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France

The storm and the compass

- IV Online magazine - 2017 - IV506 - March 2017 -

Publication date: Sunday 26 March 2017

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To say that France is experiencing a regime crisis is a euphemism. Every day, there emerges a new element of a political crisis which has shaken the two pillars of French political life for more than forty years: the Socialist Party (PS) and Les Républicains (LR); the party that comes from the Gaullist tradition. Now a "surprise" election of Marine Le Pen in the next presidential election cannot be ruled out. This political and institutional crisis is also the consequence of a social crisis in which political polarization is taking place; unfortunately, this is happening mainly towards the right and the far right.

Even though unexpected situations have multiplied over the last few weeks, the most probable outcome now is that neither the PS nor LR will be present in the second round of the presidential election on May 7th. This unprecedented situation will have ripple effects on the election of the National Assembly. In France, the electoral mechanics introduced since 2002 have made the presidential election the lever for the election of the Assembly, which takes place a few weeks later, with the party of the president-elect systematically receiving a boost for its candidates.

We are therefore probably on the eve of a serious reorganization in the field of institutional political parties and perhaps a wider political crisis.

Three new phenomena have been at work in recent weeks:

– An unprecedented crisis of the LR party

This was triggered by the revelation of embezzlement and misappropriation of public funds by François Fillon, the LR candidate for president. The investigative journalists of the *Canard enchaîné* and *Médiapart*, in particular, have for two months been distilling new elements that highlight practices which, although there is nothing new about them and François Fillon has no monopoly of them, have a deleterious effect. Fillon, who had built his campaign, during the primaries of the Right, around an image of "Mr. Clean", appears as the champion of misappropriation of funds for personal benefit. For more than a month, his campaign has been inaudible, totally stifled by his "affair" and his narcissistic obstinacy to maintain his candidacy. Little by little, during the month of February, practically all the leaders of the LR, with Sarkozy at their head, became convinced of the major risk represented by maintaining Fillon's candidacy and tried to find an alternative solution so that the Right would be present in the second round. But if Fillon succeeded in winning in the December primaries against the "natural" candidates of the right - Sarkozy and Juppe - it was because of the weakening, the discrediting of these leaders with the most reactionary electorate, who preferred to plebiscite a conservative and ultra-liberal Catholic. Between March 1st and 5th, with the announcement of the coming indictment of Fillon, almost all the LR leaders asked him to withdraw - starting with his spokesperson and his campaign manager. The ally of LR, the centrists of the UDI, "suspended" their support.

But the leadership of the party did not have the strength to compel Fillon to resign. First of all, it did not succeed in agreeing to put forward an alternative candidate who could bring together the various currents. Then Fillon himself proclaimed that he would maintain his candidacy come what may, conducting a battle against the apparatus of his party. Totally isolated within it, but understanding the weakness of its leadership, he played the card of mobilizing, outside the party, the most conservative, the most reactionary wing of his supporters, organized by the movement "Common Sense" (set up in 2014 from the activists of the "Demo for all"; the opponents of gay marriage). With the support of Common Sense and the far-right weekly *Valeurs Actuelles*, Fillon organized a demonstration on March 5th to support him, aiming to denounce "the judges" and to force the party apparatus to accept him. He pulled off the *coup de force* of staying in the race, building on the success of the rally of 40 to 50,000 demonstrators in the Place

du Trocadéro in Paris.

Within 48 hours, the leadership of LR had capitulated "in unity", and renewed its support for François Fillon, for fear of seeing whole layers of his most reactionary electorate go over to Marine Le Pen. The same people who, in the name of probity in politics, had criticized Fillon the day before and demanded his withdrawal finally put their hat on over their "morals". Similarly, the UDI centrists, who could not find harsh enough words for Fillon a few days before, renewed their support in exchange for twenty more candidates for the legislative elections... All this would just make us laugh if it was not the sign of a decay of LR, of its submission to its most reactionary wing under the pressure of the National Front, of a strong political polarization to the right. On the other hand, disaffection multiplied in the wing of the party around Alain Juppé, several of whose supporters joined the campaign of Emmanuel Macron.

– The announced break-up of the Socialist Party

There too, centrifugal tendencies are at work. Hamon exchanged the benevolence of the leadership of the PS - which accepted him as its official candidate - against a dull, colourless campaign, putting aside any criticism of the record of the Hollande governments. A campaign without any sharp edges, which could only manage to obtain the withdrawal of the EELV (Green party) in his favour, there too in exchange for about forty constituencies reserved for them in the legislative elections [1].

Some people compared Hamon's victory to a French-style "Corbyn effect." This was partially true from the point of view of the action of left-wing voters in the primaries, who wanted to sanction the liberal policies of Valls [2] and the presidency of Hollande. But the comparison stops there. As soon as he was elected, Hamon started to behave himself and took his place in the PS apparatus, even asserting that he defended the bulk of Hollande's record.

