



[The Historical Factors Influencing the Riots in France](#)

Last week, Nahel, a 17-year-old boy of Algerian descent, was killed by French police during a traffic stop in Nanterre, a Paris suburb. The killing sparked days of riots in which hundreds of cars and buildings were set on fire. The murder of Nahel set off the protests, but there are also many underlying causes. The incident not only highlights the need for France to reform its policing practices, but also shows the need for France as a whole to address the social, economic, and historical tensions affecting racial minorities in France.

Riots and protests have a long history in France. Just this year there have been numerous extended strikes, protests, and riots over the passage of a pension reform law that raised the retirement age from 62 to 64. In 2018, the Yellow Jacket protests gained international attention for their advocacy for economic and political reform. The most recent large-scale riot related to race was in 2005 after 2 teens were electrocuted while hiding from the police in an electrical substation. Protests and riots calling for reformed policing practices and better treatment of minorities are very common throughout French history. The French police have long faced allegations of systematic racial profiling and there are numbers to back this up. According to Defenders of Rights, a France-based organization, 80% of young French men perceived as Black, North African, or Arab reported being stopped by the police in the last five years compared to just 16% of the population as a whole. Other countries across the world, particularly the United States and Great Britain, have also had issues with racial profiling in their police forces, but after these incidents, there was at least discussions on police reform. None of the protests or riots ever led to a discussion about systemic racism in the police force. The country has failed to pass any police reforms in the past 40 years despite an obvious need for them.

Some news outlets have compared this incident to the killing of George Floyd in 2020. On a surface level, the two events seem similar. Both murders were committed by law enforcement officers, filmed and broadcast almost immediately after they happened, and involved a member of a systemically marginalized community. This is where the similarities end. France's past can't be ignored while analyzing these protests. Racial prejudice in France, particularly against those of African and sub-Saharan descent, has deep roots in its colonial past. The European nations have a long history of colonization, suppression, massacres, and human rights abuses that it rarely acknowledges. In the then-French colony of Algeria, these abuses were particularly egregious. For 132 years, the French used torture, conducted summary executions, and tested 17 nuclear bombs in the country. In May 1945, Algerian civilians staged protests demanding an end to colonial rule. The French responded by killing an estimated 45,000 civilians. Again, in 1961, a peaceful demonstration was held in Paris calling for an end to colonial rule. This demonstration ended in the killing of an estimated 300 Algerians. It is estimated that as many as 1.5 million Algerians were killed in the French suppression of Algeria. These massacres are still fresh in the minds of many Algerians. France has never fully acknowledged or apologized for what it did. The lack of acknowledgment continues to affect the social dynamic today, as can be seen

with the protests. The continued suppression and systemic disadvantages racial minorities face in France contribute to their feelings of anger and frustration.

France has also failed to integrate migrants into the country. A disproportionate number of racial minorities live in what are known as banlieues, areas where poverty-stricken working-class neighborhoods ring many French cities. Many migrants have difficulty finding a job because of their last names. Rising costs related to the war in Ukraine and the ripple effects of the COVID-19 pandemic make economic hardship worse. With all of these obstacles, non-whites in France have little chance for upward mobility. The systemic disadvantages minorities face in France have made them, in effect, second-class citizens.

Another facet contributing to the intensity of the riots was the use of social media. A video of the incident was almost immediately uploaded to the internet. Apps like TikTok and Snapchat were used to organize the riots. Many people feel like without these tools, Nahel would have become another statistic and the officer involved would have gone unpunished.

All of these factors contributed to Nahel's murder and the subsequent intensity of the riots. France must work to address the underlying racism in both their policing and society and work to improve the lives of the racial minorities living there. The first step to do this is to acknowledge the discrimination minorities face. Currently, France follows an official policy of color blindness, with strict limits on data that can be collected. This policy has left the government oblivious to the discrimination. Acknowledging the issues in French society will lead to a discussion about change and reform. Without change, it is only a matter of time before riots erupt again.

Despite the differences in historical context, both the United States and France need to address and rectify the institutional racism present in their societies. It is important to contextualize the underlying influences of racial discrimination wherever it takes place. There is no blanket solution, but exploring the root causes is a surefire way to begin the process of addressing racial inequality. The killing of Nahel must galvanize our commitment to fighting racism and spur a new effort to combat all kinds of discrimination around the world.