister Laurent Nunez said this week that security forces have used crowd-control weapons at least 18,000 times during the protests — mostly smoke and tear gas but also projectiles and grenades.

They include a deafening launcher-fired grenade that Nunez said was used "about 40 times" before he suspended its deployment against high schoolers, after a 15-year-old lost a hand.

"All this equipment, all these forces, all these intermediate weapons, are used whenever necessary, with proportionality, to mark an escalation of the response, to keep people at a distance or sometimes to put them out of action," he said.

We avoid everything above the neck - Laurent Nunez

The minister said rules governing the use of riot-control projectiles are "very clear, very strict."

"We avoid everything above the neck," he said.

Still, an officer suspected of firing a round that partially blinded a 16-year-old was this week charged with aggravated violence.

That case is among a growing number of investigations — totaling 36 as of Tuesday — into alleged police misconduct.

Four involve "mutilating injuries," another six involve "significant injuries" and others are for "blows, insults and suspected sexual assaults" and include the case of an officer accused of attempting to drown a protester, Nunez said.

Expert says different groups get different policing

France has more than 250,000 police and gendarmes.

Sebastian Roché, a policing specialist at France's National Center for Scientific Research, said their use can depend on the political needs of the government, which commands them.



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Officers have been less forgiving with the teenagers than they previously were with **farmers**, a powerful lobby in France, who doused government buildings with manure, blocked roads and set fires.

"It's the political definition of the movement that defines the police response," Roché said.

Public perceptions of the police also change and are influenced by what people see on social media, said Hrar, who noted that officers were applauded for their bravery during **terror attacks in 2015**.

"When you bombard people every single day with images of police intervening with batons, shields and tear gas, you're inevitably going to create a negative impression."