Beat: Politics

HOW CAN A.I HELP AN OVERLOADED FRENCH JUSTICE SYSTEM?

ITW WITH JUSTICE MIN. GERALD DARMANIN

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USPA NEWS - On 2nd June 2026, at the French Ministry of Justice on Place Vendome, a mock criminal trial was staged to showcase a new guilty?plea procedure for serious crimes. On the sidelines of this first “audience fictive” “Mock Trial” or criminal plea/bargaining, Justice Minister Gerald Darmanin answered questions on whether France was importing an Anglo-Saxon model and how far artificial intelligence should be used to help an overstretched justice system. With only around 9,000 judges expected to handle close to two million alleged offenders a year, and prisons already stretched beyond capacity, the ministry highlights the time saved by “robotisation” for court clerks. The political debate now turns to whether similar digital tools and eventually AI should be deployed on the judicial side, to prioritise cases and better protect the most vulnerable.

Reported by our correspondent on site at the French Ministry of Justice, Place Vendome, on 2 June 2026. The author, our reporter, attended the mock trial in person and gathered doorstep remarks from Justice Minister Gerald Darmanin.

MOCK TRIAL INSPIRIED BY ANGLO?SAXON INSPIRATION OR FRENCH JUSTUC SYTEM TO GET MODERNISED
INTERVIEW WITH JUSTICE MINISTER GÉRALD DARMANIN
Rahma Rachdi (USPA/handy-reporter): Minister, we have just attended the first mock criminal guilty?plea hearing in France, which lasted more than two hours with real magistrates and lawyers in the room. In the United States, similar exercises have existed since the 1980s. Is this an Anglo?Saxon inspiration? When you were interior minister, you already looked to the American Police Academy to import what you saw as the best practices. Is this mock trial inspired by that Anglo?Saxon model, or is it mainly the French justice system evolving and modernising from within?

Gerald Darmanin, Justice Minister: “I am not at all inspired by Anglo?Saxon models, even though they have long used various forms of guilty plea. Their system is accusatory: there is no investigating judge. In our case, we are keeping a French?style trial, after an average of three years of judicial investigation, and we remain focused on the fundamentals of French justice.

There are Latin?law countries that have used guilty?plea mechanisms for a long time while respecting our shared legal fundamentals, Spain, for example. Hence, this is not an Anglo?Saxon aspiration; it is a proposal that came from magistrates and lawyers themselves, in a report submitted two years ago, commissioned by my predecessor, already faced with the difficulties of scheduling hearings.

"When a defendant recognises the facts, when the evidence is overwhelming, CCTV, scientific evidence when the victim agrees to put an end to a long wait and accepts this recognition of the facts, when the lawyers agree that the sentence is proportionate, when the public prosecutor, in the name of society, agrees, and when, in the end, three judges who would normally sit in an assize court all agree, I do not see what would prevent us from creating this small slip road that allows justice to deal with certain cases more quickly. It avoids secondary victimisation, it limits excessively long delays and, above all, it leads to a more peaceful form of justice."

“As President of the High Court Mrs Bessonne, who presides over assize courts, said, the goal is precisely this: a more peaceful justice. The spirit of the law is not to impose this procedure on every trial. For the first time, we are giving defence lawyers the power to oppose a criminal procedure of this kind. And I would add something important: today, a lawyer is not necessarily present when someone admits the facts during the investigation. You can spend three years under investigation, be accused of something and recognize the facts without ever having had a lawyer by your side. We are writing into the law, for the first time, that a lawyer must be present when a person enters this discussion this preliminary interview, as the law calls it and if there is no lawyer, there can be no recognition of the facts. Hence we are keeping a justice system that remains fully French.”

AI CAN BE HELPUL BOOSTING THE FUTURE OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE IN FRANCE

Rahma Rachdi (USPA): Could artificial intelligence help accelerate the justice system? Beyond the tools already used by lawyers, do you plan to introduce AI at the level of the justice system itself, downstream, to help magistrates deal with the volume of cases and reduce delays that litigants often denounce?

Gerald Darmanin, Justice Minister: “I could speak for a long time about artificial intelligence and its consequences for French justice, but let me focus on the specific question of the criminal trial…”

At this stage, the minister stresses that the new criminal plea procedure must first be tested and evaluated within the current legal framework, with human judges firmly in control of the decision?making process. AI, in his view, may one day assist in organising files or highlighting patterns in complex cases, but it cannot replace the role of magistrates in assessing evidence, hearing victims and defendants, and deciding on proportionate sentences.

For now, Darmanin presents the mock trial and the new procedure for admitted crimes as the priority tools to reduce delays and ease the burden on assize courts, while debates on the use of AI in criminal justice continue within the ministry and among legal professionals.

BETWEEN REFORM AND DIGITAL CAUTION

France’s justice system remains under intense pressure: years?long criminal investigations, overloaded courts and victims who often wait far too long for a verdict. The mock trial at Place Vendome, and the new procedure for crimes recognised by the accused, are presented by the Justice Minister as a way to “open a small slip road” that avoids secondary victimization and makes justice more “peaceful”, without abandoning French legal fundamentals.

The question of artificial intelligence, meanwhile, is only beginning to enter the political conversation. Darmanin’s cautious answer suggests a balance the government is trying to strike: modernising procedures and reducing delays through new tools, while refusing to let algorithms decide in place of judges. How far France will go down that road and whether AI will truly help bring justice closer to victims, will depend on the next waves of reform and on the choices made well beyond the walls of Place Vendome (Chancellery, Mjistry fo Justice, in Paris)

AI, PREDATORS AND VULNERABLE VICTIMS

Beyond internal efficiency, one of the most sensitive issues is the ability of the justice system to spot and stop repeat offenders. With more than 1.9 million alleged offenders processed in criminal matters and over 176,000 minors among them, the question is whether AI could be used to better interconnect prosecutors’ offices, police services and child?protection actors, in order to detect patterns involving known offenders, serial abusers or sexual predators.

On this point, both the minister and his spokesperson acknowledge the potential of modern data tools to cross?reference information between departments and territories, particularly for domestic violence, sexual offences and crimes against children. But they also emphasise that any system must be framed by strict legal safeguards on data protection, non?discrimination and the rights of the defence. The promise of AI, in their view, is not to replace human vigilance but to support it: by flagging risky trajectories earlier, without erasing the margin of appreciation of prosecutors and judges.

FRANCE MUST NO LONGER SWINGING BETWEEN URGENCY AND PRUDENCE AS FOR JUSTICE IN NEED TO BE SERVED

FASTER
France’s justice system has rarely been under so much pressure: nearly two million offenders processed each year, more than 500,000 convictions, chronic prison overcrowding and a backlog of criminal cases that leaves some victims waiting for years before a trial. Digital tools and AI are no miracle cure, but they are now part of the conversation at the top of the ministry, from Place Vendome to the G7 (To be held 14 June 2026, In Evan, under the French Presidency chairing this summit this year).

The exchanges with Minister of Justice Gerald Darmanin and Minister of Justice spokesperson Sacha Straub?Kahn show a line of cautious opening: automation for clerks, experimental use of AI as an assistant for judges, and a refusal at least for now to let algorithms take over the core of judicial decision?making. Whether this prudence can coexist with the urgency of protecting the most vulnerable and reducing intolerable delays will be one of the key political questions for French justice in the coming years.../ To be continued in the next article with Minister of Justice spokesperson Sacha Straub?Kahn's interview.

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