

French police gain remote and repressive spying powers



**A new law allows authorities to activate the cameras and microphones of suspects' cell phones
French police gain remote spying powers / FILE PHOTO © Getty Images / Ignatiev**

Paris, July 8 (RHC)-- Police in France gained the power to remotely activate and monitor the camera, microphone, and GPS of a suspect's devices under a so-called "Justice Reform Bill" that passed the National Assembly this past week, according to media reports.

The legislation, which flew through the parliamentary body with a majority of 80 to 24, allows police to use laptops, cars, phones, and other connected electronics in order to monitor terrorism suspects, as well as those suspected of organized crime and delinquency.

The bill reportedly includes exemptions for “sensitive professions” such as journalists, judges, lawyers, doctors, and MPs. Lawmakers with President Emmanuel Macron’s party added an amendment limiting remote spying to “when justified by the nature and seriousness of the crime” and “for a strictly proportional duration” not exceeding six months. Police will only be able to use geolocation when investigating crimes that carry at least a five-year prison sentence, and a judge must sign off on every use of the powers.

The new measures “raise serious concerns over infringement of fundamental liberties,” digital rights advocacy group La Quadrature du Net said in a statement. It claimed that the “right to security, right to a private life, and to private correspondence” hung in the balance, as well as “the right to come and go freely.”

Because the bill is vague about what constitutes a serious crime, the government could use the new police powers to silence political activists and others who pose no real threat to the state, the group argued.

The Paris Bar, a professional group of 30,000 lawyers, warned in a statement that the bill constituted a “particularly serious breach of respect for privacy,” arguing it “cannot be justified by the protection of the public order” and complaining it did not prohibit police from snooping on protected conversations between lawyer and client.

Insisting the new police powers would only be used on “dozens of cases a year,” Justice Minister Eric Dupond-Moretti argued “people’s lives will be saved” by beefed-up surveillance. “We’re far away from the totalitarianism of 1984,” he said.

The justice reform bill passed the Senate last month in its original form, and now must be approved as amended.

Last week, France erupted into massive, violent riots following the police shooting of 17-year-old Nahel Merzouk as he allegedly attempted to flee a traffic stop in Nantes. The officer who shot the youth was arrested and charged with voluntary homicide.

In response to the violence, which has led to over 4,000 arrests across the country, with 1,200 of those estimated to be minors, Macron has proposed a social media kill-switch to prevent young people from coordinating actions.

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