France

The Zemmour moment

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Éric Zemmour's rise on the French political scene may seem dazzling but it certainly didn't fall from the sky. The likely transfer of the main far-right media heavyweight into the party-political arena is a symptom that encapsulates the deeper trends of the current period.

Let's briefly summarize what these trends are. Since the period of Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency in 2007-12, the center of gravity of French public debate or rather, what we have instead of public debate has radicalized to the right. Themes that used to be the sole preserve of the far right are today saturating mainstream media's political discourse. They cover a space that runs from the (supposedly) "republican" left of former Socialist Party prime minister Manuel Valls and Laurent Bouvet's Printemps républicain to Marine Le Pen's National Rally (RN), as well as the bourgeois right and the representatives of Emmanuel Macron's government. For these forces, too, have rallied to the fight against so-called "Islamo-leftism" and Muslim "separatism." These themes are articulated around a now-unabashed racism, fierce in its Islamophobia, and which ends up in the myth of the "great replacement” a myth full of potential for exterminatory violence.

Éric Zemmour is one of the most prominent names in this fascisization dynamic. His ubiquity in French media is the culmination of a process that has been underway for many years. It is an accompaniment of this process, but also one of its most effective catalysts.

**Changed Context**

This might tempt us to dismiss the rise of Zemmour as an epiphenomenon a surface effect, a simple polling bubble or a "media creation." Yet his passage from the status of a hypermediatized polemicist to that of a potential presidential candidate one whom, some polls tell us, even has a good chance of reaching the second-round is hardly automatic. Just a few months ago, who would really have thought that could happen? Who foresaw that Zemmour would be able to destabilize Marine Le Pen and her party a force that has been solidly established in the far-right electoral niche for four decades, already reached the second round of the presidential elections twice, and, according to polls not so long ago, was even closing the gap with Macron for the second-round contest in 2022? To put it another way, if the Zemmour phenomenon cannot be understood apart from the long-term dynamics underpinning it, the more strictly political path it seems to be taking would have been impossible without the change of circumstances in recent months.

For "something" did happen, or more precisely became visible, during the regional elections in June, with the National Rally's worse-than-expected result and its inability to conquer, or even seriously challenge for victory in, a single French region. Such a failure despite a high score at the national level augured badly for the presidential elections, as it made it clear that, whatever the matchup in the second round, the RN is bound to lose. That this has been acknowledged signals the failure of the so-called "detoxification" strategy that Le Pen has been pursuing for many years. For this only makes sense as a "second-round strategy," aimed at gathering a majority after Le Pen has already reached a presidential run-off (something itself taken for granted).

This quest for respectability is, moreover, an avenue that simply must be taken by any formation that seeks to manage the bourgeois state and the affairs of capital hence the RN's multiple pledges to the French and European ruling classes over recent months (the abandonment of any idea of an exit from the European Union [EU], the commitment to repaying France's public debt, the claimed compatibility of the party's "national priority" policy and the essential EU framework). In early 2021, the RN seemed to be on the verge of succeeding in its transformation into a
potential "party of government" and its arrival in power no doubt in alliance with a part of the bourgeois right was widely considered a credible hypothesis.

Yet the party's poor performance in the regional elections has deeply shaken this approach, prompting or accelerating the departure of elected representatives, cadres, and activists. We then realize that, despite its polling scores and its influence in the most decisive sectors of the electorate (young people, the working-age population, the popular classes), the RN's party apparatus and electoral machine remain rather modest. Such a party is thus particularly vulnerable to an electoral setback, and this also affects Le Pen, whose role is decisive in a political current so centered on the leader figure. The effect is amplified by the organizational amateurism and nepotism that characterize the RN's handling of its internal affairs. In a context where the very possibility of winning power is at stake, its (relative) electoral setback thus becomes a strategic failure.

Entering the Fray

But how should we explain this setback? This is where the "Zemmour factor" comes in, or more precisely, his transition from media advocate of extreme right-wing ideas to a potential player in the party-political arena. For the standpoint of his own political side, Zemmour does offer a pertinent analysis of this failure. Even the day after the regional elections, he pointed to the combined effect of the "normalization" of Le Pen's discourse and the turning of the political mainstream toward the extreme right:

In truth, there is no longer any difference today between her discourse and that of Emmanuel Macron or Xavier Bertrand. . . . Marine Le Pen speaks like Emmanuel Macron, Emmanuel Macron speaks like Marine Le Pen, they are already in the second round, since no one is supposed to exist apart from that second round [matchup], and it is clear that voters are refusing to be forced into this choice.

Yet this double banalization of Le Pen's discourse (she speaks "like everyone else," after having led "everyone else" to speak like her) a paradoxical effect of the "Le Penization of minds" that Le Pen senior once prided himself on seriously undermines her ability to channel the anger and various resentments that she had earlier managed to crystallize.

