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France

Faced with popular hostility Macron imposed his re-election

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Macron won his bet on 24 April: to overcome the obstacle of the presidential election, to be re-elected despite deep popular hostility. He won 58.46 per cent of the votes cast, so more than 17 per cent separated him from Marine Le Pen.

But more than 34 per cent of the electorate abstained or voted blank or spoiled their ballots. Macron's vote barely exceeds this percentage, since he was elected by only 38.52 per cent of those registered to vote. He is thus the most poorly elected president over the eleven elections of the Fifth Republic (apart from the Gaullist Georges Pompidou, elected with 37 per cent in 1969. Le PCF, then the main opposition force, had explicitly called for abstention).

Not only was Macron badly elected, but half of his votes in the second round were in no way in support of record or his programme. They come from a vote of refusal, to prevent the election of Marine Le Pen, which the polls on the evening of the first round had presented as a serious possibility. It was on this risk that Macron played for two weeks, becoming the champion of the fight against the extreme right, declaring of Le Pen's programme: "it is a racist programme, which aims to cleave society, and it is extremely brutal".

With unlimited cynicism, he and his ministers in two weeks created an image that represented a 180 degree turn in relation to their policies over the last five years, suddenly becoming radical opponents of a violent and authoritarian way of governing society, offended, for example, by statements by Le Pen against the right of Muslim women to wear the veil in public spaces. Most of the mainstream media played an identical role in urgently re-diabolizing the RN, "forgetting" that they themselves had favoured the trivialization of the ideas and programme of the extreme right, being largely complacent for years towards the ideas of Le Pen and Zemmour on security, Islam and immigration.

Although the risk of an election of Le Pen receded in the days before the second round, her result should nevertheless be taken seriously. In winning 13.3 million votes, the far right achieved on 24 April its best score in a presidential election, with 2.6 million more votes than in 2017, whereas Macron himself lost nearly 2 million. In 2002, Jean Marie Le Pen had created a cataclysm with a score much lower than his daughter's, 5.5 million votes.

But by "twisting the arm" of the section of the left-wing electorate that voted for him, Macron achieved his goal: to ensure a sufficient gap with Le Pen that his victory was indisputable, and to avoid the number of abstentions being higher than that of his own votes. This result, extorted by forceps, cannot hide an obvious reality: the vote for Macron in the second round, independently of those who voted to block Le Pen, clearly leans in the direction of a bourgeois, class and "law and order" vote on the part of pensioners and the most privileged layers of the salaried workforce.

Hostility to Macron

On the other hand, hostility towards Macron is a largely majority sentiment in the popular classes and the far right also benefited from this: half of its votes did not come from an adhesion to its programme but from the refusal of a second five-year term of Macron. The far right has put itself in a political position to make the most of this vote, seeking to turn its new failure into a springboard for the next elections, including the 2027 presidential election. The map of the electoral results shows a majority Le Pen vote in 30 out of 100 departments, including in the working-class regions of northern France and the Mediterranean coast. With this election, the far-right party will have succeeded in taking new decisive steps towards its banalization, thanks to the presence of the Zemmour candidacy which was able to give Marine Le Pen the image of a respectable politician; thanks also to the hatred of Macron,

which facilitated the use of the Le Pen bulletin to "get rid of Macron". This growing trivialization was strong enough for "the vote for Marine" to increase its presence in working-class neighborhoods. The vote gain for Le Pen also came in recent weeks from the burning issue of the cost of living. Macron's determination, reaffirmed during his campaign, to increase the retirement to 65 further angered people. Le Pen tried during the second-round campaign to address Mélenchon's electorate as a priority, hiding as much as possible the Islamophobic and law and order aspects, highlighting social issues, especially those of purchasing power and pensions, trying to make her vote a kind of misguided class vote.

This had no effect in many urban areas, such as the Paris region where Mélenchon came out ahead of Macron in the first round, relying in particular on working-class departments such as Seine Saint Denis and Val de Marne. Abstention did not increase in the second round and the Mélenchon electorate largely shifted to Macron, who won 73 per cent of his votes. It was the same in Lille and Marseilles.

