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France

An iron glove on a hand of clay

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The dominant class in France and in Europe breathed a collective sigh of relief at the outcome of the French electoral cycle. The system of political representation in France appeared completely in ruins in early spring 2017, now the country has ended up with an ultra-neoliberal president equipped with a strong state and an absolute majority in the National Assembly.

The way seems open to restablising the political edifice of bourgeois domination. And we are witnessing a real acceleration of the social attacks demanded by the employers' organisation, Medef, and some profound challenges to democratic rights. The Assembly is to vote rapidly on a law allowing the government to proceed through decrees (texts having legislative value promulgated directly by the government without parliamentary debate and decision) so as to speed up modifications of employment legislation from September. Meanwhile, a new security law will be voted on making the state of emergency permanent; with exorbitant powers for prefects and the Minister of the Interior, who will no longer need a judicial decision to begin investigation procedures and hearings or to ban demonstrations, place people under house arrest or imprison them.

Behind this façade, several phenomena should be taken into account.

First, the profound discredit of the political leadership, which has led to the dislocation of the Parti socialiste (PS) and the deep crisis of Les Républicains (LR), has not been erased by the election of Macron. This discredit has been concretely reflected by a very high level of abstention in the second round of the presidential election and during the parliamentary elections. 12 million voters abstained in the 2nd round of the presidential election, with 4 million blank ballots, while there was a 51.29% abstention rate in the first round of the parliamentary elections, a level never before seen under the Fifth Republic, with a rate of 57.36% for the second round.

Thus, in the 1st round of the presidential election, the number of abstentions and blank ballots was 11.5 million, while Macron won 8.6 million votes or 18.19% of those registered, 1.6 million less than Hollande in 2012, nearly 3 million less than Sarkozy in 2007. The candidates of LREM (La République En Marche, the movement launched by Macron) and MODEM obtained 15.40% of the vote in the 1st round of the parliamentary elections.

The crisis of representation and of legitimacy of the political leadership is still present. The collapse of the PS and the crisis of the LR have made Macron's victory and that of LREM possible, but this should not hide the persistence of this reality.

The mode of scrutiny has accentuated two phenomena:

- First the growing lack of interest in the parliamentary elections where the absence of proportional representation and the two round uninominal ballot means that it isn't really possible to vote for the candidates of one's choice;
- This type of ballot gives an unbelievable bonus to the party with a relative majority: with 13.44 % of the votes of those registered (28.21% of those who actually voted), LREM won 53.37% of the seats in the National Assembly. Faced with this, the Front National only took 1.3% of the seats in the Assembly, although Marine Le Pen reached the 2nd round of the Presidential election and had received 16.14% of the votes in the 1st round.

Thus, immediately after this electoral process, the institutional system allows an artificial and temporary resolution of the crisis of political domination, whereas in numerous other European countries a chaotic situation continues.

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Despite a media campaign of a type rarely seen, which lauds the president and his majority, the facts are stubborn: there is no loyalty among youth and the popular classes to the new presidential coupling of Macron-Philippe.

This reality is in no way being ignored by the new president. On the contrary, lessons have been drawn from the previous presidency in which Hollande and Valls encountered a strong popular mobilisation, an unprecedented level of discredit and an inability to hold together a parliamentary majority on major projects.

Macron wants to implement rapidly a series of ultra-neoliberal reforms which obviously runs the risk of coming up against the same obstacles.

Certainly, he can rely on an apparently very strong stability in the national Assembly, with an absolute majority of 289 votes. The LREM parliamentary group has 314 deputies and its allies in François Bayrou's MODEM have 47. The crisis following these elections has also dislocated LR leading to a new group, known as "Les constructifs", bringing together the centrists of the UDI and some of the deputies elected under the LR label, or 35 deputies in all.

But the current picture could change in the coming months. Thus Macron will use the system of decrees which involves having a blank cheque from the Assembly to legislate on a new dismantling of the employment code.

Also, he wants to introduce institutional reforms which will deepen the presidential character of the regime. In this sense Macron has stressed a symbolism playing on the monarchical aspect of the presidency and his function as chief of staff: going down the Champs-Élysées in a command car the day after his election, receiving Putin at Versailles. Also, taking as model the US presidential system, he convened the members of the Assembly and Senate in Congress for a speech on general orientations of the "State of the Union" type.

Playing on these symbols is partly an attempt to restore a strong image of the President, an image which was heavily eroded under Hollande. But behind the image, there is a reality.

Emmanuel Macron wants to accelerate France's passage towards ordo-liberalism, a system allying a still deeper challenge to the redistributive functions of the state, an acceleration of the attacks against the whole system of social protection (health insurance, pensions, unemployment benefits) with a stronger executive power and further erosion of democratic rights. Meanwhile, his behaviour displays a class contempt which is even more patent than that of Nicolas Sarkozy.

The evidence is that the aggressive nature of his social policy of austerity and of challenging social rights will not generate any more popular support than was the case under Sarkozy or Hollande. Also, Macron's whole goal is to advance rapidly without fear of institutional blockage or too much pressure from social mobilisations.

So we should not underestimate the turning point that these orientations represent. LREM has not simply replaced the old traditional parties; the goal is also to change a number of rules in terms of institutional functioning. Macron was shaped by the institutions of the Fifth Republic and will accentuate the rules of the strong state.