This explains the RN's failure in the regional elections: Against all expectations, this party's vote was as much, or even more, hurt by abstention than that of the other formations (apart from La France Insoumise, which suffered even worse). According to an Institut français d'opinion publique (IFOP) exit poll, some 71 percent of Le Pen's 2017 electorate did not turn out to vote this June. As for the RN's cadres (or at least a significant part of them), as they see the prospect of electoral victory slipping away, they are increasingly minded to criticize what they see as a softening and gentrification of their party. As a former leader of the party's Deux-Sèvres federation put it:

The gap has grown deeper over time. We were forbidden from going to the Manif pour tous [a series of protests against same-sex marriage], then from supporting [the neofascist] Génération identitaire. Marine Le Pen says that the "great replacement" is a conspiracy theory, that Islam is compatible with the Republic, that she will not leave Schengen [the space of free movement in the EU] or the European Convention on Human Rights. . . . She is a leftist who grew up in a château and inherited the Le Pen brand.
The Zemmour moment

This is what allows for the "Zemmour moment," now also on the party-political terrain. Armed with this recognition of failure, and drawing on his own exceptional visibility, which has made him one of the most effective catalysts for the far-right radicalization of French politics, Zemmour seems able to exploit the difficulties of the hitherto legitimate representative of the far right. He can now present himself as a legitimate spokesperson, in the field of party-political competition, of a radicalization for which he worked so hard in the media.

This is reflected in recent polling data, pointing to the prospective candidate's meteoric rise. Zemmour has managed to attract putative voters from both the established candidates of the far right (Marine Le Pen and her satellite, the "national-conservative" Nicolas Dupont-Aignan) and the classic right. What is more, contrary to what earlier polls suggested, he also seems able to attract a substantial part of the popular (and, to a lesser extent, youthful) electorate. This is an electorate that, let's not forget, has been turning increasingly toward the far right for several years even considering its high abstention rate. Even before Zemmour's more recent rise, the polls had suggested a level of far-right penetration among the popular classes apparently surpassing even the record levels we saw in the 2017 presidential election: The three far-right candidates totaled then around 50 percent among "blue-collar workers" and "employees," with the total for left-wing candidates in these same categories ranging between 22 and 25 percent.

The prospect of Zemmour running for the presidency thus outlines the contours of a potentially majoritarian bloc, both extending the far right's influence and uniting it with part of the classic bourgeois right that is now under its hegemony. If this does indeed come to pass, it could accelerate the breakup of the bourgeois right, part of which has already rallied to the president, or is preparing to do so in the coming period, with Macron's former prime minister Édouard Philippe's new party (a split from the Republicans) as the receptacle for these voters.

An Incomplete Move

If the "Zemmour moment" is indeed the symptom of a fascist radicalization of the political field, it also signals that this process is now overtaking, or at least taking by surprise, those who have thus far been its main vectors and beneficiaries in the field of political representation. More than, as Ugo Palheta suggests, a "bourgeois alternative" in the sense that the bourgeoisie has fashioned several options so that it can choose the best one (for its own interests) when the time comes this phenomenon seems like a form of the "autonomy of the political." Or, to put it another way, this is a process that escapes its initiators' own control. In so doing, it acts as a catalyst for the fragmentation, and thus for the instability and unpredictability, of a political field that has lost its structure. Such a development does not necessarily do the bidding of the bourgeoisie, which likes nothing better than order and uncomplicated exchanges of power.

And yet, this autonomy really is relative. Not only in the sense that Zemmour's political options are, quite obviously, as much at the service of capitalist interests as those of the other representatives of the bourgeois bloc. To successfully convert media capital into the field of partisan political competition, one has to be able to pay the entry fee. And this comes at a high price, especially for a presidential campaign: It means not just collecting 500 endorsements from elected officials, but campaign finances, rallies, the need to have at least some limited presence on the ground. The decay of France's political parties surely favors the entry of outsiders into the political arena Macron's rapid rise to victory four years ago is itself proof of this and the success of campaigns conducted with an apparatus cut back to the minimum, as in Jean-Luc Mélenchon's 2017 bid. But in both those cases, the candidates were able to mobilize important resources: In Macron's case, they came from the country's economic elites, and, in Mélenchon's case, as the fruit of a long history within the Left. It remains to be seen whether Zemmour is capable of creating a mobilization of this kind, and this is undoubtedly the reason why he has thus far delayed his decision on whether to run for the presidency.
As an expression of a (relative) autonomy of politics, in the context of an organic crisis of representation and creeping fascisization, the rise of Zemmour's possible candidacy is a sign of both strength and weakness. Strength, in that it shows that this process of fascist radicalization is deep-rooted, that it has reserves and energies that go beyond those deployed by those who have thus far been its legitimate representatives. Weakness, because it remains to be proven that such a candidate is likely to rally more people than Marine Le Pen, and that a far right split into two wings of comparable electoral weight is more credible than the relatively united force that has prevailed up till now.

In which case, the question of *cui bono* inevitably arises. In the end, it may be that this character from the bowels of the reactionary wing of the bourgeois right, a man from the columns of *Le Figaro* will serve a different function, whether this is his deliberate aim of his or merely his "objective" effect. That is, Zemmour will serve to destabilize the only pole that had hitherto seemed able, given the decay of the Left, to put the bourgeois bloc's candidate in (electoral) difficulty, at the same time as it gave his (fascist) ideas a new level of visibility and acceptability.

In this sense, even if he doesn't go all the way, Éric Zemmour has already won.

*Source: translated by David Broder for Jacobin.*

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