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moderate
support for democracy and human rights

France

Christian Lequesne

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

French foreign policy combines support for democracy and human rights with a strong Realpolitik dimension. Development assistance increasingly funds human rights and governance-related activities, primarily in France’s former colonies. France is also very willing to use military intervention to counter authoritarian regimes and prevent violations of human rights and democracy, most recently in Mali and the Central African Republic. France has provided support for democratic electoral processes in countries such as Guinea and Madagascar. It has also been a firm supporter of the rebels in Syria against the abuses of President Bashar al-Assad.

However, among repressive regimes with which France has close historical ties, the government tends to engage rather than criticize. For example, France has supported the undemocratic leadership of Algeria and Morocco, even going out of its way to repair strained relations. In addition, France’s contract to sell Mistral warships to Russia has been highly controversial given events in Ukraine and the backing of France’s allies for strong sanctions against Russia.

Introduction¹

France has a foreign policy with global interests and is involved diplomatically in developments in every part of the world. The 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen is among the inspirations for the diplomacy of the current French state. But French foreign policy also has a Realpolitik dimension that at times clashes with democratic principles. French policy thus reflects two extremes: support for democracy in some cases, and strong protection of the national interest in others.

The promotion of democracy and human rights has become increasingly important for French diplomats in the context of a globalized world. More than ever, French governments are inclined to consider that values, not just interests, matter in foreign policy as a source of legitimacy. This evolution has clear consequences for both the soft and hard power of France. The country takes seriously debates at the United Nations, which it sees as the place where democracy and human rights issues should be discussed. The old Gaullist line that the United Nations is just a “thingamajig” has been set aside.

Meanwhile, France still considers military intervention as a legitimate means for countering authoritarian regimes and preventing violations of democracy and human rights. France at times has been aggressive in confronting dictatorships and supporting democratic opposition. France also has implemented sanctions in response to breaches of democracy, mostly in the European Union (EU) context.

About this project

This project analyzes support by 11 democratic powers for democracy and human rights during the period June 2012–May 2014.

About the author

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In development policy, France continues to focus its actions mainly (though not exclusively) on former French colonies in sub-Saharan Africa, some of which are under authoritarian control. Where France has close historical ties, the government usually prefers engagement with, rather than criticism of, repressive regimes.

Foreign Policy Objectives

In principle, the current Socialist government is more willing than its predecessors to call for improved human rights conditions in its diplomatic relations. President François Hollande, elected in May 2012, has declared that “the time of *Françafrique* is over,”² referring to the past French policy of supporting authoritarian regimes in Africa solely for economic reasons. Nevertheless, the Hollande administration often emphasizes France’s strategic interests, which are especially dominant when they relate to the fights against terrorism and extremism.

As a candidate, Hollande outlined 60 priorities for his administration. Priority 57 on a renewal of French multilateral diplomacy and priority 58 on relations with Africa broadly reflect his main foreign policy ideas. Hollande said that partnerships with Middle East and North African countries will be built on economic, democracy, and cultural projects, in direct response to the Arab Spring.³

Hollande’s inaugural address on May 15, 2012, provided further detail on his ideas for supporting human rights and democracy in foreign policy. His five-year term in office was presented as a period during which France must uphold the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as much as possible: personal freedoms, women’s rights, the fight against political repression, and humanism are all presented as priorities for French diplomacy in the period 2012–17.⁴ France also outlines its own path for democracy support and human rights based on healthcare diplomacy (support to UNICEF), as well as bilateral economic and financial support to the least developed countries. France insists that the integration of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights should be supported within UN multilateral policies.

In practice, France continues to lend support to undemocratic regimes, especially in Africa. Its intervention against militant jihadists in January 2013 in support of the Malian regime, which had come to power through a military coup, is a prime example. Hollande has called for democracy and transparency

in the authoritarian regime in Algeria, but continues the tradition of his predecessors of maintaining stable relations due to the strong historical connection between the two countries.⁵

France also continues to turn a blind eye to rights abuses by Moroccan authorities, including in the disputed territory of Western Sahara. France has described Morocco as “an intimate, very close partner,”⁶ with which it has strong historic and economic ties. Relations between Morocco and France have been tense since early 2014, when French-Moroccan activists filed lawsuits against Morocco’s intelligence chief, prompting an investigation into his alleged involvement in the torture of prisoners in Morocco. Rather than supporting the call against torture, Hollande reportedly called the Moroccan king in February 2014 “to send a message of confidence and friendship.”⁷

Development Assistance and Trade

Development assistance, both multilateral and bilateral, is implemented by the French Development Agency (AFD), a public agency that is part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development. The AFD carries out programs in close connection with French embassies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Although President Hollande’s campaign speeches emphasized its interest in working with Arab countries, most AFD programs are still oriented toward sub-Saharan Africa.