There is not a shadow of popular mobilization around Benoît Hamon's campaign and even his flagship measure of a universal income has become bogged down in the necessary compromises with the PS leadership. Hamon is in no way an anti-austerity candidate, a candidate breaking with the liberal rules of the European Union. His allegiance to the apparatus has not prevented a slow hemorrhage for two months of PS members of parliament and party officials joining the ranks of the supporters of Emmanuel Macron: the latest to date are Bertrand Delanöé, former PS mayor of Paris and Jean Yves Le Drian, Minister of Defence.

The certainty of the absence of Hamon in the second round is leading to a particular climate within the PS. The leadership officially continues to assure Hamon of its support and makes threats of expulsion and refusal of the party's nomination against all those who would sponsor Macron's candidacy. At the same time, more and more leaders and elected officials are preparing for after the first round. An appeal of PS MPs is being circulated surreptitiously and Claude Bartolone, Socialist President of the National Assembly, considers that he is ready to vote Macron "if democracy is in danger and it is the only alternative." His political friend Manuel Valls, beaten by Benoît Hamon in the primaries, has just publicly announced his refusal to support Hamon. The vast majority of ministers remain on the sidelines of the PS campaign, expressing a silent sympathy for Macron. Francois Hollande himself displays this silent support.

Many are hoping for a scenario that is unlikely to happen. In this scenario, the second round of the presidential elections opens up a space for the PS to make an alliance with Emmanuel Macron, mitigating the consequences of the failure of Hamon during the legislative elections. Because the PS, just like LR, is afraid that the Macron effect will sweep away its candidates in the legislative elections in June. In any case, the upcoming elections will have a corrosive effect on the Socialist Party. Although the candidacy of a "dissident" has blocked any rise of Mélenchon (see below), combined with the push of the social-liberal Macron it will certainly lead to an explosion of the PS if Macron wins. The project of Manuel Valls, of a democratic party like the Democratic Party of Matteo Renzi, is likely to be concretized... without the PS, or at least on its ashes! Indeed, faced with Macron the PS as such will have no

relationship of force against him.

– The catch-all offensive of Emmanuel Macron.

Coming from the social-liberal orientation of Hollande and Valls, having emancipated himself from the PS and its balance sheet, he has succeeded, for the moment, where many had failed before him, in creating a centre-right movement capable of overcoming social democracy and the Christian-Democratic allies of the Gaullist movement.

He comes across in the media as breaking with the old parties, portraying a young, modern image on questions of society and a liberal one on economic issues. He proclaims his intention of at least half of his candidates for the legislative elections coming from "civil society", that is to say without any political background. From the outset, he has refused any apparatus type of agreement with currents coming from the PS or the Right, and his strength in the polls, the success of his meetings and the polarization of the media behind him give him the means to maintain this position.

Obviously, the policies proposed by Macron are nothing new. They have their source in the liberal measures developed under Sarkozy and Hollande, of whom he was an adviser and a minister. The main author of his programme is Jean Pisani-Ferry, an economist and senior civil servant, a social-liberal with a long experience in ministerial circles, notably around Dominique Strauss-Kahn. The economic programme is not innovative, focusing on lower spending and public revenues, the perpetuation of employers' exemptions on wages and taxes, new de-structuring of the Labour Code and the gradual transition to retirement income based on pension funds.

To organize the "rejuvenation" of his elected representatives and correspondents in the regions, he has appointed an old political operator, who was a parliamentarian under Chirac, Jean-Paul Délevoüe. But the image is that of renewal. Moreover, Macron can polarize more effectively in the PS as well as in LR because the profiles of candidates of these parties obviously create a force of attraction towards the centre... Valls and Juppé would have considerably reduced the space of Emmanuel Macron.

Moreover, the polls over recent weeks have made him "the only one capable of beating Marine Le Pen", polarizing even a left electorate that fought the Macron and El Khomri laws. Today, even without a previously constituted party, Macron benefits from enough defectors from the PS, UDI and LR to structure his campaign and prepare the legislative elections. In the event of a victory in the presidential elections, he can therefore afford to maintain an official position of refusing any agreement for the legislative elections with the apparatus of the PS or the partisans of Juppé. As a result, the question of alliances would be postponed until June. In any case its success would have an explosive effect on the PS and a corrosive on the UDI-LR Right.

A polarization to the far right

All these elements reinforce the polarization towards the far right through Marine Le Pen, so much so that her presence in the second round is assured and her election in the second round is not to be ruled out. As in many European countries, the far right has reaped the fruits of the social crisis by playing on the mechanics of a nationalist withdrawal into identity, to which, in the absence of an anti-capitalist political pole active in the popular strata, many voters affected by austerity policies can be attracted. The liberal policies pursued by social democracy have accentuated these phenomena.

In addition, security policy, state Islamophobia and the institutional racism of the Valls government have also brought

grist to the mill of the National Front. The influence of the FN has developed on a broad scale within the army and the police, whose most reactionary tendencies have been flattered by Socialist governments. The refusal to accept migrants and the ultra-security policies developed after the terrorist attacks were also capitalized on by both the most reactionary wing of LR and the FN. The polls show that in the present electoral maelstrom, Le Pen's electorate remains stable, even being not very sensitive to financial affairs, in which the National Front is also involved.

