

Final warning! The situation in France after the regional elections

Wednesday 30 December 2015, by [ROUSSET Pierre](#), [SABADO François](#) (Date first published: 15 December 2015).

Not a single region for the National Front - which nevertheless obtained the highest score in its history. A victory for the right - weaker than it had hoped. The Socialist Party (PS) pushed back - barely saving face. A "left of the left" marginalized or subordinate, inaudible. That sums up, in a few words, the results of the regional elections of December 2015.

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Nothing would be more mistaken than to believe that the FN is only a party of the first round and that in the second, almost ritually, it will be blocked by a "republican backlash". That is what happened this time, but it is not sure that it will be the case the next time. Especially if the governmental left continues its neoliberal policies (which it has said it will) and if the right becomes even more radical, as Nicolas Sarkozy wants.

So the priority task is to do everything to block the austerity policies of the Valls-Hollande government - and to that end to put a stop to the state of emergency, to defeat the constitutional reform that seeks to trivialize the use of repressive emergency measures.

The National Front, a real danger

The regional elections mark a new upsurge of the National Front: nearly 7 million votes, more than the number of votes obtained by Marine Le Pen in the last presidential election. In election after election, since 2012, the FN vote has increased. It has become, in electoral terms, the biggest party in the country. Without alliances, it falls short of an absolute majority, but with the deepening of the regime crisis in France, that can change. We cannot rule out the possibility of the victory of Marine Le Pen in the next presidential election in 2017.

We know the reasons for this upsurge of the National Front: the global degradation of the relationship of forces to the detriment of the workers' movement, the neoliberal policies endorsed by governments of right and left, the persistent repercussions of post-colonial domination, the new (marginalized) place of the country in capitalist globalization. The combination of the effects of a long economic depression in Europe, the political crisis related to the choices made by the government, the consequences of the terrorist attacks perpetrated by the Islamic State and a new wave of racism in the popular classes provide a breeding ground for the FN.

The National Front is now present in all layers of society. It is becoming a majority electoral force among blue- and white-collar workers (at least among those who vote). The globalized bourgeoisie has certainly not made a choice in favour of the National Front - particularly its policy on leaving the euro; but the employers are now divided. The FN today does not correspond to the rational interests of the ruling classes. However, the political crisis is such, the political apparatuses are so weakened, that an "electoral accident", even though it is not "the most probable variant", can no longer be rejected out of hand.

At the risk of disarming ourselves, we should not underestimate the danger of the National Front or the destructive effects that a possible frontist victory would have. The political struggle against the far right must be conducted - an FN government would not be just one more right-wing government. Some people think the opposite, such as Jacques Rancière, who affirms: "As soon as I analyze the National Front as the fruit of the imbalance that is proper to our institutional logic, my hypothesis is rather one of an integration into the system. There are already many similarities between the National Front and the forces present within the system."

To a question - if the FN came to power, would it have concrete effects for the weakest in French society, that is to say, the immigrants ... - Jacques Rancière replies, unwisely:

"Yes, probably. But I have difficulty in seeing the FN organizing massive departures, an exodus of hundreds of thousands or millions of people, to send them "back home". The National Front is not the poor Whites against the immigrants. Its electorate is extending into all sectors of society, including among immigrants. So, of course, there could be symbolic actions, but I do not believe that a UMP-FN government would be very different from a UMP government..." [\[1\]](#).

Some ultraleft currents go further, putting the PS, the right and the National Front on the same level.

We do not agree with these analyses.

The National Front is not a fascist party in the manner of the 1930s because we are not in the 1930s. The origin of its leadership is fascist, its national-socialist themes repeat the classic themes of the far right, national preference and anti-immigrant racism, anti-Muslim in particular, remain central to its politics. This is not a classic fascist party, but nor is it a bourgeois party like the others.

A FN government is not a UMP government, much less a PS government. The vote for the PS and the vote for the National Front vote is not the same thing. Although voting for the right after the withdrawal of PS lists in the North and in the PACA region has added to the confusion and to the disappearance of the left in the fight against the National Front, there should be no hesitation about voting Socialist against the FN.

Admittedly, Valls and Hollande are conducting neoliberal policies that are destroying the living conditions of millions of workers; they want to entrench the state of emergency in the Constitution. We are sliding into ever more authoritarian political systems. Parliamentary democracy is being emptied of what remains of the "democratic".

Hollande and Valls are conducting a policy of destruction of the left, as other "socialists" already did in the past. But at this moment of the 21st century, 'social democratic' leaders are undoing what made historical social democracy

However, as severe and repressive as it is, the state of exception of Valls is not yet that of Marine Le Pen. At the centre of her programme, there is admittedly no mobilization of the petty bourgeoisie

through fascist militias to liquidate the workers' movement; but there is the "national preference", as opposed to several million foreigners and French citizens of foreign origin - as well as all those who protect them.

