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France's Ban on Jeune Garde: A Crackdown on Anti-Fascist Activism

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In June 2025, the French government, under President Emmanuel Macron, issued a decree to dissolve Jeune Garde, a prominent anti-fascist youth organisation founded in Lyon in 2018. The decision, justified as a measure to maintain public order, has sparked intense debate, with critics arguing it represents a disproportionate attack on left-wing activism. This move mirrors similar actions across Europe, including in Germany, Hungary, and the

UK, where activist groups face increasing government scrutiny and bans, raising concerns about the erosion of democratic freedoms.

Jeune Garde emerged in response to escalating far-right violence in Lyon, uniting young, working-class leftists in cities like Paris, Strasbourg, Lille, and Montpellier. Known for their militant ethos, members often wear black attire adorned with the 'three arrows' symbol, a nod to 1930s German social democrats. Their slogan, "Face à l'extrême droite: riposte immédiate!" ("Against the far right: immediate response!"), encapsulates their commitment to confronting far-right groups head-on.

The group's activities include street patrols, disrupting far-right gatherings, and covering racist graffiti, often sharing videos of these actions online. While their rhetoric is confrontational, violence is not always involved. However, an incident in July 2024, in which eight members were arrested for allegedly assaulting a 15-year-old linked to the Jewish Defence League, a far-right Zionist group, drew significant attention. Court filings claim the teenager was beaten and forced to chant "Viva Palestine," though Jeune Garde insists the encounter was verbal and accuses authorities of bias.

French Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau, part of Macron's government, cited this and other incidents to justify the dissolution, alongside banning Lyon Populaire, a far-right group. On 12 June 2025, Retailleau stated, "The state cannot normalise violence, no matter who it comes from," adding that "those who claim to fight fascism with fascist means must be held to account." The decree, approved by the Council of Ministers, invoked a 1936 law targeting "private militias and armed groups that disturb public order," accusing Jeune Garde of promoting physical confrontation and inciting hatred.

Critics argue the ban is disproportionate. Jeune Garde operates openly, with known leaders like Raphaël Arnault, an elected La France Insoumise MP, and its actions pale in comparison to those of far-right extremists, who have committed murders and planned terrorist attacks. Arnault, in a recent interview with France Info, vowed to appeal the decision, stating, "If Bruno Retailleau thinks he can silence anti-fascists through bureaucratic repression, he clearly doesn't understand our history or determination."

The ban has drawn condemnation from groups like the Human Rights League (LDH) and Amnesty International France. LDH argued that the 1936 law, historically used against fascist paramilitaries, is ill-suited for a loosely organised activist collective like Jeune Garde. Political parties, including the Greens, Communists, and Socialists, have also decried

the move, noting the growing threat of far-right extremism in France and the government's apparent leniency toward it.

Supporters of the ban, however, frame it as a matter of principle. A senior Ministry of the Interior official told Le Monde, "Violence on the street is unacceptable, whether it's from the far right or the far left. We are defending the Republic, not taking sides." Yet, the timing amid political instability and heavy-handed police responses to pro-Palestinian protests suggests a broader shift. The French government's actions reflect a worrying trend across Europe, where governments increasingly target left-wing activism while far-right movements gain ground.

If Jeune Garde's appeal fails, the precedent could embolden further crackdowns, chilling activist movements across France. As the far right grows stronger, the decision to dismantle one of its most vocal opponents may prove a costly misstep for Macron's government, fuelling perceptions of a lurch toward authoritarianism.