



### YELLOW VEST MOVEMENT EXPLAINED

By  
**Shamsa Nawaz**  
*Research Fellow*

Edited by  
**Najam Rafique**

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



In his effort to quell the *gilets jaunes* (Yellow Vest) movement that has gripped France, French President Emmanuel Macron has announced plans to tighten laws on undeclared protests.

He has invited citizens across the country to give their views on four central themes: taxation, the organization of public spending savings, bureaucratic procedures and citizenship and democracy.<sup>1</sup> "We won't agree on everything, which is normal in a democracy. But at least we'll show we're a people which is not afraid of talking, exchanging, debating,"<sup>2</sup> he said while furthering the democratic values.

Macron has declared to give his own conclusions by March 15, 2019, while agreeing with the protesters' demands to change some of his flagship policies. He however has not given any indication of rolling back his pro-business reforms and is invariably referred as "president of the rich" for his new climate and environment friendly policies which are considered as new approach towards capitalism.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sam Meredith, "France's Macron launches national debate to soothe ongoing 'yellow vest' protests", *CNBC*, January 14, 2019. [www.cnbc.com/2019/01/14/france-macron-launches-national-debate-amid-yellow-vest-protests.html](http://www.cnbc.com/2019/01/14/france-macron-launches-national-debate-amid-yellow-vest-protests.html)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> "Yellow Vest protests: Macron launches national debate with open letter to the French", *France 24*, January 14, 2019. [www.france24.com/en/20190113-france-macron-national-debate-yellow-vest-protests-letter](http://www.france24.com/en/20190113-france-macron-national-debate-yellow-vest-protests-letter)

The Prime Minister of France, Edouard Philippe has also climbed down by halting the planned increase in gas and electricity prices this winter. He has announced to postpone the toughening of the rules for vehicle emissions tests.<sup>4</sup>

The 'Yellow Vest' movement, named after the high-visibility jackets protesters wear, has plunged France into worst crisis since the seminal event of French Revolution in May 1968. The French society is shaken to its core ever since November 2017. Starting from the grassroots level against the hike in the fuel tax to 20 percent,<sup>5</sup> the protest has morphed into a movement challenging Macron's authority and demanding his resignation as President. The protesters have also called for the reintroduction of the solidarity tax on wealth, a minimum wage increase and the implementation of Citizens' initiative referendums.<sup>6</sup>

*The gilets jaunes* movement has severely distressed the euro zone's second-largest economy and disrupted the French political system. Turned almost more than two months old with 84,000 people demonstrating all across, so far twelve people have died and more than 1700 are injured.<sup>7</sup> Analysts say most of those joining the ranks of the "yellow vests" are workers on lower middle incomes who say they barely scrape by and get scant public services in exchange for some of the highest tax bills in Europe.<sup>8</sup>

Macron's intention to implement a raise in fuel prices from January 1, 2019 holds environmental logic. The raise in the carbon prices is one of several steps towards France's commitment to cut carbon emissions by 40% by 2030 and to ban sales of petrol and diesel vehicles by 2040.<sup>9</sup> However, this has been delayed at the request of Prime Minister Edouard Philippe.

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<sup>4</sup> "France protests: PM Philippe suspends fuel tax rises", December 4, 2018. *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46437904>

<sup>5</sup> Feargus O'Sullivan "Why Drivers Are Leading a Protest Movement Across France", *City Lab*, November 19, 2018, [WWW.CITYLAB.COM/TRANSPORTATION/2018/11/FRENCH-PROTESTS-GILETS-JAUNES-EMMANUEL-MACRON-GAS-DIESEL-TAX/576196/](http://WWW.CITYLAB.COM/TRANSPORTATION/2018/11/FRENCH-PROTESTS-GILETS-JAUNES-EMMANUEL-MACRON-GAS-DIESEL-TAX/576196/)