There are many similarities between the National Front and other forces of the system, but the FN is nonetheless not integrated into the system. The orientation of Marine Le Pen is not a project like that of Gianfranco Fini in Italy. Coming from the Italian Social Movement, then founder of the National Alliance in 1995, Fini joined in 2009 Berlusconi's formation, the People of Freedom, before separating from him in 2010. He was a minister in Berlusconi's second and third governments. He is really built into the system.

The majority of the National Front does not want to make alliances in which their party would find itself in a subordinate position. Its leaders want to break the right and replace it. They cannot today go beyond a certain electoral threshold. However, they are betting on the deepening of the crisis, and on the division and the explosion of the right. Is this a hypothesis that we can rule out?

Given the current international situation, the political disarray, the lack of a credible alternative to the system based on solidarity, the internal racist pressure, the National Front can count on certain sections of society to justify discrimination, repression, or indeed the expulsion of foreigners, particularly Muslim foreigners. It is a ferment of civil war that implies a radical liquidation of democratic freedoms. There will be a noticeable difference between all the authoritarian, Bonapartist, political formulas initiated by social democracy or the centre-right and a regime dominated by the far right.

The struggle against the National Front should take on a new dimension and must therefore be reconsidered - because, to date, we have failed to conduct it. Minority central mobilizations against the FN are no longer operative. Everything must be "taken up at the grass roots", in workplaces, in schools, in neighbourhoods, in towns, with unity of action of all democratic forces - we must organize mobilizations against the measures taken at local level by the party, especially in the towns it governs, in terms of education, culture, defence of freedoms.

To emphasize the specific danger that the National Front represents is not to give any kind of seal of approval to the government and to Hollande as president! The Valls state of emergency already aims to get society accustomed to living in a state of exception, to delegitimize the control of the judiciary over the repressive apparatus and over the executive, to put citizens under general surveillance, to in fact restrict civil liberties, to squeeze the life out of social movements.

The Hollande-Valls state of emergency creates the political conditions and mental conditioning that could tomorrow favour the imposition of a "navy blue" state of emergency [2]. The attack against democratic freedoms that we are experiencing today is extremely serious, unprecedented in France since the war in Algeria. So what is urgent, the first task, is to confront our leaders with the broadest possible democratic front. It is by blocking today the implementation of "austerity and security" policies, by giving back confidence to combative sectors in the trade unions, associations, workplaces, neighbourhoods, by rebuilding an anti-capitalist political alternative that we will begin to push back the National Front.

The priority struggle against the austerity and security policies of the Valls Hollande government should not lead us to minimize or relativize the fight against the National Front - and vice versa.

The right divided

The traditional right won the regional elections, without however this relative success calling into question the central place that the National Front has conquered in political life. The right remains under pressure.

This situation is pushing towards a recomposition of political life - something that is easier said than done. "Well-informed" commentators are exhorting the political machines of right and left to move towards a "national union", particularly against the FN, evoking governmental formulas of union or alliance of the right, the centre and social democracy that are now dominant in Germany and in the European Union. However, in France, this approach is quite difficult to implement.

The pressure exerted by the National Front has made a considerable part of the voters of the right swing over to voting FN. More generally, this encourages a radicalization of the traditional right.

During the recent elections, the PS withdrew its candidates in two regions, the North and Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, calling for a vote in the second round for the right in order to block the National Front - a call that was largely followed by left voters. However, the same right refused any withdrawal in favour of the lists of the left - Nicolas Sarkozy even declaring "To vote for the PS or the FN is the same thing"...

So, in the case of PS and FN candidates facing each other in an election, it is not at all clear that the electorate of the right would block against the far right. It is this uncertainty that makes possible the major "electoral accident": a defeat of Hollande by Marine Le Pen in the second round of the next presidential election.

Nicolas Sarkozy wants to embody this electorate, by taking up its programme. The result is that many voters prefer the original to the copy and Sarkozy becomes weaker in his own camp. The divisions, indeed the fractures, within the traditional right open up space for his competitors, Alain Juppé, Bruno Lemaire and Francois Fillon. The aftermath of the-regional elections is shaping up to be a period of turbulence, whose outcome remains undecided.

For a good many years now there has been a virtual space in France for a recomposed "centre", which however does not manage to take shape due to the weight of inertia of political machines and electoral clienteles - and the constraints of the presidential election, the biggest challenge in the electoral arena. These constraints are even stronger because there is no vice president, no ticket that could embody an alliance and satisfy at least two egos, two "stables".

To bring about first of all the union of the right and centre in order to eventually forge in the future alliances with part of the left seems to be a rational project (represented by Alain Juppé?), But it runs up against the dynamics of radicalization on the right and the structural weakness of the centre.

