



## The murky world of French politics

by Christine Ockrent, 19 July 2024

**Two weeks after the second round of France’s parliamentary elections, it is still far from clear who or what can form a new French government.**

First the good news: a large majority of French citizens are adamant that they do not want the far right in power. In a spectacular turnaround, the results of the second round of France’s legislative elections were the exact reverse of the first. On Sunday July 7<sup>th</sup>, the hastily-constructed Nouveau Front Populaire (NFP) left-wing alliance came out first, the centrist bloc second, and the far-right Rassemblement National (RN) third. Public opinion may be more fragmented than ever, but candidates and voters were disciplined enough to rally against the RN in many constituencies. Now it is up to the newly-elected or re-elected MPs to find a way of making Parliament function – in a political system, and a culture, that has been dominated since 1958 by presidential supremacy. Almost two weeks after the snap vote called by Emmanuel Macron “to clarify the situation”, the scene can only be described as murky and chaotic.

On the far right, young Jordan Bardella, president of the RN, is brooding. He won’t be able to show himself on TikTok at the prime minister’s desk for quite some time – his wild popularity with young people all over the country relied primarily on the platform he used to display his craving for sweets and videogames. His only solace will be to lead a new party, Patriots for Europe, in the European Parliament. This party is the progeny of the happy Franco-Hungarian couple of Marine Le Pen and Viktor Orbán, who hope to increase their influence in the newly-elected assembly by bringing together 30 French and 11 Hungarian MEPs. They are joined by a few Czech, Austrian, Dutch and Italian MEPs (not those from Georgia Meloni’s party, but followers of Matteo Salvini).

The final results in France may be disappointing to Bardella; the RN’s campaign was scarred by too many of his candidates’ blatantly racist and anti-semitic remarks. Yet his boss, Marine Le Pen, the parliamentary leader of the RN, has staged a triumphant return to the National Assembly. From one seat in 2012, just after she took over from her father, to seven in 2017, after Macron’s first presidential victory, to 89 seats in 2022, after his re-election, Marine Le Pen now leads a group of 143 MPs – and the money follows suit. Proportional to their number, public funding will fill the party coffers. There might even be a sigh of relief among her most experienced advisors, that they will not have to cope with running a government and tackling so many difficult issues, when they can draw on such a limited reservoir of expertise.

The dynamics could remain in Le Pen's favour. She may wait for the political mess to thicken, use her weight in the National Assembly to make life difficult for whatever government emerges, and gleefully watch general disappointment grow in the country. She has nearly three years to prepare for the next presidential election.

The centrist forces have done better than expected. Don't call them *Macronistes* anymore: the dissolution cost them a good 80 seats and threw into disarray many of the president's most faithful followers. A few of his cynical admirers may still pretend that he won his bet, by keeping the far right at bay, but the cost has been high, particularly for those who believed in Macron's capacity to mend the country's left-right political divide, and change forever its political landscape.

There is acrimony in the air. Overtly critical of the snap vote, the young prime minister Gabriel Attal took charge of the campaign and managed to escape the worst on election night. The morning after, true to tradition, he offered his resignation, only to be turned down by Macron. With the Olympic Games in sight, the president wants to keep the current government in charge for as long as possible, albeit with a limited caretaker role, and regain leverage until the parliamentary situation clarifies. Ever since he was elected in 2017, Macron has liked to see himself as *le maître des horloges*, his favorite expression, meaning the master of his own timing, not to be rushed or compelled by short-term political considerations. As he was flying to the NATO celebrations in Washington, Macron sent a *Lettre aux Français* via local newspapers, commending them for the high turn-out and "the vitality of our Republic". No one actually won these elections, he wrote, as no majority coalition emerged. "It is now up to those political parties that share common values, respect our institutions, support European ambitions and defend our independence" to work together in Parliament and forge a new majority. In other words, do your job and negotiate a broad governing pact to exclude both extremes, on the right as well as on the left.

The problem with the president's message was that he seemed to forget the snap election that he triggered led to the unexpected victory of the left-wing parties. In all democratic logic, it should be up to them to take the initiative.

