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France

Faced with social anger, Macron replaces legitimacy with police batons

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With the coup de force of article 49.3 on 16 March, Macron and his government have provoked a new impetus of popular mobilization in all its forms: renewable strikes, blockades, demonstrations and even the movement of university and high school students.

But, above all, a real political crisis is now added to the social crisis, a regime crisis, from which Macron is not certain to be able to escape, because it is his legitimacy, his claim to continue to lead the country in the next four years that is at stake. The legality of his formal institutional legitimacy is becoming more and more in contradiction with a popular legitimacy that is totally lacking.

For ten days, the authorities have been pretending to ignore this reality, to ignore the rage and anger of millions of women and men in this country. As one young protester said: "Up until now he didn't give a damn about us, now he doesn't even care about democracy."

Since 16 March every evening has seen, in hundreds of towns and cities, often in small towns, spontaneous demonstrations, with or without the presence of the unions, demonstrations of anger against 49.3 and against Macron's contempt for the people.

After the 49.3, the rejection by the National Assembly on 20 March of a motion of censure that would have led to the rejection of the law and the resignation of the government (the motion obtained 278 votes, 9 votes short of an absolute majority, something that had not been seen since 1992) was further proof of the isolation of the President and his parliamentary minority, and an additional reason for popular anger. Out of 61 deputies of the right-wing Les Républicains, 19 voted for the motion of censure, well beyond all predictions.

This isolation did not prevent Emmanuel Macron from speaking, on 22 March at 1 p.m on TF1 and France 2 (the two main TV channels) 24 hours before the new national day of mobilization, with a posture of a president sure of himself, and insensitive to the anger of the street. A spectacular exercise in aristocratic contempt, to try to appear solid to his vacillating electorate, by presenting himself as firm and determined in spite of everything - an exercise in which he only succeeded in alienating the popular classes even more. Because once again, he said that his reform was justified, that he had been elected to implement it, and that, moreover, it had just been democratically adopted by Parliament, rendering social mobilization irrelevant.

This so-called democratic legitimacy has surely been the strongest irritating factor in recent weeks. The system of political representation, based on periodic elections of deputies, is far from real popular sovereignty, with choices taken democratically by the populations concerned. But the French Fifth Republic is in itself the European system that accumulates every possible defect of representation.

France has a really presidential system, where a single individual, elected by universal suffrage, has most of the executive powers, in terms of foreign and domestic policy, the government being simply his cabinet and the Prime Minister having only a secondary role, except in the case of cohabitation. (This possibility - a President and Prime Minister of different political sides - is ruled out, a priori and barring accidents, since the transition to the five-year presidential term, with the legislative elections quickly following the presidential election.)

In a second penalty for democratic rights, there are two chambers in France, the Senate and the Assembly. The Senate, "an assembly of notables" is not elected by direct suffrage, but by 160,000 grand electors.

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The third penalty is that the National Assembly is not elected by proportional representation, but by uninominal vote in two rounds, which does not reflect the reality of political currents and limits representation. Thus, the electoral system of France, "Homeland of Human Rights" ticks all the boxes of an insult to basic democratic rights.

Beyond these general considerations, the 2022 elections accentuated all these shortcomings inherent in the Fifth Republic.

Macron won only one vote out of five of the electorate (20.07 per cent). The presidential election taking place in two rounds, in the second round, opposed to Marine Le Pen, he won 38.55 per cent of the electorate. The additional votes came from voters, most often from the left, who voted for him only to block the far right. Obviously, the only real legitimacy of his programme amounts to 20 per cent! In the legislative elections that followed, the candidates of his alliance obtained in the first round 11.97 per cent of the electorate. These two figures, 20.07 per cent and 11.97 per cent, are the lowest in the history of the Fifth Republic.

At the end of all this, the deputies of the alliance around Macron obtained only 250 seats, whereas the majority is 289. In any parliamentary system, such a situation would have required a more or less long discussion to form a coalition agreement with one or more parties around a programme. This situation is customary in most European and other countries.

Macron had managed in 2017 to obtain 314 seats by a first hold-up on the elected representatives of the PS (which had lost 216 seats) and some LR (which had lost 92 seats). He thought he could pull off the same trick, essentially with the LR, in 2022..... Not wanting to accept his failure and propose a real alliance, he preferred and still prefers to act as if he was in the majority and can pick up a few LR deputies in order to actually build a majority. But Macron has the weakest social base, the weakest electoral base in the history of the Fifth Republic.

All these reminders are necessary to understand the accumulated anger, the rage at seeing thus used, by political violence, all the artifices to impose an anti-social law.

The methods used to push through a reform rejected by the vast majority of the population have further accentuated the rejection of an undemocratic system and a president who has, in effect, usurped his legitimacy. Macron is the first president to try and pass a pension reform without having a parliamentary majority. And he is also the first to try and sneak through his reform by means of a PLRFSS (a bill for amending the financing of Social Security) which allows the use of article 47.1, limiting to 20 days the debates in the Assembly and to 50 days the whole procedure. And he is also the first to pass a law that heavily modifies the conditions of access to retirement by using the famous article 49.3. which allows a minority bill to be passed without a vote.

Macron therefore wanted to manipulate the institutions and twist the arm of the deputies in order to impose a project that was in a minority in the Assembly and in an ultra-minority in the country. The violence of these manoeuvres has provoked massive rage and anger among the population. More than 1200 spontaneous demonstrations took place throughout the country in the days following the use of 49.3. with at the heart of these mobilizations the anger against an authoritarian government, deaf to the largest mobilization since 1995 and which utilises a discourse worthy of the Newspeak of George Orwell : "a necessary and legitimate reform", "a democratic process", "a law that the French people were waiting for".

