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France

France: Macron scorns popular vote...and puts himself in the hands of the RN

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‘The people have, through their own fault, lost the confidence of the government...Wouldn't it then be simpler for the government to dissolve the people and elect another?’ Bertolt Brecht, ‘The Solution’, 1953

Brecht's ironic lines have just been put into practice by French president Emmanuel Macron. From 2017 to 2024, his party went from 314 to 99 deputies in the National Assembly. It was again defeated in the European and parliamentary elections of June/July 2024. During these same legislative elections, an electoral front against the far right Rassemblement national (RN) was formed in the second round by all the parties except the small right-wing party les Républicains (LR). The barrage worked, thwarting all predictions, with the RN not even managing to win a relative majority. The leading party after this second round was clearly the Nouveau front populaire (NPF), followed by the ‘centre bloc’ and the RN.

Despite these results, at the beginning of September a government was formed led by an old politician from the Républicains, Michel Barnier, who will recycle many of the leaders of the ‘presidential majority’ to continue the same policies, and who will only be able to survive if the RN undertakes not to bring him down with a motion of censure.

How can such a result be achieved? In total, the day after the legislative elections, there were three blocs in the Assembly: the NPF with 193 seats, the Macronists with 166 seats and the RN and its allies with 142 seats, followed by the small alliance around the historic party of the right, Les Républicains, with 47 seats.

Macron initially obstructed and maintained, for more than two months, his outgoing prime minister, Gabriel Attal and his ‘resigning’ government, taking refuge behind ‘the truce of the Paris Olympics’. Then, contrary to the usual practice of appointing a prime minister from the party that came out on top in the parliamentary elections, he immediately ruled out the appointment of the candidate chosen by the NPF. And finally, to ensure that despite the vote his policies would not be called into question and that he could continue to lead the executive, he has just appointed Barnier.

In June 2024, Macron used his presidential right to dissolve the National Assembly. He did so after the European elections, which saw his presidential alliance fail spectacularly with 14.6% of the vote against the RN (31.37%) and the left split into 4 lists (31.58% of the vote). Macron's manoeuvring idea was to try to enlarge his parliamentary majority by reshuffling the cards. With only 251 of the 577 seats available to him and all his allies, he knew he was at the mercy of a vote of no confidence that would force his government to resign.

On the evening of the European elections, the far right appeared to be the big winner, and the left was divided between the Greens (EELV), the Communist Party (PCF), the Socialist Party (PS) and la France insoumise (LFI), and had been incoherent since the break-up of the NUPES alliance a year earlier. What's more, the leading European list on the left was that of the PS led by Raphaël Glucksmann, who appeared to be close to social liberalism and at odds with France Insoumise. Faced with what appeared to be a field of ruins, Macron thought he was in control of the cards and that it would be possible to recompose around him, in the face of the threat of a RN majority, some of the socialists, ecologists and the Gaullists in LR. At worst, he saw himself cohabiting with a government led by the RN'S Jordan Bardella, giving himself the stature of a president resisting the excesses of the far right.

Whatever his hazy plans, they dissipated in 48 hours in the face of the determination of the trade union movement and the social movement to impose unity on the left, a new popular front, to defeat the neo-fascist threat, with a

single candidate in each constituency and a common programme 'for a social and ecological rupture'.

Macron, refusing to accept his failure, is now trying to maintain his position as head of the executive, with a government at his beck and call, in order to persevere with his policies. Above all, it is out of the question for him to accept the formation of a left-wing government. The argument put forward for this refusal was first and foremost 'the presence of LFI ministers', who have been maligned and stigmatised for months as 'accomplices of Hamas' and 'anti-Semites'. A government with the presence of LFI would immediately trigger a vote of censure, proclaimed Gabriel Attal of Macron's party, Ensemble, LR, and Jordan Bardella of the RN.

But the real reason for the visceral rejection of an NFP government soon became apparent: to get rid of the pretext of their presence to reject the NFP's proposal as prime minister, Lucie Castets, LFI questioned the Macronists at the end of August about their position on a government that would not include LFI ministers. The Macronists and the LR right were quick to respond: there would be no question of a government without LFI that would go back on pension reform and apply the NFP's programme for a break with neoliberalism. Patrick Martin, the president of the employers' organisation, MEDEF, also insisted that there was no question of going back on the policies implemented since 2017. Similarly, the RN clearly stated that it would censure any left-wing government. In short, a class unanimity against any government committed to breaking with neoliberal policies! In the space of a few weeks, this vigorous campaign against the NFP has taken us from a deep-seated movement in society to counter Le Pen to a common front between Macron and Le Pen to block the implementation of a policy to serve the popular classes and to sideline a left-wing government.

Macron would have had no problem adapting to an RN government, even without an absolute majority. On the other hand, the absence of an absolute majority for the NFP meant that Castets could not be appointed 'for reasons of stability'. What is true for the RN is obviously not true for the NFP.