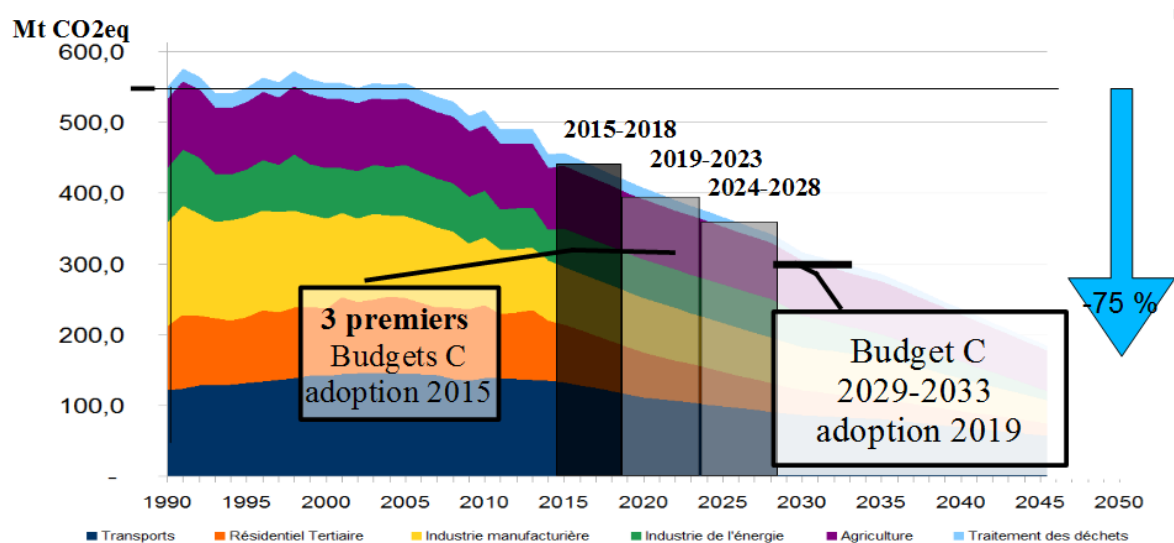
<sup>6</sup> Sam Meredith, "France's Macron launches national debate to soothe ongoing 'yellow vest' protests", *CNBC*, January 14, 2019. [www.cnbc.com/2019/01/14/france-macron-launches-national-debate-amid-yellow-vest-protests.html](http://www.cnbc.com/2019/01/14/france-macron-launches-national-debate-amid-yellow-vest-protests.html)

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Watts, "Macron's U-turn on eco-tax rise gives green lobby fuel for thought", *The Guardian*, December 4, 2018. [www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/dec/04/macron-u-turn-on-eco-tax-rise-gives-green-lobby-fuel-for-thought](http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/dec/04/macron-u-turn-on-eco-tax-rise-gives-green-lobby-fuel-for-thought)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Angelique Chrisafis and Adam Vaughan, "France to ban sales of petrol and diesel cars by 2040", *The Guardian*, July 6, 2017. [www.theguardian.com/business/2017/jul/06/france-ban-petrol-diesel-cars-2040-emmanuel-macron-volvo](http://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/jul/06/france-ban-petrol-diesel-cars-2040-emmanuel-macron-volvo)

## Macron's Carbon Emission Cut Plan



**Source:** “Stratégie Nationale Bas-Carbone (SNBC)”, Ministère de la Transition écologique et solidaire, December 19, 2018. [www.ecologique-solidaire.gouv.fr/strategie-nationale-bas-carbone-snbc](http://www.ecologique-solidaire.gouv.fr/strategie-nationale-bas-carbone-snbc)

Macron’s slogan “make our planet great again”<sup>10</sup> by cutting down on the use of carbon is not well received in France, mainly due to two reasons;

- i. The uncertainty in what they are supposed to be paying for.
- ii. Whether the burden is being fairly shared or not.

Variant in its characteristics, since social media is being used to publicize the cause of the protest, the challenge for Macron is enormous. It is not only confined to the readjustments of his policies to accommodate the grievances of the people, but to ensure the sustainability of his reforms. With the rising trends towards the rightist policies particularly amongst the youth of France, as was manifested in the elections between Macron and Le Pen, no prophecy of the win of La République En Marche as a liberal or social-liberal political party can be ensured in the times to come. Eco-tax rise would have been easier for the poor people to stomach if an assurance was given for the redistribution of revenues among the public or ring-fenced for a better healthcare system, renewable energy or environmental homes. Macron would have faced lesser hostility if the similar model of Canada’s Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in British Columbia in which he introduced carbon

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Watts, “Macron’s U-turn on eco-tax rise gives green lobby fuel for thought”. Op.Cit.

pricing system and the revenue is returned to citizens. Similarly the rebates are followed to deal with the costs of air pollution and rising temperatures.<sup>11</sup>

Christophe Barbier, a columnist for L'Express magazine, has divided the people of France into two groups:<sup>12</sup>

- i. A nation that understands the new rules of international capitalism. He considers them the brain of France since they go with the new rules of capitalism. They are generally viewed as the rich people.
- ii. The other group does not understand the rules and therefore the rise in fuel prices are unacceptable for them. They form the body of the French nation since they are in majority coming from low- or middle-income families. They are hardest hit since their share of incomes on fuel and transport is already enormously disproportionate. They are demanding reintroduction of the solidarity tax on wealth, a minimum wage increase and the implementation of Citizens' initiative referendums.