Macron's political isolation keeps him all the more in a state of immobility, with week after week the hope that all this will pass, that the popular river will recede into its bed... So far he has not succeeded, and he himself has fanned the flames.

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We are seeing the combination of anti-democratic institutions and a badly-elected President wanting to impose his will with institutional artifices, the combination of a reform that is socially unjust for the working classes and growing inflation, especially concerning food and energy, which multiply the anger.

All that is left to the government is the argument of law and order. The demonstrations are no longer part of political debate, a situation to which the government should respond by addressing the social and political forces that are engaged in it, but only of public order, and the weapon of police repression has become the only political response, with the attempt to stifle the movement with batons, tear gas and LBDs.

Macron and Darmanin, the interior minister, now present themselves as the defenders of law and order, facing a civil war led by far-left agitators. The last few days, after the use of 49.3 and the rejection of the motion of censure, have seen a wave of police violence, arbitrary arrests and bans on the demonstrations called by broad inter-union coordinations.

Obviously, the goal is to break the movement. The Union of Magistrates, the Union of Lawyers of France and the League of Human Rights have warned against the use of these methods by the police to hinder the progress of demonstrations and to intimidate demonstrators. They have protested against police violence, especially the abuses perpetrated by the BRAV-M (motor-cycle brigades for the repression of violent action) in Paris, a sad repetition of the motor-cycle police created by Raymond Marcellin in the aftermath of May 68, responsible for the death of Malik Oussekin in 1986.

Demonstrators find themselves mutilated following police violence: in Rouen, a hospital worker lost a finger and in Paris a Sud Rail activist lost an eye, following the firing of disencirclement grenades.

Such an attitude of the government, of criminalization of the movement, is being implemented while the day of mobilization on Thursday, 23 March saw, in many cities, the biggest demonstrations since the beginning of the movement, bringing together nationally 3.5 million people according to the unions, 1.08 million according to the police, a number equivalent to the big day of mobilization of 19 January 19, with even greater determination, with a fighting spirit. Medium-sized cities, in particular, saw impressive demonstrations: 40,000 in Nantes, 30,000 in Brest, 20,000 in Avignon, alongside the 800,000 people present in Paris. This date also saw the entry into the mobilization of young people attending high schools and universities, with more than 80 universities and 400 high schools blockaded and 150,000 young people counted by the UNEF students' union in the Paris demonstration. Young people are the first targets of police violence, the aim being to nip in the bud the spread of strikes and blockades.

Macron, in his televised speech, also managed to stir up the anger of the union leaderships, in the first place the CFDT and the CGT. Directly attacking Laurent Berger, the leader of the CFDT, Macron did not hesitate to affirm that he had never put forward any proposal concerning the financing of pensions.

In return, Berger and Martinez rewarded him with harsh comments ; "contempt, lies and denial," all unusual terms coming from union leaders. Especially considering that Macron had explicitly asked the union leaders to come to see him and to move on and accept the implementation of the law against pensions.

The fires in Paris and in several cities and the clashes with the police have most often taken place in night demonstrations bringing together young people unaccustomed to demonstrations and even less to clashes. To see in these demonstrations only the actions of black blocs and the extreme left is obviously a political calculation, but has nothing to do with reality.

Alongside street mobilizations, blockades and the arrival of young people in the movement, strike movements are continuing: on March 23, the percentage of strikers among SNCF drivers, teachers (50 per cent on strike) and in the

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energy sector had risen sharply and renewable strikes continued at the SNCF, in oil refineries, ports and docks, waste collection and storage.

This Saturday, the clash with the government also took place in the big demonstration against the megabasins in Sainte Soline, which mobilized 30,000 people and was confronted with violent police charges, with more than 200 people injured.

At the end of this stage of the movement, the showdown continues with contradictory elements. Some sectors on strike, notably the waste sector and the refineries, and the multiple demonstrations in towns and cities, maintain the political climate of confrontation with the government. Similarly, the blockades of high schools and universities may also create a new climate in the coming days. At the same time, there are no new strike movements in important sectors.

Macron and his government are still bogged down and unable to turn the page on this conflict, despite their posture. Moreover, they are also looking for a way out in terms of their parliamentary base, seeking to "expand the majority", that is to say, in fact, to create one, without a political agreement with the Republicans, but seeking to rely on the crisis of this party, which is torn between support and opposition to Macron.

The inter-union coordination still stands, with the demand for the withdrawal of the law and a new strike call for Tuesday 28 March. But at the same time, it is already itself putting forward the possibility of participating in the long process of the initiative for a referendum, launched by the elected representatives of the left.

Advancing this perspective now obviously does not correspond to strengthening the relationship of forces in strikes and in the streets. Everyone feels that the government is weakened, isolated, that the situation of the working classes faced with the rising cost of living and the pension reform has the potential to create a relationship of forces that may force Macron to back down on his reform. The cancellation of the visit of Charles III was, in fact, a slap in the face for the government, showing its inability to curb popular mobilization.

Nevertheless, in the current situation, what is lacking is the building at the national level and in the cities of a common social and political front, defending an anti-capitalist alternative of social and financial choices in favour of the working classes, with a different sharing of wealth, a front relying on social dynamics to present itself as a direct political actor in the current situation. Even though the movement has not seen the development of structures of self-organization or massive general assemblies of strikers, tens of thousands of activists of the social and political movement are ensuring, in hundreds of towns and cities, the continuation of the movement for withdrawal now, through strikes and blockades, while relying on the existence of a national inter-union coordination.

They are the ones who are carrying this movement on their shoulders, they are the ones who built it and who are making it continue to this day. Maintaining the mobilization in unity and radicality will, once again, be the challenge of the coming days.

25 March 2023

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