But the most spectacular counter-example was in the French departments of the Antilles, French Guiana and Reunion. There, although abstention was clearly in the majority in both rounds, the anti-Macron vote had been massive in the first round, provoked by the management of the health crisis, the movement of Yellow Vests in Reunion; and in the Antilles, by the scandal of the distribution of water and that of the pesticide Chlordecone, not to mention several weeks of general strike last autumn. Social anger was synonymous with a majority vote for Mélenchon in the first round. In the second round, the shift was almost automatic towards a vote for Le Pen.

Macron therefore begins his mandate by sitting again on the ashes of the PS and the LR but, under these ashes, there is a bed of social embers that he himself has fanned during his five-year term and he will be confronted with two political poles, one on the extreme right, another of a left asserting itself as radical and anti-liberal. He will have obtained exactly the opposite result of what he committed to on 7 May 2017, on the evening of his election: "I will do everything so that there is no longer any reason to vote for the extremes." Five years later, he has helped to further dismantle the political credibility of social democracy and the Gaullist right, but above all his policies have exacerbated social tensions and accentuated divisions.

On all fronts, urgent problems are posed and the record of the Macron governments could not be worse. Serious questions have accumulated and Macron will, in one way or another, be confronted with social anger: the situation has been aggravated by the pandemic in the popular neighborhoods and communes, the only response consisting of racist laws and police violence, an increase in the cost of living, low wages, rising inequality, precarious employment contracts and attacks on the rights of the unemployed. Macron promises for his second term only fresh attacks on pensions, the public health system and the National Education system. To impose the move to retirement at 65, the outgoing Minister of the Economy, Bruno Le Maire does not rule out the use of Article 49-3 of the Constitution to cut short the debate and vote in parliament. Faced with the impoverished health system, the pandemic and the scandals that have appeared in recent months in the EHPADs (old people's homes), after years of shortages and bed closures, increasingly highlight the need for an increase in the number of hospital beds, hiring more staff, a public system based on the health needs of the population.

In another area, the citizens' convention for the climate, although organized by Macron in 2019, saw 90 per cent of its recommendations rejected, and France has been twice condemned for its inaction on the climate. None of the issues raised by the Yellow Vests have been resolved and they have even been compounded by the pandemic and recent increases in food and energy prices. Femicide, rape and violence against women, far from decreasing, have increased in recent years and many new tragedies highlight the lack of dealing with complaints, passivity in the face of sexual criminals and the lack of protection of victims.

Despite strong mobilizations in the Antilles, the only response has been a pirouette to promise autonomy and provide no answers on urgent social issues, the reparations demanded on Chlordecone, water issues, the damage done by

the health crisis. In Kanaky, the pseudo-referendum on independence leaves the question of the path to Kanak sovereignty directly posed. Similarly, in Corsica, all dialogue with the nationalist majority has been broken off. So the list of reasons for the anger provoked by Macron's governments is long.

All these questions, left unanswered for many years, have worn down the social bases of the traditional parties and provoked their crisis. A crisis that has been accentuated by a political system concentrating all real political power at the national level. This system increases all the more the anger against the parties claiming to be running the state. Macron has avoided accountability for his liberal and authoritarian policies, whereas the PS and the LR, for similar policies, have just been decimated. But Macron's tricks will only last for a time in the face of social anger.

Prospects for parliamentary elections in June

The next political steps will be the general elections on 12 and 19 June, with the election of the 577 deputies who make up the National Assembly, the legislative chamber, to which the government is responsible in the French political system.

Since the introduction of the five-year presidential term there has been a strong bonus for the party of the newly elected president and the crushing of opposition parties, nevertheless the hope exists that the particular context of this presidential election can change the situation. Generally, legislative elections see a higher rate of abstention than the presidential election, more than 51 per cent in the first round five years ago. The election is held by a first-past-the-post system in two rounds, and it is necessary to have obtained, in the first round, the vote of 12.5 per cent of registered voters to qualify for the second round. In practice, for an abstention rate equivalent to that of 2017, this would represent, on average, more than 25% of the votes cast. This system obviously leads to a radical reduction of the number of candidates and therefore tends to impose broad electoral alliances in order to get past the first round. The greatest probability is therefore a new majority for the presidential party, rejected by the vast majority of voters, gagging any political debate for five years and advancing the steamroller of liberal reforms unless the next six weeks disrupt this scenario.

Many different issues are present in this election and many clarifications will only take place in the coming days.