With 180 seats, the Nouveau Front Populaire won the July 7<sup>th</sup> vote, albeit with internal tensions out in the open and with too few seats to govern on its own – a majority in the National Assembly requires 289 votes. By denying the left its relative success, the president's message in his letter only succeeded in uniting the NFP's competing leaders in common anger. True to his lyrical celebration of chaos, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the radical left party La France Insoumise (LFI), and who behaves as if he is the Messiah of the *insoumis* (the unsubdued), took the credit for the good results of his associates, the Socialists and the Greens, who reject his leadership altogether. His showing up on election night with Rima Hassan, a rabidly pro-Palestinian MEP draped in her *keffiyeh*, did not help. Although LFI failed to make any electoral gains, his close aides keep insisting that he should be the next prime minister. One of his zealots even tweeted "Let's march on Matignon!", that reference to the residence of the prime minister being a reminder of the January 6<sup>th</sup> attack on the Capitol in Washington DC.

Olivier Faure, the Socialist leader, claims to be ready for the prime minister's job – and though he is not popular in his own ranks, he points out that his party has doubled its representation in the assembly. François Hollande, the former Socialist president, just elected to Parliament, immediately dismissed the idea that he was aiming for Matignon, but stressed he would be well qualified for the foreign ministry. Just imagine Macron having to go to Brussels and elsewhere with his former boss as foreign minister...

The most pro-European leader on the left, Raphael Glucksmann, whose strong performance in the European elections restored social-democratic morale, hasn't shown much taste or aptitude for sheer politicking. He managed to get support for Ukraine and the European Union included in the NFP common platform, but has kept rather silent ever since. Sharp-tongued Marie Tondelier of the Greens, who was smart enough to wear the same green jacket throughout the campaign and made quite an impression, argued for the need to reach an agreement on a common candidate for prime minister. So did the Communists, whose boss lost his seat to a far-right candidate. NFP negotiators kept meeting at night in secret locations to discourage journalists, and came out at dawn exhausted, still without an agreement. Later on, the Socialists, Communists and Greens suggested calling for a personality outside political circles – and proposed Laurence Tubiana, a well-respected civil servant and veteran climate negotiator. Mélenchon rejected her as being too close to Macron and – ever the Trotskyist – labelled the Socialists as traitors. Mélenchon's strategy remains the same: to contribute as much as possible to political and social disorder in order to push for Macron's resignation and a new presidential contest in which he himself could take part.

In the meantime, France has a public deficit at 5.5 per cent of GDP and the European Commission is about to start an excessive deficit procedure against it. Economic and financial circles shiver at the thought that Mélenchon's promise of "all our program, only our program" could eventually prevail. Raise the minimum wage, sharply increase taxes, with the return of a specific tax on wealth, and repeal of the last pensions reform... All that would have worrying and unpredictable consequences, warned the Banque de France president, it would be catastrophic, claimed the employers' federation, and it would mean the death of "our start-up nation", moaned young entrepreneurs. Quite a few of them are looking to Belgium as having more favourable business conditions.

What about foreign policy, Europe and Ukraine? Mélenchon's praise for Venezuela as a model democracy, his fierce anti-Americanism and soft spot for Putin's authoritarianism, and his constant criticism of NATO and European institutions, starting with the European Central Bank, would weigh on his associates, should they eventually join him in trying to form a minority government. So far, it seems, Mélenchon is doing all he can – via his provocative comments – to prevent the NFP from taking power. There is no time to wonder about anything except domestic strife. The main question remains: who could form a coalition government and find a way to govern at all?

None of the three main components of the new assembly can on its own secure enough votes to win a motion of confidence. Therefore Les Républicains, the traditional conservatives with their 43 seats, plus 15 would-be affiliates, stand at the centre of intense speculation. Eric Ciotti, their former leader, who chose to rally to Le Pen before the election, lost his bet to split the party in his favour; only a handful of MPs followed him.

The new strongman on the right is Laurent Wauquiez, whose overt ambition is to conquer the Elysée in 2027. True to the French obsession with language, his first decision was to change the name of the party to La Droite Républicaine. That done, he turned down the idea of joining a coalition with Macron's centrist forces, as suggested by Xavier Bertrand and other conservative leaders. Vouching never to allow the far left to govern, Wauquiez declared he would be ready to sign a 'legislative pact' with the parties in government, that is to say case-by-case agreements on specific issues. For example, he wants a rise in working class salaries, more law and order policies, and a return to financial stability without raising taxes. He would also require tougher measures on immigration, such as annual quotas or limits on the social support that immigrants can receive. Known in the past for his euroscepticism and tepid

Atlanticism, Wauquiez would not push for an ambitious European and foreign policy agenda. Would there be room for some sort of a governing pact between Wauquiez and the centrists?

