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Le Pen:

A sign of voter concern for immigration or lack of concern for parliamentary democracy?

Maryam Namazie

In the first round of the French presidential elections, the National Front leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, has won 17% of the votes; he will face off Chirac who won 19.67% of the votes in the second round. Le Pen's 'success' has caused much concern throughout Europe and the world about the extreme Right's gains on the European political scene.

Le Pen's 'showing' is being portrayed as a 'reflection of voters' concern on immigration' and their 'fear of foreigners.' In fact,

though, Le Pen's showing has more to do with reflecting people's disillusionment with the parliamentary system rather than revealing anything on their views on immigration. The low winning votes (the top three candidates all received less than 20 percent), the number of people who didn't even bother to vote (nearly 30 percent - more than those who voted for any one candidate), and the numbers who voted for Le Pen as a protest vote or to register their dissatisfaction, all point to this truth. People are disillusioned with the system, see no real differences between the main candidates and no longer see



the relationship of Social democracy to their lives. Regardless of the candidate, people have come to realise that nothing really changes by voting in such elections. As a result, fascist parties, which are isolated in society, are able to gain access to the political scene.

Under these conditions, people's real views on the far-Right and its policies cannot be gauged by counting the percentage received by Le Pen but rather by looking to the streets where people are 'voting' with their feet. Tens of thousands poured out to oppose Le Pen right after his 'success'. In Italy, 13 million workers shut down society in

response to the Right wing Berlusconi government. Hundreds of thousands have come to the streets to defend immigrants and asylum seekers throughout Europe. Their views are nothing like Le Pen's or even Blunkett's and Blair's for that matter. It is in the streets where society's real views on immigration and asylum and on the extreme Right can be seen. This is where society is polarised. This is where the Right has been and will be pushed back.

** Pictures of Protests in France and Italy against Right.*

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Who is Violent: Asylum Seekers or the Australian Government?

Maryam Namazie



Once again, asylum seekers in Australia have 'rioted'. This time it is in Port Hedland where detainees were confined to quarters after one man leapt from a tree in a bid to gain the attention of immigration department officials investigating camp conditions on 24 April. The man split his head open and was taken away for medical treatment while the centre was locked down. Around 150 'detainees' were involved in the protest. 24 April was the same day that 'rioting' asylum seekers in Curtin 'detention centre' in Derby, Western Australia ended a 6 day stand-off with guards. They had seized control of the main compound on 19 April after their applications for visas to stay in Australia were rejected. Nearly all of the centre's population joined the standoff soon after. Port Hedland and Curtin are the latest of Australia's six immigration centres to be hit by protests. The last protests came three weeks ago when 800 stormed the Woomera

centre, releasing 50 asylum seekers, about 10 of whom are still free.

Media reports surrounding these and other protests generally portray asylum seekers as violent. Reports on the Port Hedland protest states that asylum seekers went on a 'rampage, smashing an accommodation block and hurling chunks of concrete at staff', a group of whom were 'armed with a sledgehammer, steel bars and concrete blocks.' Reports on the Curtin protest states that 'a security officer was knocked unconscious and 27 other staff suffered minor injuries in the rampage, which caused extensive damage to the buildings' and that asylum seekers were 'armed with knives, cleavers, sharpened broomsticks and curtain rods.' It also states that they 'lit fires', 'ransacked' rooms and destroyed 'thousands of dollars worth of equipment.' Protest leaders, people who we would call refugee rights activists, are portrayed as seditious trouble makers: 'a hard core of rejected asylum seekers' and who continue making trouble. For example, a report states that 'an unspecified number of rioters are believed to be former inmates of Woomera detention centre...' The government has even sentenced an asylum seeker involved in protests to five-years in prison.

Certainly, the protests of asylum seekers do turn violent, just as many other forms of resistance do when faced with state-sponsored violence. Clearly, though, sharpened broomsticks and curtain rods are incomparable with the Australian government's violence and brutality, just as the rock-throwing Palestinian child's 'violent' resistance is incomparable with the Israeli government's full military machinery. One is the oppressed resisting oppression while the other is the oppressor. Don't forget, asylum seekers are innocent people who haven't committed a crime other than to flee for their lives from governments that are often supported and maintained by Australia and the West. The asylum seekers who are protesting in Australian detention centres are people who have fled Afghanistan, Iran, Northern Iraq, Iraq and other countries. They are twice victims of state-sponsored violence - once at the hands of oppressive Islamic and fascist governments and parties and second at the hands of the Australian government. They have resisted both. Both have labelled them trouble makers and have attempted to silence them, imprisoned them, and attempted to devastate them. The resistance of asylum seekers in Curtin, Port Hedland and Woomera is an extension of their resistance in Iran, Afghanistan,

Northern Iraq and Iraq. Don't forget, to asylum seekers, a refusal order means deportation back to more violence and possible death. Their resistance is similar to that of the Jews in Nazi concentration camps, where many tried to protest and escape death. At the time, too, many Jewish refugees were detained by the Australian government.

