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France's struggle is against much more than gay marriage

By Mark Mazower

The issue of same-sex union reflects deep anxiety over the country's future, writes Mark Mazower



Anti-gay marriage activist Virginie Tellene, also known as Frigide Barjot (centre), leads a demonstration in Paris against France's new bill to legalise same-sex marriage

As France celebrated its first gay marriage on Wednesday, the reverberations of Sunday night's demonstration in central Paris could still be felt. In the biggest protest in a generation, about 200,000 marchers waving pink and blue banners protested against a bill that makes France the 14th country to legalise gay marriage. The city has vivid memories of protests – May 1968, for one – that toppled governments. These encourage the organisers of the anti-gay movement, who like to see it as a “French spring”; and worry the government, which has been

toying with the idea of clamping down on them.

To an outsider, though, there is something mysterious about the whole business. It was courageous of the Socialists to drive the bill through the National Assembly, given that it was scarcely a vote winner and that the government has few other achievements to its name. But, when most opinion polls suggest this is an issue about which few voters care, it would not have expected such opposition.

The main driver is political. Rightwing party politics is in flux as rarely before; and, while the National Front waits in the wings, the centre-right UMP is transfixed by the succession struggle to replace former president Nicolas Sarkozy. The party is split, with Islam-bashing hardliners such as Mr Sarkozy's protégé Jean-François Copé ranged against the centrists who support former prime minister François Fillon. Pushing for a move away from the middle ground, the former group has jumped on the opposition to gay marriage. Younger Sarkozyists have been supportive, too.

Meanwhile, Catholic activists dream of a France returned to the path of Christian virtue. For decades, they have been on the margins of political life or forced to compromise with mainstream conservatives. Their hope is that gay marriage will be the issue to alert the republic to the dangers of secularism.

Would this matter had the country not been plunged into one of its bouts of soul-searching? Almost certainly not. The restoration of democracy, supported by the creation of a governing elite to carry it out, was central to President Charles de Gaulle's reshaping of the republic after the second world war. That elite's achievements are in doubt as never before. Arguments over whether to increase English-language instruction in universities degenerate into shouting matches over how to preserve the global reach of *la Francophonie*, while the plight of the underperforming higher-education sector goes largely unremarked.

Then there is Europe. Since the 1950s, France's role as co-driver of continental integration has served as the modernisers' preferred route to grandeur. But the European crisis has sharply knocked popular support for the project, as a Pew Research Center survey this month confirmed.

Much the same is happening elsewhere on the continent: since the economic crisis, confidence in globalisation has collapsed and political sentiment is turning inward. The result is a new focus on the nation and its future. In France, few wish publicly to mark themselves as extremists by claiming inspiration from Vichy or from colonial days.

Instead, these activists of the right take the wartime language of collaboration and resistance and turn it against those who now lead the republic. It is the administration of François Hollande that must be resisted in the name of French values. To these historical allusions, they add what really counts for them: the language of existential moral danger and national demographic catastrophe that has been around as long as the republic itself. This now includes new threats – not Germany, not communism, but the kind of perspective that allows someone such as extreme rightwing historian Dominique Venner, who killed himself last week in Notre Dame cathedral, to see opposition to gay marriage and Islam as twin aspects of the same mortal battle.

The French remain as gloomy as any in Europe about the future of their country and their children. Legalising gay marriage will have little impact on either. But Sunday's march was not about reality; it was about symbols and fears. Activists' hopes for a national spiritual rebirth through this issue will, polls suggest, be disappointed. But the underlying anxieties will not go away. France's long struggle to come to terms with its dwindling global stature goes on.

The writer is professor of history at Columbia University and author of 'Governing the World'

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