Renaissance, Macron's own party, is now torn between Gabriel Attal, who will lead the group in the National Assembly, and his rival Gerald Darmanin, the interior minister. Attal, initially a Socialist, proposes an alliance ranging from Social-Democrats and Greens to traditional *Républicains*. Darmanin, initially a Conservative, promotes a deal ranging from Conservatives to Social-Democrats... In other words, a similar mix, but with a different leader and differing emphases on social issues. Macron, irritated with the growing ambitions of the young man he appointed to Matignon, is rumored to favour Darmanin. Gathering some of his party leaders a few days ago, he blamed them all for the "disastrous display" of personal ambitions put "before the interest of the nation". Edouard Philippe, the ex-prime minister, who runs a splinter group of 25 centrist MPs, did not attend. He has severed all links with his former boss and tries to nurse his presidential ambitions. The recent revelation that he shared a dinner party with Marine Le Pen a few months ago has not helped his cause.

Whatever scenario prevails among centrists, assuming the NFP split and some of its components agreed to take part in a coalition, they would still not be numerous and powerful enough to govern. Even if all the Socialists, Greens and Communists together (96 MPs) agreed to join the 168 members of the centre, they would fall short of the necessary 289 majority – and the centre itself is highly unlikely to remain united. Hence Wauquiez and his Conservatives have a lot of bargaining power.

Whatever the scenario, the far right will be in opposition. "We might support specific projects if we deem them reasonable", mused one of Marine Le Pen's advisors – and straight afterwards Le Pen tweeted that her party would vote against any coalition that included Green and LFI representatives.

As the constitution forbids any new parliamentary election for another year, Emmanuel Macron could resort to a technocratic government led by a non-political figure, *à la* Mario Draghi or Mario Monti in Italy. That would be a very un-French solution – public opinion loves to vilify *les technocrats* – and quite possibly the kiss of death to the institutions of the Fifth Republic.

During his recent trip to Washington, Macron tried to play his part on the international scene as if his own credibility was intact. In a rare display of Franco-German *camaraderie*, Chancellor Olaf Scholtz offered to sell him some seminars on how to build a majority in Parliament – which Macron probably did not find amusing. Whatever happens in Paris, the president's ability to maintain France's support of Ukraine and NATO remains unaltered, according to his diplomatic adviser. According to the French constitution, as the previous Mitterrand-Chirac experiences with *cohabitation* showed, the Elysée keeps control of defense and foreign policy. Still, the approval of the prime minister, and key ministers such as those for finance and defence, are necessary to put decisions into practice. And money – for example, to aid Ukraine – has to be voted on by Parliament.

The French political world became slightly less opaque on Thursday July 18<sup>th</sup>, when all MPs had to cast secret ballots to fill the top positions in the National Assembly. Eleven days after the election, this offered a first occasion to appreciate the balance of power and the tactics of the various parties. After three rounds of voting – the first two required an absolute majority, and the third only the highest number of votes – Yaël Braun-Pivet was re-elected as president of the Assembly, the position she had held before the snap election.



An early *Macroniste*, first elected to Parliament in 2017, Braun-Pivet cultivated a rather tense relationship with the president, which contributed to her reputation as an independent and fair leader of the Assembly. With 220 votes, she got full support from the centrist bloc and Wauquiez's Conservatives, and none from the far right: indeed that may be the first concrete demonstration of a possible minority alliance against both the extreme left and extreme right. The Communist candidate chosen by the left came a close second, with 207 votes. The NFP as well as the RN immediately attacked the wheelings and dealings of their adversaries as 'undemocratic' – the beginning of their parliamentary apprenticeship, and for the left a return to the difficult process of trying to select a common candidate for Matignon.

Thirty-nine days after the dissolution, France was left with the same president of the National Assembly, the same prime minister in office and of course the same president: "*tout ça pour ça!*" Macron may well consider the current predicament as the validation of his initial bet: the far right is kept out of government, the far left is destroying the NFP and the Social Democrats might be up for grabs. But at what a price!

France's political parties are not used to parliamentary games. Compromise to them and to many of the French is still an ugly word. The country faces huge social, economic and financial difficulties. Its weight on European and international issues is weakened. The French may be ungrateful, and their rejection of the president's achievements unfair, but they have expressed their discontent. More than ten million citizens turned to the far right. Throughout the land, anxiety remains high. Shrinking purchasing power, insecurity, immigration, rising inequalities and the decay of public services matter. Whoever takes charge, public trust in the political process remains at a low ebb. Let's brace for difficult times. Fortunately it is summer, soon the Games and *les vacances*...

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