Obviously for Macron, the challenge of the legislative elections is to establish an absolute majority (he currently has only 267 deputies, although 79 other centrist deputies participate in the presidential majority). The goal is to pull in as many deputies as possible around the fringes, from the Gaullist right and from the PS, to try to broaden his base by winning over individuals. Despite the fact that the legislative elections are an extension of the presidential election, the influence at the local and regional level of the PS and LR counterbalances the presidential score of their candidates. The PS, the Republicans and their elected representatives are much more present in departmental and regional institutions than En Marche is: 685 departmental councillors for the PS and 838 for LR, (and an equivalent number for the Regional Councils), well ahead of the 400 departmental councillors and 118 regional councillors of En Marche. Similarly, in cities with more than 30,000 inhabitants, there are 50 PS and related mayors, 99 LR and related, 3 En Marche and allies. The institutional political network is still the prerogative of the two old traditional parties, even though their weight has collapsed at the national level. En Marche must therefore make an effort, not by having a national alliance with the PS or LR, but by trying to establish its influence on local personalities. The En Marche deputies often having the image of having popped up out of the ground without having a local network, Macron wants to avoid the risk of not having an absolute majority.

On the far right, the line is simple. There will be no alliance between the RN and Reconquête! (the party of Zemmour

and Marion Maréchal). Le Pen's goal is even to suffocate Zemmour by imposing, as in the Presidential election, a useful vote in the first round to guarantee the presence of the extreme right in the second round. Marine Le Pen came out ahead in the presidential election in 260 legislative constituencies, and the first polls give her a range of 75 to 100 deputies. But elections are not the strict projection of national votes. Presenting candidates everywhere, the RN does not have the illusion of being in the majority in the Assembly, but by the same token of perhaps multiplying by ten its number of deputies – only eight in the outgoing assembly.

In addition, the public funding of political parties (66 million euros annually) is calculated half on the number of votes obtained in the legislative elections, half on the number of elected deputies. For Zemmour as for Le Pen, the stakes are therefore also financial; 55 per cent of the declared resources of the RN now come from public funding (i.e. 5 million euros). The RN intends to transform its presidential defeat into a springboard for the legislative elections and consolidate itself, despite its recent crisis. The RN too, like En Marche, has a weak local institutional presence and is counting on the next elections to build itself, with the 2027 presidential election as an objective (perhaps with a fourth candidacy of Marine Le Pen). In any case, closing the Zemmour parenthesis is the immediate goal. The latter has no prospects for the moment, especially for the coming elections.

For the Republicans, the situation is dramatic. The pressure no longer comes so much from the RN as from the side of the presidential majority. Nicolas Sarkozy, the last elected LR president, a true “supreme commander” of the Gaullist party, clearly indicated his distrust of the campaign and the LR candidate, and his explicit support for Macron. He does not hide, like many other LR officials, his wish that the Gaullists should integrate in one way or another into the presidential majority. The party's leaders, divided, would like to try to “save the furniture” and the existence of the party as an independent party, as they did in 2017 when they kept just over a hundred MPs. But that number is likely to halve this year. The outcome is therefore uncertain. Thus, the president of the parliamentary group, Damien Abad, appears favourable to taking the step of joining Macron today.

Towards a left coalition

Finally, the great novelty could come from the side of the left and the radical left. La France Insoumise, between the two rounds of the presidential election, made a proposal for a common front for the legislative elections to the Communist Party (PCF), the NPA, and the Greens (EELV). The union was to be based around the main axes of the programme “Common Future” presented by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, with the objective of a popular union majority in the National Assembly, imposing Mélenchon as prime minister.

The PCF responded positively, without disagreeing with the framework proposed by La France Insoumise. Regarding EELV, the issue is more complex. The Green party is heavily indebted, having won less than 5 per cent of the vote in the presidential election. The party will be reimbursed for its campaign expenses on a basis of 800,000 euros and not the 8 million on which it built its budget. The leadership decided to save what it could, and open discussions with La France insoumise, although their candidate Yannick Jadot marked his disagreements with Mélenchon throughout the campaign on the respect of the institutional framework of the European Union and on retirement at 60. Moreover, multiple discordant voices are to be heard. Yannick Jadot himself refuses the leadership of Mélenchon in this union. In substance, EELV is divided between a line that is entirely compatible with social-liberalism and a more radical line close to La France Insoumise, represented in the party primaries by Sandrine Rousseau.