Some examples of the violence meted out by the Australian government, which:

*** Imprisons all asylum seekers - innocent men, women and children for up to several years in substandard prisons (given the sterilised name detention centre), simply because they have escaped persecution and violence. Curtin is at an air force base in Western Australia state, while Woomera, for example, is surrounded by razor wire topped fences and patrolled by guards and is a former missile testing base on a dusty Outback plain.**

- According to Prof. Richard Harding, Inspector of Custodial Services WA, 'If the conditions that you see in Curtin, Woomera and some of the other detention centres were replicated in an Australian jail, they would be ungovernable. Red-blooded Australian prisoners would

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simply not put up with what we are doing to people who have not been convicted of anything.'

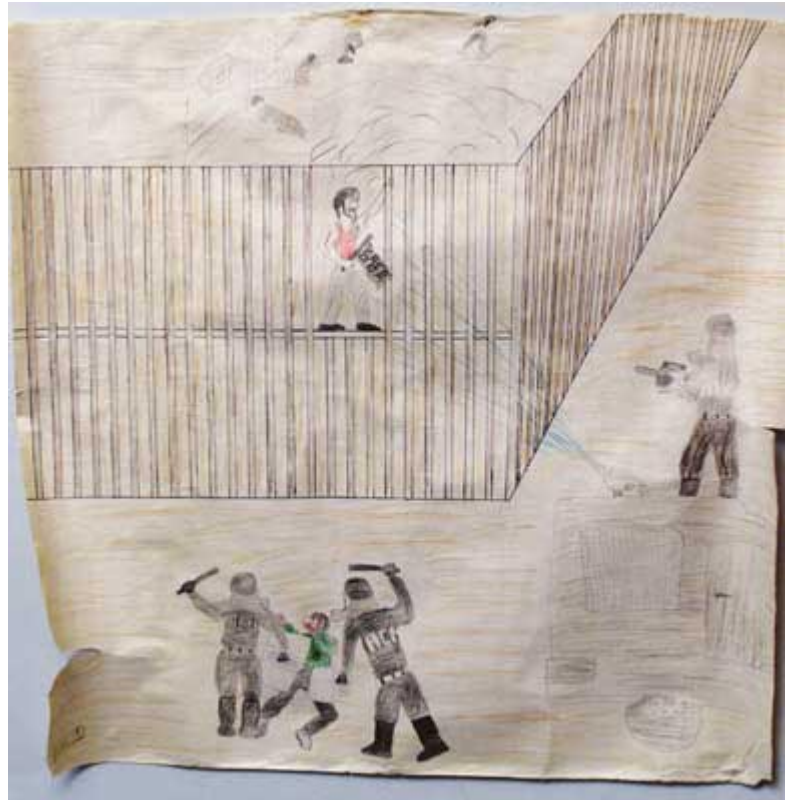
- According to a South Australian government report from a team of child protection officers who visited the Woomera centre, many young people in the centre are suffering severe mental problems. There is a lack of proper beds for young children, inadequate schooling and restrictions on feeding arrangements for toddlers. Parents are not allowed to feed toddlers outside set meal times. The full report has not been released because of a memorandum of understanding with the federal government!

- According to Dr Louise Newman of the NSW Royal College of Psychiatrists, children in detention are being traumatised by the terrible scenes they are witnessing.

- According to Australia's Human Rights Commissioner Dr. Sev Ozdowski children released from Australia's detention centres are struggling to adjust outside the razor wire and many will never recover from their experience. Some children require psychiatric treatment or psychological counselling once they have left mandatory detention, while others carry around a hatred for Australia. Dr Ozdowski, says most asylum seekers who arrived in Australia were already traumatised. He says they come from violent

societies where they have experienced war and civil conflict and placing them in mandatory detention compounds the problems.

- According to Wayne Lynch who was himself traumatised after seven months of counselling 'detainees' in Woomera, most detainees arrive in good health, robust and buoyant, but by the end of their time in detention many are clinically depressed, suicidal and mutilating themselves. 'I was personally traumatised by it and I decided I couldn't participate in such an atrocity any more.' Lynch says he had counselled one asylum seeker who was a professional in his home country and arrived well-dressed and fluent in English. A year later he was clinically depressed, physically unwell and believed he was going to die in detention. He had arrived thinking he would be able to bring his family almost immediately, only to find that the process would take years and he would not be able to speak to his family by phone for the first three months. He was referred to only by a number, had all his possessions confiscated, including photographs of his family which were not returned for six months, and was told he needed a medical certificate if he wanted a tomato or cucumber. He saw



detainees abused, strip-searched and subjected to random raids on their rooms. Lynch's decision to leave Woomera came after 80 asylum-seekers were flown from Woomera to Curtin and Port Hedland without notice and without being told where they were going, a move he saw as an immense breach of human rights.

