



# French Guiana Protests Play an Unexpected Role in France's Presidential Race

Karina Piser | Friday, March 31, 2017

Strikes and protests have paralyzed French Guiana since last Sunday, as residents of the French overseas department in South America demand an end to rising crime and insecurity and rampant unemployment.

French Guiana, France's biggest overseas department, has the highest murder rate in any French department, with one murder each week for a population of just 250,000. But residents are also fed up with poor economic and development indicators, including a youth unemployment rate of 40 percent and high infant mortality.

The unrest, which according to some estimates has drawn 20,000 people to the streets, led to the closure of schools and blocked access to the main airport. Many of the demonstrations have been led by a group called the 500 Brothers, which, along with others rallying earlier this week, demanded to meet with a delegation from Paris, saying lower-level officials would not suffice.

The current protests were unexpected but are by no means out of the ordinary. "Today's mobilization is the accumulation of grievances," says Francois Taglioni, a professor at the University of Reunion who has written extensively on France's overseas territories and departments. "There's a sentiment among the Guianese that they're not being heard. The upcoming elections could have galvanized protesters to turn out in such numbers." Taglioni adds that, despite progress in the past two decades, persistent disparities between French Guiana and metropolitan France have made the population impatient.

Indeed, French Guiana's recent history has been one of social upheaval. In 1974, a deteriorating economic situation sparked mass demonstrations that led to the arrest of leading trade union activists and some pro-independence political figures. Despite increased investment from the central government, French Guiana's economy continued to suffer, setting the tone for decades of unrest marked by demands for economic development and greater autonomy.



*Masked members of the collective "500 Brothers" take part in a march supporting a general strike, Cayenne, French Guiana, March 28, 2017 (AP photo by Pierre-Olivier Jay).*

On Wednesday, Paris sent two ministers to French Guiana, Interior Minister Matthias Fekl and Ericka Bareigts, the minister for France's overseas territories, who promised an aid package of 4 billion euros over the next decade. That would build on a long-anticipated "pact," promised by outgoing French President Francois Hollande in 2013, that has yet to be signed or implemented.

Speaking to a crowd during her visit, Bareigts offered something of an apology ([http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2017/03/31/en-guyane-la-ministre-s-excuse-les-negociations-peuvent-commencer\\_5103575\\_3224.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2017/03/31/en-guyane-la-ministre-s-excuse-les-negociations-peuvent-commencer_5103575_3224.html)) to the Guianese people and pledged to move forward with needed support. But the French prime minister's office quickly put a damper on expectations for a lofty and highly anticipated aid package, noting that no specific amount of support had been determined. In a statement, the office said Fekl and Bareigts didn't ([https://www.lesechos.fr/journal20170328/lec1\\_une/0211919439033-comment-matignon-veut-calmer-le-jeu-en-guyane-2075525.php](https://www.lesechos.fr/journal20170328/lec1_une/0211919439033-comment-matignon-veut-calmer-le-jeu-en-guyane-2075525.php)) "leave with a predetermined envelope. We don't work like that. We work with the actors to find useful measures for Guiana, not based on far-fetched and unfounded numbers."

Even if French Guiana were to receive 4 billion euros by 2027, protesters' grievances won't disappear. Economic anxiety has been compounded by a soaring rate of inflation that straitjackets even those Guianese lucky enough to have jobs. The economy has been further strained by a rapidly rising population and a significant influx of migrants from Brazil, Suriname and Haiti, says Taglioni. "Despite everything that can be said about Guiana, with its difficult economic and social outlook, the reality is that other areas in the region are far poorer and see it as an attractive destination."

## ***French Guiana's recent history has been one of social upheaval.***

There seem to be few available options to stimulate growth. The department, reliant on aid from Paris and subject to EU rules and regulations, has little leeway ([http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2017/03/30/la-guyane-sous-tension\\_5103341\\_3232.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2017/03/30/la-guyane-sous-tension_5103341_3232.html)) to integrate economically with its South American neighbors. "The economic problems in French Guiana are in large measure the result of its dependent relationship upon metropolitan France," says Stephen Toth, an associate professor at Arizona State University who has written a book on the history of French Guiana, in an email interview.

As long-standing and systemic as many of the current grievances are, they are being colored by contemporary French politics in the run-up to next month's presidential vote. Demands for reductions in crime, says Toth, "largely echo what you have heard in metropolitan France regarding 'insecurity'—a sort of dog whistle in which crime is attributed to young, male immigrants, particularly those living in suburban neighborhoods and housing projects."

In France itself, people have become increasingly fixated on the country's sizeable North African and

Middle Eastern minority. In French Guiana, meanwhile, “it is immigrants from Brazil, Suriname and, to a lesser extent, even those hailing from the Antilles and Haiti, who are blamed for an increasing crime rate.” This scapegoating is fueled by the fact that French Guiana hosts tens of thousands of undocumented immigrants, according to Toth.

Notably, the 500 Brothers are asking that French Guiana be included in the state of emergency that has been in place in metropolitan France since November 2015. The state of emergency has granted the police extraordinary powers to conduct searches without warrants. Hundreds of homes have been raided in sweeps that human rights groups say have disproportionately and often arbitrarily targeted Muslims. “Additional demands to deport foreign criminals to their country of origin and to somehow establish surveillance and/or checkpoints along the shared borders with Suriname and Brazil echo much of the current discourse in the EU and the United States regarding immigration control,” says Toth.

Against that backdrop, it comes as no surprise that French presidential candidates have seized on the unrest to bolster their platforms. Far-right candidate Marine Le Pen has denounced years of neglect to the department. Center-left candidate Emmanuel Macron appealed for calm but humiliated himself by calling French Guiana, which shares borders with Suriname and Brazil, an island. Francois Fillon, the conservative candidate mired in escalating corruption scandals, called the unrest “extraordinarily dangerous” and the result of five years of failed policies to France’s overseas departments under Hollande.

It’s true that Hollande, despite taking a highly publicized tour of France’s overseas territories and departments early in his term, has largely been a disappointment for their residents. Around this time last year, similar strikes and protests paralyzed the department of Mayotte (</trend-lines/18557/mayotte-islands-protest-inequality-but-france-says-progress-takes-time>), and large-scale demonstrations have hit nearly all of France’s overseas territories and departments over the past decade.

With that in mind, Le Pen’s National Front party, with its tough-on-crime rhetoric and outreach to the “left behind,” could find new support in territories and departments where it has typically fared poorly.

But for Toth, lackluster progress for France’s overseas territories and departments—a national symbol of prominence even in the post-colonial era—points to problems that may persist regardless of who is in power. “Moving forward,” he says, “whether France has the financial and political wherewithal to maintain its position as a global power remains an open question.”

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