Here too, things are not closed, far from it. A surprise came a few days ago from the PS, which was not foreseen in the equation proposed by La France Insoumise. On 19 April a National Council of the party, while taking stock of the financial and political catastrophe of Anne Hidalgo's candidacy (1.75 per cent) decided to ask La France Insoumise if it could participate in the discussion for the legislative elections, despite the notable disagreement of Anne Hidalgo and several historical leaders of the party. While LFI had previously said that the agreement could not be extended to

the social liberals, Jean Luc Mélenchon, two days later, declared himself in favour of a broad alliance, from Lutte Ouvrière to the PS. Manuel Bompard, spokesman for La France Insoumise for this negotiation, has made a point of reminding the Socialists, since this evolution on its part, that the agreement would imply it voting for the repeal of the El Khomri labour law (a cocktail of social attacks on collective rights in workplaces), imposed by the Hollande government, the return to retirement at age 60 and the erasure of the Touraine reform on pensions which, again under Hollande, introduced retirement at age 62 and a reduction in pensions, and the acceptance by the PS of the project of the Sixth Republic put forward by LFI, calling into question the 1958 Constitution.

All in all, these discussions around an enlarged Popular Union, driven by a real popular momentum around Mélenchon's campaign, are a mixture of militant political dynamics and financial calculations with the aim of rescuing the party apparatuses and maintaining parliamentary groups. The question is to know which of these two dynamics will win out over the other.

From the outset, the NPA has been favourably disposed to an agreement which, based on the programme of the "Common Future", could therefore only be made in rupture with the social-liberal bases of the PS, and also by a clarification of EELV on these axes. It has also spoken in favour of everyone retaining their identity and that there should be no obligation to participate and show solidarity a priori with a government that comes from a possible majority.

The electoral objective of a "Popular Union" majority in the assembly imposes on paper, in one month, an exceptional local militant mobilization, against the usual sluggishness of the legislative elections, especially since Mélenchon came out ahead in only 105 legislative constituencies out of 577. In any case, the political stakes are very real. For the first time on the left, for a very long time, the possibility of building a political and social front, a front of common action around political and social axes of rupture with social-liberalism, even if the framework is limited to legislative elections and therefore for a purely institutional purpose. Mélenchon's programme and the construction of La France Insoumise are made in an explicit break with the five-year term of François Hollande from 2012 to 2017 and the social-liberal drift of the PS.

Even though the programme of "Common Future" is above all an electoral programme that the Popular Union envisages will be implemented through obtaining a parliamentary majority, the political polarization of recent weeks raises questions that go beyond the June deadline, in the continuation of the social struggles of recent years. Because the challenge could be, on a larger scale, and going beyond what has been done by La France Insoumise with the parliament of the Popular Union, to create a political and social crucible that allows the presence and activity of a militant front of action in cities and popular neighbourhoods. The challenge would be to change the situation, especially in the face of the extreme right and reactionary excesses, by allowing axes of social justice, social and democratic rights, the fight against exclusion and discrimination to prevail in the public debate around social struggles, and in mobilizations bringing together militant currents that are at present fragmented. A common front for the legislative elections would therefore be a springboard for such a project, provided of course that the presence of the PS does not blur the image of this alliance and transforms it into an unprincipled "electoral arrangement" at the antipodes of the social struggles of recent years.

Many axes put forward by the campaign of La France Insoumise resonate with positions and demands put forward by the NPA and Philippe Poutou during his presidential campaign. On other points, the NPA develops an anti-capitalist programme that obviously goes further and, above all, links this programme to the need for social mobilizations, even to achieve the most basic goals of social justice, as well as the need to confront the power and the political levers available to the capitalists. [1] This is not just a question of a parliamentary majority and it brings us back to the unavoidable balance sheet of the experiences of Syriza and Podemos. Nevertheless, even an electoral agreement on a few essential points would be a concrete step forward. Besides, if in the aftermath of 19 June a broad front around the Popular Union brought together even 100, 50 or even 30 deputies, the prospect that would be posed to everyone would be that of the construction of this militant political and social front.

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A lot will be clarified in the coming days, up to May 7 as the deadline, with a convention to launch the campaign. Many militant currents hope for a positive outcome to this process.

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[1] For the outcome of the discussions with the NPA see "[Statement of NPA National Political Council on the parliamentary elections](#)".