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France

# A surprise victory and a reprieve from the RN

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**The Nouveau Front populaire (New Popular Front), a coalition built in just a few days by the left-wing parties (whereas they remained splintered at the recent European parliamentary elections), has just won 182 deputy seats in the French National Assembly, beating the Rassemblement national (RN) and its allies, with 143 seats, and the camp of President Macron with 168 seats.**

This is a spectacular reversal of the situation meaning we have gone from the threat of a far-right stranglehold on the state apparatus to a relative left-wing majority in the Assembly, elected on a programme of rupture with neoliberal policies. This reversal cannot be understood without looking at the massive mobilisation in recent weeks of the activist forces of the workers' and democratic movement in the face of the far right, leading first to the formation of this New Popular Front (with *la France insoumise* (LFI), *Europe Ecologie Les Verts* (EELV), the Socialist Party (PS), the Communist Party (PCF) and others including the *Nouveau parti anticapitaliste* (NPA)), then to a major mobilisation at the ballot box and a very broadly supported vote to reject the RN.

Following on from its 31.34% result in the European elections on 9 June, the RN obtained more than 33% of the vote in the first round of legislative elections on 30 June, and everything suggested that it would obtain a very large number of deputies in the second round, with all the polls giving it well over 200 deputies and possibly even an absolute majority of 289 seats.

In France, MPs are elected in a first-past-the-post system in the country's 577 constituencies. Basically, if no candidate obtains 50% of the votes cast in the 1st round, there is a second round the following Sunday, in which candidates who obtained more than 12.5% of the votes cast in the 1st round may stand. Candidates may also withdraw spontaneously within two days of the 1st round. 76 M.P.s were elected in the 1st round. Of the remaining 501 constituencies, only 191 were automatically duels, as the other candidates fell below the 12.5% threshold. But three or even four candidates remained in the running in 310 other constituencies. The RN and its allies from *Les Républicains* (around *Éric Ciotti*, President of the LR) had won 39 seats in the 1st round and were leading in the 260 remaining constituencies.

There was therefore a good chance that, in the event of a three-way tie, the RN would win a large majority of these seats. On Sunday evening, the Nouveau Front populaire announced in a single voice that it was withdrawing its candidates wherever it was in third place, to prevent the election of far-right candidates. Throughout Sunday evening and Monday, the Macronist camp dithered, explicitly refusing to call for a barrage against the Rassemblement National, with several voices, such as that of former Prime Minister *Edouard Philippe* and National Assembly President *Yaël Braun Pivet*, maintaining a parallel rejection of the RN and LFI. Finally, on Tuesday evening, under pressure, 81 of the 95 third-placed Ensemble candidates withdrew, bringing the total number of withdrawals against the RN to 221.

Above all, in the days following the 1st round, there was a clear upsurge of activist forces, trade unions and associations from the workers' and democratic movement, to block the RN and prevent it from taking power. This has manifested itself in appeals, demonstrations and, particularly on social networks, a spectacular denunciation of the reality of the RN, a far-right force that has its roots in French fascist currents and, like its European equivalents in the "Identity and Democracy" group, is developing a racist policy that undermines social and democratic rights. [1]

RN activists and officials were a little too quick to relax between the two rounds, confident of victory, and the veneer of respectability they had been brushing for months in the media began to crack. Racist comments and attacks

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increased in towns and neighbourhoods, and the RN declared that it would wage its first battle against French citizens with dual nationality, saying that they were ineligible to hold office. For example, Hollande's former education minister, Najat Vallot-Belkacem, should never have held the post in the first place, in their view, as she is Franco-Moroccan. Similarly, social networks and independent media have revealed the reality of dozens of RN candidates displaying Nazi symbols, responsible for violent actions or making openly racist comments.

In just a few days, Gabriel Attal, the outgoing Prime Minister, had to make a 180° turn. After stigmatising the NFP, criminalising la France insoumise as "anti-Semites refusing to call Hamas terrorists", after calling for a rejection of "the extremes", he had to clearly call for the RN candidates and the "threat of the far right" to be defeated everywhere.