The AFD increasingly works directly with NGOs, which are selected based on their use of local resources and their local impact. Its emphasis on a participatory approach is a major development in contrast to 10 years ago, when France implemented development projects directly with governments, of which most were African. In 2013, the areas of human rights, governance, education for development, and creation of associative networks represented 44 percent of AFD projects managed by NGOs.⁸ According to the AFD’s strategic plan for 2012–16, one of the four aims of French support to NGOs is promotion of democratic governance and human rights as recognized by the French state and international conventions.⁹ Priority countries include 17 former colonies in Africa, as well as some in North Africa and the Middle East. Projects support the rule of law, respect for human rights, the fight against corruption, and effective governance.¹⁰

France rarely emphasizes human rights and democracy issues in trade deals. The country has a strong

defense industry that is a major source of its global exports. Local employment is directly dependent on these weapon sales and is prominent in the public eye. Moreover, a weak French economy has led politicians to push for stronger international trade regardless of the partner.

For this reason, the French government has not given up the controversial plan to sell two Mistral-class warships to Russia, despite Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea and Russian support for violent separatists in eastern Ukraine. Signed in 2011 under former president Nicolas Sarkozy, the Mistral contract is worth €1.2 billion (\$1.7 billion) and includes a large penalty for breach of contract if France fails to deliver the ships. More than 1,000 French jobs are also linked to completion of the contract.¹¹ [Editor's note: In September 2014, France postponed delivery of the warships due to Russia's actions undermining security in Europe, although it did not cancel the contract.] Similarly, France supports a flexible interpretation of the EU arms embargo that has been in place against China since the crackdown on Tiananmen Square in 1989, and continues to export technology that has some military applications.¹²

Elections

Despite the global reach of French foreign policy, in practice, French electoral observation concentrates on sub-Saharan Africa. Most of this takes place through electoral observation missions run by international organizations such as the United Nations, the EU, or the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. In general, France rarely responds to an election beyond making statements—what is referred to as “discursive diplomacy”—on human rights. However, France has often criticized election fraud and manipulation.

For example, in the Republic of Guinea, parliamentary elections on September 28, 2013, demonstrated steady progress in the electoral system. However, the EU, after an election mission supported by France, noted infringements on democracy and human rights immediately following the elections, including illegal detentions, violations of freedom of speech, and cases of torture.¹³

In Mali, parliamentary elections of November–December 2013 led to a long list of EU recommendations that France likewise supported. These included reform of the electoral system through creation of new constituencies, clarification of rules for incumbent officers to be candidates, and a

redefinition of the role of political parties within the political landscape.¹⁴ France also considered the January 2013 military intervention to be linked to the July 2013 presidential elections. As Hollande said in May 2013, “We must ensure Mali's authorities can actually have control over the territory, in order to organize these elections everywhere. No part of Mali can be detached from the electoral process.”¹⁵

In Madagascar, France supported the August 2013 decision of a new electoral court that addressed the list of candidates for the December presidential election. Madagascar had been facing a protracted political crisis since a military coup in 2009. The court decision canceled the candidacies of both the coup leader and the wife of the ousted president, both of whom had been prolonging a stalemate over holding the first post-coup elections. The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that the court decision “represents significant progress in the process to resolve the crisis in Madagascar, which must involve the holding of free, transparent, and credible elections.”¹⁶ The December election was peaceful and the EU did not report widespread fraud.

In response to the campaign process in Egypt that led to the election of Mohamed Morsi in June 2012, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasized the need for a peaceful environment and for legal protection of freedom of speech. France also regularly denounced inappropriate use of force against protesters during the electoral campaign.