- Three psychiatric professionals who recently left the Woomera Detention Centre have said that scenes of distressed asylum seekers are a daily occurrence. The three told the ABC's Lateline program, attempts at suicide, even among children, is common.

- Dr Glenda Koutroulis, a Melbourne psychiatric nurse who has witnessed the mass mental health problems taking

place inside Woomera has felt compelled to speak publicly in defiance of her confidentiality contract with the centre's administrators, Australasian Correctional Management. She has never before held so many sobbing, heartbroken men in her life and never wants to again. All she can do is to speak up for them because to do otherwise, she says, would be to collude with torture.

- A disturbing video recently aired shows bloodied detainees bashing their heads against walls and being dragged along the floor by guards while pleading to be released.

*** The Australian government no longer allows asylum seekers on its territories, in**
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contravention to international refugee and human rights norms, and forces their unsafe boats to Papua New Guinea's Manus Island and the Pacific island nation of Nauru calling it a Pacific Solution. Australia has paid these Islands \$114 million to imprison and process asylum seekers.

- According to the ABC's Four Corners program, Australian soldiers used electric prods, cattle prods, double strength capscicum spray and water hoses against asylum seekers in order to force them to disembark on one of the Islands. They also denied hospital treatment to a woman bleeding after childbirth and refused to help more than 100 asylum seekers suffering diarrhoea or dehydration. Negligence by the navy led to the deaths of three men whose boat was returned to Indonesian waters during last year's federal election campaign.

- According to media reports, acute water shortages, the use of solitary-confinement cells to punish detainees and an increase in psychiatric breakdown are among the main complaints made by 300 Afghan asylum seekers held on Nauru. In a fax sent by the 'detainees', they accuse the Australian Government of breaking a promise that they would not be held in detention for more than four months. 'We are now spending our eighth month here . . . many of us think we are being dealt with like

cattle'. The asylum seekers said eight 'detainees' were locked up for three weeks after they left the camp.

*** The Australian government has changed its laws to reduce rights and benefits given to asylum seekers and has made recognised refugees second class citizens while asylum seekers have no rights whatsoever.**

- Since 1999, the Australian government is denying any asylum seeker arriving in Australia by boat permanent refugee status. They can therefore never access mainstream social services, gain permanent residency, and have no rights to family reunion and full citizenship rights. They also cannot re-enter Australia if they leave! Aware that legal challenges to the temporary visas are imminent, the federal government is poised to bring in new laws that would eradicate rights to legal appeal against decisions made by the Refugee Review Tribunal.

- Australia is refusing to commit itself to signing an optional protocol to the Convention Against Torture, passed earlier this week by the UN Human Rights Commission, which would allow snap inspections of immigration detention centres.

*** The Australian government is running a racist anti-asylum seeker**

publicity campaign in order to dehumanise asylum seekers and justify its policies.

- During last year's federal elections, government officials stated that asylum seekers were throwing their babies overboard. According to statements made at a Senate Select Committee, officials knew that the story was untrue but did not set the record straight.

- A Senate Select Committee into the 'children overboard' affair has been told that the Australian military was given guidelines to ensure that 'no personalising or humanising images' were to be taken of refugees during the Tampa crisis in 2001.

- According to retired vice admiral Sir Richard Peek draconian laws gagged Australian Defence Force personnel from telling the truth and allowed the Government to spin-doctor stories. Sir Richard says most people in Canberra knew the Government's claims that asylum-seekers had tossed children into the sea were false by mid October, but the Government did nothing to correct the information.

- Papua New Guinea is deliberately denying foreign journalists visas to avoid scrutiny of the asylum seeker 'detention centre' on Manus Island. [Foreign Correspondent's Evan Williams managed to prepare a comprehensive report after entering PNG clandestinely.]

And the list of the Australian government's legal, political, social and military violence against asylum seekers goes on and on. After the showing of a disturbing video with asylum seekers being dragged by guards, Prime Minister Howard says: 'I know they don't like being in detention, but without sounding insensitive I hope, if people did not seek to come to Australia illegally, they would not be in detention'. Howard and Immigration Minister Ruddock are not insensitive; they are violent criminals carrying out a violent and criminal policy. While the Australian government's spin-doctors spin stories of asylum seekers as violent, we know better. It is the Australian government that is violent and which must be unequivocally condemned.

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