At the international level, Macron will intensify the ongoing military interventions in Africa and the Middle East. Meanwhile, after the German general election in September, the French and German leaders can be expected to resume a joint offensive to accelerate a reorganisation of the European Union.

Faced with this remodelling, the two traditional parties are in deep crisis. The Parti Socialiste is clinically dead. LREM has taken a good half of its electorate and a similar proportion of the local notables who make up its base. The PS's

parliamentary representation (now called Nouvelle Gauche) is reduced to 31 deputies, one tenth of what it had in the previous assembly. Nearly all the PS leadership have been eliminated. Two centrifugal trends are at work: one prefigured by Manuel Valls which seeks to integrate itself somehow or other with the presidential majority, without for the moment having any distinct political project. The other is led by Benoît Hamon who, by constituting a new “July 1st movement” seeks to reconstitute a “classic” social democratic party on an anti-neoliberal basis to recover the 25% of the socialist electorate who opted for La France Insoumise and Jean-Luc Mélenchon. This project is for now entirely virtual. The leadership apparatus of the PS is completely paralysed, Macron and LREM occupying the place previously occupied by the PS of Hollande/Valls.

That does not mean that the page of neoliberal social democracy has been turned in France. LREM is a very fragile political structure, even if its leader wants to project an image of hyper-solidity. It is not a party, it has no elected leadership body, the parliamentary group and the local spokesperson are a heterogeneous conglomerate. Several hypotheses can be advanced as to its future, but it is highly possible that some kind of social-liberal current will recompose if Macron encounters obstacles to his current dynamic.

Things are to some degree simpler with relation to LR. Highly shaken by the Fillon episode and the coming to power of a Juppé supporter as Prime Minister, we can say that the party apparatus is in flux. But it is henceforth divided between its “constructive” wing and its more reactionary sectors. Here again, Macron occupies the terrain of the neoliberal management of the affairs of the bourgeoisie and the leaders of LR have little political space for the moment.

Finally, the Front national (FN), despite its great success at the presidential election, has arrived at a crossroads. It has been unable to form a parliamentary group and is marginalised in terms of the parliamentary game. However, it can think that time is on its side and that the political crisis will be still greater after five years of Macron’s austerity policies. The successful rooting of the FN among the reactionary electorate of the popular layers could also impel the party to seek to profit from the crisis of the traditional right. Marine Le Pen’s project of changing the party’s name and openness to a policy of alliances like that realised with Dupont-Aignan for the presidential election seeks to seduce the most right wing layers of LR. In all cases, the FN with its kernel of neo-fascist leaders is just as big a danger as ever for the workers’ movement.

The whole question in the coming months for the radical left will lie in the capacity of reaction and mobilisation against Macron’s projects. The points of support to launch this resistance are very broad in the social movement.

There is still a debate among the leadership of the trade union movement on the legitimacy of the president which makes it difficult to challenge these decisions. The false idea is advanced that it is necessary to await the concrete outcome of governmental decisions before opposing them and that the president and the government still enjoy broad support, even among the popular layers and youth. The leadership of Force ouvrière, at least, argue for this position and more generally the union leaderships have kept a low profile during and since the elections.

Despite this, numerous local demonstrations are already afoot. Combative trades unionists organising around the Front social thus mobilised immediately after the elections, with some CGT sections and the support of Solidaires. In numerous regions, genuine inter-union coordinations have been established. The CGT has called for a one day strike on September 12 against the decrees. Numerous protests have also taken place against the attacks on democratic rights and the attempt to render the provisions of the state of emergency permanent.

But everyone knows that the challenge is on another scale and that what is needed is a mobilisation still more powerful than that of the movement against the El Khomri law in spring 2016 to block Macron’s attacks and destabilise his government.

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The forces to do this exist and the exasperation among the youth and popular layers is not extinguished by the media campaign portraying the country as pacified by the new president. But what is needed is the capacity to rally them in the context of unitary mobilisations on all the questions posed.

At the political level, La France Insoumise (FI) occupies the space of parliamentary opposition with the Communist Party (PCF) deputies (the collapse of the PS allowed the PCF to elect 11 deputies and to form a parliamentary group with the support of deputies from France's overseas territories).

But several questions remain unsettled. La France Insoumise based its success on the collapse of the PS and its future remains uncertain. Jean-Luc Mélenchon scuttled the Front de Gauche and also any electoral alliance with the PCF. He nonetheless attracted at least 25% of PS voters. Also, the FI attracted a great number of activists in the social movements during the presidential and parliamentary electoral campaigns. It is nonetheless not a new party, nor even a place of democratic debate between the diverse components which make it up, without mentioning Mélenchon's numerous chauvinist orientations in a series of areas.

The question of organising the anti-capitalists present in the revolutionary organisations and the social movements to constitute a political force which can meet the current challenge remains posed. The coming months will necessitate the construction of frameworks for unitary mobilisations on the social questions and in defence of civil liberties, against police violence and French and EU policies in relation to migrants. These represent important tasks for revolutionaries and in the first place for the Nouveau parti anticapitaliste (NPA).

Macron's France will undoubtedly not be pacified for very long.

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