Disruptions of Democratic Processes

French diplomats have responded to disruptions of democratic processes in several countries in recent years, but have also been hesitant when economic interests were at stake.

France took an active position in the UN Security Council to gain support for unilateral military intervention in Mali in January 2013. When French intelligence provided evidence of progress of militant jihadist groups from Northern Mali toward the capital city, Bamako, Hollande determined that military intervention was the best option to stop them. After a bombing and ground offensive, France fostered support from the UN Security Council in April 2013 to deploy a peacekeeping force in Mali.

In 2013 and early 2014, France again determined that international mobilization, and ultimately unilateral military intervention, was necessary, this time in the Central African Republic. Sectarian killings

prompted a fear of civil war between the Muslim and Christian communities and of the potential for violent anarchy. In August 2013, President Hollande called for the African Union and the UN Security Council to address the situation.¹⁷ In December 2013, France called for reinforcement of the African-led International Support Mission in the Central African Republic and decided to intervene with its own troops in Operation Sangaris. The following month, France proposed to its EU partners the launch of Operation EUFOR RCA, which began its first mission in April led by French major general Philippe Pontiers. Thus, France has played a key role at all stages of military intervention in Africa.

Throughout the past two years, France has periodically condemned the political situation in Egypt. Criticism increased after the army's July 2013 arrest of President Mohamed Morsi, legally elected in June 2012. In August 2013, President Hollande voiced support for setting up a new democratic electoral process in Egypt.¹⁸ France has also supported the action plans of the European External Action Service (the EU's diplomatic corps) to enhance political dialogue and the protection of human rights in Egypt. France's stance is that the Egyptian government's efforts at democracy must be supported through the Euro-Mediterranean partnership.

After two attempted military coups in Comoros in April and May 2013, France joined the European External Action Service statement calling for respect of democratic values.¹⁹ However, Comorian political leaders have alleged that French mercenaries were involved in the military coups, and have launched legal procedure in a French court. These allegations are not without precedent; French mercenaries have been involved in African coups in the past.

Violence against protestors in Ukraine in 2014, mostly perpetrated by the government of then-president Viktor Yanukovich, as well as the subsequent Russian invasion of Crimea and Russian support for violent separatists in eastern Ukraine, have led the EU to contentious discussions of sanctions against Ukrainian and Russian individuals responsible for breaches of democratic process and civil liberties. While the Hollande administration supports an independent Ukraine in face of Putin's politics of hegemony, and France has accepted limited EU sanctions, France does not support strong sanctions against Russia due to its extensive economic ties. France is second only to Germany among Russia's largest foreign investors.²⁰ [Editor's note: France did

support the tighter sanctions that the EU imposed on Russia in July 2014.]

Gross Human Rights Violations

France has developed an active role within the United Nations, its primary place of focus for human rights diplomacy. France defined a political agenda for its candidacy to the UN Human Rights Council, to which it was elected in November 2013. Gérard Araud, French permanent representative to the United Nations, has said that the notion of "responsibility to protect" must be redefined by strengthening international law.²¹ In an effort to improve accountability, President Hollande has called for a code of conduct to end what France considers the reckless use of veto power in the UN Security Council and the resulting failure to end serious violations.²²

Hollande's suggestion came at the end of a speech detailing numerous world challenges, the first of which was the civil war in Syria.²³ France was the first country to recognize the Syrian opposition in November 2012. In September 2013, France was prepared to engage in military action against the Assad regime, but renounced the idea due the refusal of the United States and the United Kingdom to participate in a military coalition. France has broken diplomatic relations with Syria and recalled its ambassador to Damascus. The Syrian ambassador in Paris also has been expelled, although she may remain because of her accreditation with Paris-based UNESCO. France now supports the installation in Paris of an ambassador representing the Syrian opposition and is helping to fund an embassy.

In contrast, France has shied away from further military intervention in Libya after the Sarkozy administration played a key role in NATO's campaign to overthrow Muammar al-Qaddafi in 2011. While France makes regular statements against ongoing violence in Libya,²⁴ Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius announced in February 2014 that France had ruled out Western military action.²⁵

France has engaged in a global campaign against the death penalty, calling for an international moratorium in November 2012. Every French embassy has been requested to hold international forums and conferences, and to support public diplomacy by NGOs.²⁶

At the EU level, France has supported mediation by High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton and by the European External Action Service to ease several

dramatic political situations around the world. By supporting EU diplomacy, France is able to project its interests further.