To the left of the PS, the perspectives do not match the scale of the political crisis.

Jean Luc Mélenchon has succeeded in imposing his candidacy on his partners of a Left Front which he himself scuttled so that no one could control his self-proclaimed candidacy with "France insoumise" (Unsubmissive France, FI) whose local representatives and campaign themes are under the exclusive control of Mélenchon himself. This autocratic campaign, which claimed a few months ago to be the alternative to Sarkozy and Hollande, has been destabilized by subsequent vicissitudes. Stuck on around 10 per cent, it only appears as the fifth wheel of the electoral competition. From that point, the purely personal aspect of his campaign, in a posture inherited from Mitterrand, has a catastrophic boomerang effect.

He explicitly refused to base his campaign on an organized convergence of political forces and fronts of social mobilization. His programme, even though it takes up a whole series of questions that have been present in the social mobilizations of recent years, moulds them and reconfigures them along republican and chauvinistic lines, such as the way its meetings close with the singing of the national anthem. The forces which, alongside the Left Party, support him, are reduced to the role of extras and spectators, the spokespersons of the campaign being personally appointed by JLM.

The PCF continues up to now its fight to ensure that FI does not present candidates against 15 PCF candidates, including 10 sitting MPs. JLM's refusal to sign up to this commitment led the PCF to block its 850 elected representatives from signing his nomination papers, delaying until the end the confirmation of JLM's candidacy [\[3\]](#). This episode of electoral bargaining is similar to the one between the PS and EELV or between LR and the UDI. This illustrates above all the lack of dynamics of the Mélenchon campaign, freewheeling on the axis of the supreme saviour of the Left. It is therefore certain that it brings together many militants of the trade union movement and the social movement who are backing him in order to express a vote to the left of the PS which has some weight.

But this leaves open the essential question for those who, on multiple fronts, are fighting against liberal and reactionary policies. One year after the most powerful social movement in the country since 1995, the only real political polarization is to the right. Tens of thousands of protesters managed to paralyze the Notre Dame des Landes airport project, tens of thousands of activists mobilized in the country to welcome migrants, numerous workers' strikes, some more important than others, mark each month the different regions of the country, on questions of wages or employment. Important mobilizations have taken place and will take place against police violence and state racism, such as the murder of Adama Traoré last summer in the Oise department and the rape of young Theo in the woods in Aulnay in February. This violence, benefiting from the climate of impunity of the police, reveals not "regrettable incidents", but a racism structured by the practices of state institutions and government policies. To counter it, a political anti-racism is being built.

All these social mobilizations demonstrate the resistance of the popular strata, they all point to the need for a global political project of social justice in the face of capitalist exploitation and discrimination. Fillon's affairs have, once again, revealed the practices of politicians who enrich themselves, engage in all sorts of shady dealings and impose on the working classes the questioning of the basic rights of workers. They are really no more than the reflection of the big capitalist corporate executives who enjoy generous bonuses while implementing redundancy plans and productivity gains. The struggles of workers at Air France and Goodyear were the echo of these social demands. The Fillon affair brings to the forefront democratic demands for popular control and for questioning how institutions function. The Nuit Debout movement expressed these democratic demands. We would not be able to understand the shock waves that the revelations of the *Canard enchaîné* about Fillon produced if we did not relate it to the

disaffection and the profound rejection of political institutions on the part of the popular strata, among whom abstention is steadily increasing.

All these elements of mobilization, these social and democratic demands are present, in a fragmented way, in the background of the political situation but they have not exerted much influence up to now, they do not provide a compass in a presidential campaign polarized by the centre-right of Macron, the extreme right of Fillon, and the far right of Le Pen.

The activists of the NPA have succeeded in obtaining the 500 signatures necessary for Philippe Poutou to stand in the presidential election. The aim of the NPA in this campaign is precisely to put forward the need for a new representation of the exploited and the oppressed, to be the bearer of the project of a society rid of all oppressions. This demand, this project can echo the expectations of many activists of the social movement. The coming weeks, whatever happens, will make this necessity even more urgent.

[1] You cannot understand the manoeuvres around the main parties in France without taking into account the archaic electoral system: the deputies are not elected by proportional representation, but by uninominal vote in two rounds. So it is practically impossible for a minority party to have elected representatives – that is what happens with the far left – without a global agreement with a big party, which in some constituencies withdraws its candidates in the first round in favour of this small party. Otherwise, even obtaining scores of more than 5 or 10 per cent of the votes at the national level, the lack of proportional representation blocks the road to minority parties.

[2] Manuel Valls, who was Hamon's main adversary in the primaries, was prime minister from April 2014 to December, 2016.

[3] Each candidate must obtain the signatures of at least 500 elected representatives. They do not necessarily express political support for the candidate; some sign for democratic reasons, so that candidates without party machines behind them can stand.