The practical situation of this new Barnier government is that it is a front for a Macron government, but with a new situation of a de facto alliance with LR and external support from the RN, which has just declared that it is 'putting the government under surveillance'. This means a further weakening of Macron, a shift to the right and pressure from the RN, which will support this government like a rope supports a hanged man. It is to be feared that what Barnier announced when he took office will be implemented: an even greater emphasis on security issues, a discriminatory policy against foreigners and new policies against migrants. In other words, a policy that is compatible with the RN and largely in line with the new prime minister's political profile. Known for a series of very right-wing votes in the European Parliament, notably in favour of anti-LGBT discriminatory measures and to 'regain legal sovereignty in France over migration policies'. Similarly, during the primaries to select the LR candidate in 2021, Barnier systematically sought to position himself on the right, in favour of banning the veil in public spaces, raising the retirement age to 65, organising a referendum to abolish state medical aid for undocumented migrants and so on.

After a legislative campaign during which the left made its presence felt in the media, denouncing the fascist roots of the RN and asserting a united insistence on the NFP's social programme, the last few weeks have seen a resurgence of language aimed at demoralising the left and returning the far right to a respectable image. Macron, for example, dismisses out of hand the 9.5 million votes received by the left in the legislative elections, but reminds us that we must 'respect the 10.6 million' received by the RN and its ally Ciotti.

The aim is eminently political. Against all the odds, the NFP has succeeded in building a united political front on a programme for change, driven and consolidated by the trade union, democratic and social movement, creating an enthusiastic momentum around the possibility of a left-wing government. This political and social momentum, which was not built during the movement against pension reform, was suddenly created in a matter of days. It is therefore vital for reactionary leaders and the media at their service to deconstruct this unexpected unity. Firstly, by saying that the left doesn't really want to govern, that it doesn't want power and was itself responsible for not having obtained the post of prime minister. Then, of course, to discredit a programme of 'waste and debt'. Finally, above all, to say that the NFP is an ephemeral assemblage and that centrifugal forces will soon take over again, particularly between the

'reasonable' socialists and the 'Islamist ultra-leftists' of LFI. The main thing now is to demoralise those who spent weeks building the NFP campaign, those who believed in it because they thought we could finally build something united on the left.

And that's what's at stake over the next few months. There is a risk of a repeat of the centrifugal dynamics that caused NUPES to explode. In recent weeks there has been a reappearance of a fragmentation of initiatives, albeit with a common objective. The first day of demonstrations on 7 September, in the face of Macron's 'putsch' with the appointment of Barnier, and for the establishment of a NFP government and the implementation of its programme, was mainly driven by left-wing political movements such as the PCF, the Greens, LFI and the NPA (but also, on the social movement side, by ATTAC, Planning familial, #NousToutes, the Jeune Garde and, often locally, the LDH). But on the trade union side, while the initiative was hailed as useful, it was seen as institutional and therefore the responsibility of the political organisations, even though locally the CGT, Solidaires and FSU unions were involved. The result was by no means negligible - 150 demonstrations, and even the police had to admit to more than 100,000 demonstrators (300,000 according to the organisers' calculations) - but it would obviously have been possible to take a joint initiative involving all the forces that had supported the NFP in June. At the same time, on 1 October, preparations are underway for a major day of strikes and mobilisation involving the CGT, Solidaires, FSU and youth organisations, again 'so that the social emergencies expressed in social mobilisations and on the streets are finally heard', taking up the social demands shared with the NFP parties. Finally, on 21 September, a new day of action is being organised along the same lines as on 7 September, involving youth organisations, Greenpeace, the Collectif national pour les droits des femmes and Action justice climat.

What's more, the right wing of the PS is already taking positions aimed at splintering the united front by pulling to the right, as is the case with François Hollande, even though he was elected as part of the NFP. This National Assembly and its government are obviously unstable elements and from June 2025, either the RN by its participation in the vote of a motion of censure, or Macron could lead to a government crisis and a new dissolution of the Assembly.

In any case, the urgent thing is to create a political and social balance of power to start a long-term mobilisation around the social demands put forward by the NFP and the social and trade union movement, whatever the electoral deadlines. The convergence achieved at the beginning of the summer must be maintained and acted upon collectively by creating unitary frameworks enabling militant forces to coordinate. It is only by building this unity that we will be able to prevent centrifugal forces, wherever they may come from, and avoid demoralisation.

The NFP is unique in the European political arena in that it is an alliance built on a programme explicitly aimed at breaking with the neoliberal system, and has been able to bring together a wide range of political, trade union and social forces, marginalising the social-liberal currents. It is therefore a valuable initiative. If it manages to maintain itself and take root throughout the country, becoming a daily tool for the tens of thousands of activists working in neighbourhoods, urban and rural areas, developing the demands of its programme, developing the themes of social, climate and democratic justice, and the fight against discrimination, it could challenge the political weight gained by the RN, which uses racism and Islamophobia to divert the feeling of abandonment and social injustice against the racialised popular classes. This false consciousness obviously aims to distract from the questioning of the class policies at the root of the attacks suffered by the exploited and oppressed. In any case, the strikes and demonstrations on 1 October could be a springboard for restoring momentum on the left in the face of Macron's manoeuvres.

PS:

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