The *gilets jaunes* movement is apparently meant to protect the French social model considered as an effective counter of the adverse consequences of capitalism. It encompasses a set of services and benefits which are administered by both central and local governments. They are designed to shield the underprivileged by giving every citizen equal chance and tries reducing inequalities.

However, due to the goals of the movement being more amorphous, it has added an ideological disorientation in the *giletsjaunes* movement. The reactionary and populists traits are gradually creeping in to accentuate the xenophobic tendencies. True to the historical facts, hatred of high finance can easily translate it into anti-Semitism, racism and populism. Moreover, contrary to the pro-European policies of La République En Marche that accepts globalization and emphasizes to modernize French politics, the protest is taking on a more myopic dimension.

Just before Christmas, a group of yellow vests were filmed in Montmartre, making the *quenelle*, a version of a Hitler salute invented by the humourist Dieudonné. Similarly, the protesters have also threatened more than 50 parliamentary deputies from Macron's *La République en Marche* (LREM)

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<sup>11</sup> David Roberts, "Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is betting his reelection on a carbon tax", *VOX*, October 24, 2018. <https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2018/10/24/18017726/canada-trudeau-election-carbon-tax-dividends>

<sup>12</sup> Eleanor Beardsley, "To Understand France's Yellow Vest Movement, You Have To Get Out Of Paris", *npr* January 14, 2019. [www.npr.org/2019/01/14/685276691/to-understand-frances-yellow-vest-movement-you-have-to-get-out-of-paris](http://www.npr.org/2019/01/14/685276691/to-understand-frances-yellow-vest-movement-you-have-to-get-out-of-paris)

with hanging, guillotining or shooting.<sup>13</sup> In Dordogne, the cars of an LREM deputy and her husband were torched outside their homes by *gilets jaunes*. Jean-François M baye, another LREM deputy, received an anonymous letter calling him “a token black” and asking what right an African had “to meddle in French problems”.<sup>14</sup> Though, according to one poll, the number of protesters who had voted for Macron in the 2017 French presidential election is very little, and many had either not voted, or had voted for far-right or far-left candidates. Similarly, according to the French interior ministry, the total number of people demonstrating has dropped from 285,000 people in November, 2017 to 75,000 people by December, two weeks after the first protests.<sup>15</sup>

What the future holds for environmentalists in the wake of rising anxiety of those affected by the implementation of carbon tax is the main concern of the movement. Would it give a new curve to capitalism? Would the Paris Agreement continue to keep the world united on climate change? Similarly, at the regional level, it is an undeniable reality that Europe is in a grip of growing populism. It would be interesting to see how successful would Macron be to evade political high jacking of the movement by the rightist political parties. The issue significantly touches the populous throb. Moreover, French do agree with the environmentalists, but their much apprised social model is equally threatened at this period of transition because the poor is getting affected by the asymmetry of folds meant for long-term Climate Change measures. The dilemma is an uphill task for Macron to deal with.

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<sup>13</sup> Lara Marlowe, “Yellow vests' reactionary and populist traits not just a French problem”, *The Irish Times*, January 14, 2019. [www.irishtimes.com/opinion/yellow-vests-reactionary-and-populist-traits-not-just-a-french-problem-1.3756613](http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/yellow-vests-reactionary-and-populist-traits-not-just-a-french-problem-1.3756613)

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Watts, “Macron’s U-turn on eco-tax rise gives green lobby fuel for thought”, *The Guardian*, December 4, 2018. [www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/dec/04/macron-u-turn-on-eco-tax-rise-gives-green-lobby-fuel-for-thought](http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/dec/04/macron-u-turn-on-eco-tax-rise-gives-green-lobby-fuel-for-thought)

<sup>15</sup> “75,000 take part in French anti-Macron protests – Interior Ministry”, *The Citizen*, December 1, 2018. [citizen.co.za/news/news-world/2044148/75000-take-part-in-french-anti-macron-protests-interior-ministry](http://citizen.co.za/news/news-world/2044148/75000-take-part-in-french-anti-macron-protests-interior-ministry)