Civil Liberties

The protection of freedom of expression and free media was at the core of the French international agenda in 2012 and 2013. French policy was defined after Paris-based NGO Reporters Without Borders reported that 88 journalists were killed globally in 2012.²⁷ In a speech on May 3, 2012, the spokesperson at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that France will consistently speak out when journalists are victims of violence, condemning the crimes and calling for justice.²⁸ UN Ambassador Araud declared on July 17, 2013, that the international community must work to provide journalists sufficient protection to accomplish their “democratic mission.”²⁹

France supported the European External Action Service’s condemnation of the May 2014 arrests and detentions in China of human rights activists marking the 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre.³⁰ It regularly supports other EU statements on human rights in China as well. However, France itself rarely condemns Chinese crackdowns on civil liberties, preferring to emphasize the positive aspects of French-Chinese economic cooperation. In a speech in Nanjing in February 2014, Foreign Minister Fabius obliquely said, “Sometimes, these two great countries can have different approaches. . . . I’m thinking of certain international issues. I’m also thinking of the issue of human rights, where different historical trajectories have produced different sensibilities: nobody should force their views upon anyone else, but we believe that certain principles and rights are universal and should benefit every woman and every man in every country.”³¹

Marginalized Communities

France hosts the second-largest number of refugees and asylum seekers in the EU, after Germany. In 2013, 13 percent of the total candidates who obtained the status of refugee or asylum seeker in the EU were in France. In 2013, one in four refugee candidates gained legal status.³² This openness is new since the left-wing government came to power. Refugee status allows the beneficiary to work and to receive social welfare in France. Refugees in France come from countries such as Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Russia, and Albania.³³

The French public has a general sympathy for Christians from the Middle East, supported by Christian churches but also by parliamentarians and the media. This stems from the close historical links that France has built with these communities, especially in Lebanon and Syria. In his meeting with the president of the Conference of French Catholic Bishops on October 7, 2013, President Hollande publicly expressed his concern about the future of these communities in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and the Palestinian territories. The French president declared that France has the clear wish to support all the Christians from the Middle East.³⁴ During his visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories in November 2013, President Hollande reiterated that there is nothing worse “than imagining that the Middle East could be a land where Christians could no longer live in peace.”³⁵ As a consequence, the French refugee agency has been keen to support refugee status for Christian Syrians escaping the civil war.

Since France passed a law in May 2013 legalizing same-sex marriage, French diplomacy has been more supportive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights abroad. In January 2014, for instance, the foreign ministry criticized a bill in Nigeria to criminalize same-sex relationships.³⁶

Gender equality is not a primary area of focus for French foreign policy, although diplomats make occasional statements in support of equality issues. The AFD is in the process of finalizing a strategy on gender and development.³⁷

France continues to issue statements in response to the killings of ethnic Rohingya in Myanmar, including acknowledging a Human Rights Watch report that referred to the violence as ethnic cleansing.³⁸ President Hollande raised the topic in a meeting with Burmese president Thein Sein in July 2013. In that meeting, Hollande also mentioned that France supports everyone who is working for democracy and respect of human rights in Myanmar.³⁹

Tibetan rights activists were encouraged that Hollande reportedly raised the topic of human rights with Chinese president Xi Jinping on an April 2013 visit whose primary purpose was to improve economic relations; the visit came just after two Tibetan monks had set themselves on fire to protest China’s policy in Tibet.⁴⁰ However, despite encouragement by various NGOs and French parliamentarians,⁴¹ Hollande did not explicitly raise the topic of Tibet during President Xi’s visit to France the following

year, in March 2014. France hosted a visit by the Dalai Lama most recently in 2011.

Nor has France spoken openly against China's treatment of the Uighurs, who face religious repression, crackdowns on peaceful protestors, imprisonment, and torture. After terrorist attacks occurred in March and May 2014 that were blamed on Uighur separatists, France issued statements condemning the violence and expressing solidarity with the government and the Chinese people.⁴²

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