The reality of the RN, a force that represents a danger not only to the rights and security of the racialised working classes, but also to the rights and security of women, LGBTQ+ people, democratic freedoms and all social rights, became clear. The profound anti-Semitic and anti-social nature of the RN was forcefully denounced, breaking with a climate of resignation and benevolence distilled in particular by the 24-hour news media in the hands of a few French billionaires.

If Macron and his candidates had appeared to be the only alternative to the RN, this groundswell would never have happened. Moreover, Macron was already positioning himself as the "heroic" president standing up to a government of the RN after having himself created the possibility of such an accession. The dynamic of rejection was made possible by the existence of the NFP, which emerged as an alternative to the RN, and the consolidation of the NFP was itself made possible by the dynamic of the social movement, particularly the CGT trade union federation. On the evening of the announcement of the early parliamentary elections, Sophie Binet, Secretary of the CGT, called for the creation of a popular front against the extreme right. This social mobilisation was reflected in an inter-union joint call from the CGT, CFDT, FSU, Solidaires and UNSA unions for people to vote against the far right.

The movement to vote against the RN candidates on 7 July exceeded all the forecasts and opinion polls, with withdrawals not leading to a drop in turnout and vote transfers largely to the detriment of the RN. The far right is still massively rejected in the country, and a majority of voters were not prepared to let them come to political power.

But even down to 143 MPs, the RN bloc nevertheless represents a very significant increase for this party, by more than 50 MPs, which is below its electoral weight, having only 25% of the seats after having obtained 33% of the vote.

The NFP is therefore the leading group in the National Assembly and together with the various left-wing parties represents around 190 seats. Nothing is settled, however.

The NFP has a legitimate claim to the post of Prime Minister, as the President of the Republic must, in accordance with institutional practice since 1958, appoint a representative of the group that came out on top in the legislative elections. This should not be open to challenge but, as always, Macron does not want to acknowledge his political failures, arguing that the NFP does not have an absolute majority in the Assembly, with the left having only 190 seats. Yet he himself has governed since June 2022 with a relative majority of 250 seats, imposing his policies with decrees and 49-3 articles that avoid a vote in the Assembly. [2]

The Macronists would therefore like to stand in the way of the NFP by acting as if they themselves had a majority, by seeking to build, ex nihilo, out of odds and ends, a new fictitious coalition, with variable geometry according to different hypotheses put forward by the leaders of the Macronist party, Ensemble - an alliance of Ensemble (163 seats) with the small group of the LR (Les Républicains, 66 seats), or also the hypothesis of a centre-right and left front without LFI, with socialists and ecologists, allied with the Macronists.

Clearly, Macron is currently blocked in the National Assembly, but there is also a general seizure, due to the institutional functioning of the French Fifth Republic, created to avoid parliamentary coalitions and to weld majority camps around the president, based on the single-member constituency ballot. Since 1958, the Gaullist system has rejected the parliamentary alliances with which the Fourth Republic functioned, imposing majorities built around the presidential party. Then, from 1986 onwards, the system had to evolve, accepting “cohabitations” between a left-wing or right-wing president and opposing parliamentary majorities. But the system has never allowed coalitions formed by several parties negotiating around a government programme, relegating the President of the Republic to a secondary role. Moreover, Macron still imagines organising a pseudo majority in which he would remain the conductor of the orchestra. On Monday morning, he reappointed Gabriel Attal as Prime Minister. Having lost nearly 100 seats, a loss that would have been much greater without the carryover of votes from the left in the second round, Macron would like to appear victorious in these elections without acknowledging his own defeat. We'll see how this tug-of-war plays out in the days ahead.

