France's New Security Laws - Rightward Shift

Why in news?

More than 46,000 people gathered in Paris to protest against France's controversial new security law.

What are the key provisions of the law?

- The legislation, being pushed by President Emmanuel Macron, seeks to provide greater powers and protections for police officers.
- Three articles of the bill concern enabling the police to organise ground and air mass surveillance.
- They restrict the filming of police officers.
- Articles 21 and 22 of the proposed "global security" law allow the police and the gendarmes (paramilitary forces) to use body cameras and drones to film citizens.
- The provisions also allow the recorded footage to be live-streamed to the command post.
- Article 24 penalises publishing "the image of the face or any other element of identification" of a police or paramilitary official who is acting in "a police operation".
    - This applies if the dissemination is done with "the intent of harming their physical or mental integrity".
- Punishment for the crime will be imprisonment for up to 1 year, with a maximum fine of 45,000 euros.

What is the government's rationale?

- The Macron government has insisted that it does not intend to target press freedoms.
- The new law is said to be aimed at protecting police officers and their families from online trolling and harassment when off duty.
- Apart from Macron's centrist LaRem party, the bill has received support from the country's conservative parties.

What are the concerns with it?

- The law is being opposed by civil liberties groups, left-wing parties, journalists and migrant activists.

- They have called the bill authoritarian and unnecessary, insisting that existing laws are sufficient to protect police officers.
- Opponents condemn what they describe as the hardening of police response to protests in recent years, especially after the Yellow Vest demonstrations of 2018.
- Journalists and human rights groups have particularly expressed serious concerns.
    - Article 24 would make it harder to cover public events and record instances of police violence.
    - It would thus make it more difficult to hold officers accountable.
    - Its wording has also been criticised as being open-ended. E.g. the way courts would interpret the term "intent of harming"
- There have been instances of police excesses during the recent protests which would have been left unreported had the proposed law been in place.

What is the larger significance?

- **Rightward shift** - Analysts have pointed to a rightward shift of the French electorate.
- This is seen especially in the aftermath of recent terror attacks, including the beheading of schoolteacher Samuel Paty, and the Nice stabbing attack.
- A government-commissioned survey found that 58% of respondents backed the new security law.
- Also, Macron, who describes his politics as "neither right nor left", and who was with the Socialist Party until 2009, has been increasingly trying to appeal to right-wing voters.
- This is seen in the light of the Presidential election of early 2022.
- Another controversial legal measure, the so-called "anti-separatism" bill that Macron is proposing, is also being seen as a part of this trend.
- **Islamic radicalism** - The bill, which aims to crack down on Islamic radicalism, has caused concern among Muslims in France.
- The measures include school education reforms to ensure Muslim children do not drop out, and stricter controls on mosques and preachers.

Source: The Indian Express

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