## The New Popular Front resists

Until now, the NFP parties have resisted the centrifugal forces that led to the break-up of the NUPES alliance a year ago. This is the result of pressure from the social movement and the threat from the RN. Despite all the efforts of the media devoted to Macron's regime, the representatives of the four parties forming the backbone of the coalition have been speaking with one voice for the last fortnight and avoiding any discordant initiatives. Clearly, in the coming days, maximum pressure is going to be brought to bear on the leaders of the PS, EELV and even the PCF, and on figures from LFI such as François Ruffin, to try to break this front.

Until now, the leaders of both the PS and EELV have understood that giving in to the siren calls of social liberalism or a dubious agreement with Macron would mean falling back into the ruts that made the far right flourish and led to the crisis of certain Green parties at the European level.

François Hollande's presence as an NFP deputy has not changed the nature of this. Without being a programme for breaking with capitalism, the NFP programme focuses on social demands on wages, prices and public services, in particular, which are an extension of the mobilisations of recent years and correspond to the demands of the social movement and the needs of the popular classes in the face of the damage caused by neoliberal capitalism. This is what the vast majority of the components of this social and trade union movement have understood, even its most radical components, and it is also the meaning given by the NPA to its participation in the NFP, with the candidacy of Philippe Poutou in the Aude. For reasons of identity, groups like Lutte ouvrière, the POID, Révolution permanente and the NPAR have placed themselves on the margins of the movement in recent weeks, but this did not correspond to a widespread posture in activist circles, even radical circles who understood the urgency and did not mix up the stages. This was the case, for example, with the position of the Union communiste libertaire.

The NFP said that if it were able to form a government, its first decisions would be to raise the minimum wage (SMIC) from 1400 to 1600 euros net, increase civil servants' wages by 10%, index wages to prices, repeal the pension reform and increased retirement age of 64 imposed by Macron a year ago, introduce a freeze on essential prices, and increase housing benefit by 10%. This would obviously be a positive step.

No one can predict what the weeks ahead will bring in terms of government or new twists and turns.

On the other hand, certain points are important, starting with the maintenance of the Popular Front as a unified political coalition around a political project and a programme to break with the system, even if this programme is limited in its proposals to challenge the system (nothing, among other things, about public ownership of key sectors

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of the economy). Similarly, there will be no social advances and no resistance to all the blockages that will be put in place by the neoliberal forces if the NFP does not extend beyond the electoral framework to a rally, a political front in the towns and neighbourhoods, particularly where the RN has succeeded in deceiving the popular classes by claiming to be the defender of their living conditions.

The social movements will also have to continue to play a direct political role and help build a common front of political and social forces capable of thwarting the RN's advance. Of course, the RN's advance has been halted in the Assembly, but that doesn't mean that its influence in society has diminished. Anti-fascist action, anti-racist mobilisation and denunciation of the real nature of the RN are essential in the months ahead, but uprooting the RN from its popular base will require a political and social project based on social needs to be built, heard and organised to combat the ideas of neoliberal capitalism and the neoliberal, security-oriented and racist policies on which the far right thrives in France and Europe. If an anti-neoliberal, anti-capitalist alternative does not make itself heard among the popular classes, there will be no lasting barrier to the Rassemblement national.

9 July 2024

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[1] On 8 July, the RN - which has 30 MEPs, the biggest delegation of elected representatives in Strasbourg - joined the Patriots for Europe group, which brings together: Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's Fidesz, Austria's far-right FPÖ (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs), Geert Wilders' PVV (Partij voor de Vrijheid-Party for Freedom), ANO (Akce nespokojených občanů-Action of Discontented Citizens, ANO stands for Yes in Czech) led by former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, Santiago Abascal's Vox (Spain), André Ventura's Chega (Portugal), the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti), the Flemish independence party Vlaams Belang and Matteo Salvini's Lega from Italy. Jordan Bardella is president of the Patriots for Europe. The group has 84 MEPs, while the EPP has 188 and the Social Democratic group 136.

[2] Article 49.3 of the French constitution enables a government to push a bill through the National Assembly without a vote.