The risk for the right, if Nicolas Sarkozy is the presidential candidate, is the opposite: a centrist candidate (François Bayrou?) might prevent him from reaching the second round, leaving a face-off between Holland and Marine Le Pen...

So there is a double impasse, which will probably be resolved only on the occasion of an open crisis on the right, and which blocks for the moment the realization of a kind of national unity with the PS, or part of it.

Where is the Socialist Party going?

It has limited the damage, but the decline is obvious.

The PS got better results than in the recent European and departmental elections, but in the first round of the regional elections, it nevertheless came in behind the National Front and the right, with less than 25 per cent of the vote. The total of what can be called the left came to only about 35 per cent. The decision not to present lists in the second round in some areas has serious consequences: it means deserting, even on the parliamentary terrain, the fight against the right and the National Front.

This operation may seem like a smart tactical move, allowing Hollande to present himself as a unifying candidate in 2017, during the presidential election, counting on a division of the right-wing forces. In the meantime, however, the PS has withdrawn from the political struggle in two key regions.

This choice reflects a continued deterioration of the Socialist Party since 2012. It went from 280,000 members (official figure) in 2006 to 130,000 in December 2014. Only 70,000 “activists” voted for the last congress. However, the party is not experiencing a process of “Pasokisation”. It has more than 20 per cent of the vote, it is not suddenly collapsing. The crisis is far from reaching the Greek level in France. The weakening of social democracy is nevertheless considerable.

Even more important, the PS is undergoing a profound change in its nature. There is what could be called an acceleration of the bourgeois transformation of social democracy. It is a process that has been unfolding for a long time and which is resulting in an unprecedented degree of integration of social-democratic cadres at the highest levels of the state, in global institutions (IMF, WTO...) and in the globalized economy. The socialist parties have become “less and less working-class and more and more bourgeois.” The brutality of neoliberal policies is undermining their social and political bases.

In different ways, the socialist parties are being transformed into bourgeois parties. Are they therefore become just like other bourgeois parties? Not quite; the functioning of alternation in government requires the socialist parties to mark out their difference with other bourgeois parties. They remain linked, by their historical origin, to the workers’ movement, but of that there are no longer any more than traces that are fading in the memory of activists. This nevertheless creates contradictions and oppositions within these parties. They can maintain a certain relationship with the “people of the left”, although it is increasingly distended. This qualitative change, if it was completed, would transform these parties into US-style democratic parties.

We are, perhaps, on the eve of events that would crystallize a qualitative leap in the process (for one of the authors of this article, this transformation has already, in its essentials, been accomplished in the French case).

The result of the regional elections is sufficient for Hollande and Valls to persist on their chosen path: to pursue neoliberal policies, then move to the construction of a new party that would resemble US-style democrats. Manuel Valls in particular, but also more and more sectors of the PS, are posing the question of a renovation-refounding of the PS or of a new political formation that would it possible to break the remaining links with the history of social democracy.

The new international situation, the duration of the neoliberal economic depression, the integration into the policies of the European Union, the march towards an authoritarian regime: all of this is pushing towards an internal evolution of the Socialist Party, towards changes that are progressively

draining the life from it... It nevertheless remains the case that for Valls, Macron and others, the PS is still not sufficiently on the right: it is necessary to accelerate the pace. Will there be resistance? On what scale? In what forms?... The British surprise indicates that even where we were not expecting it, there are unpredictable reactions. This does not call into question the domination of "Blairism" in the Labour Party, particularly in its parliamentary representation, but it indicates that changes in the political landscape are also having repercussions in formations like Labour.

Much will depend on the next presidential election, but in any case the question of a refounding-new formation will be posed in relation to the choice of the option of a policy of national unity.

Radical left: the failure. How to rebuild

For the radical left, these elections were a profound failure: the NPA was unable to present candidates. Lutte Ouvrière got a little over 1 per cent. The Left Front got under 5 per cent, less than half the result of Mélenchon in the 2012 presidential election. This is the end of a political cycle.

Since 1995, there have been three important politico electoral experiences – and we insist on the electoral form of these experiences. In 1995 with Laguiller and Lutte Ouvrière; in 2002 and 2007 with the LCR – then the NPA – and Olivier Besancenot; and in 2010-2012, with the Left Front and Jean Luc Mélenchon, who received in 2012 more than 4.5 million votes. These three experiences have shown the potential for political reorganization on the left of the left, but also its limitations and its failure. This also explains the space left for the National Front. In any case, there has not been, beyond the political and historical differences between each experience, the emergence of political parties like Syriza, Podemos or the Portuguese Left Bloc.

The deterioration of the relationship of forces to the detriment of struggles and social movements over recent years has affected all the organizations of the radical left. The Left Front, which with its specific features has dominated in recent years the political space to the left of the left, has been paralyzed by its internal contradictions. The hesitations between the affirmation of the need for political opposition, often made by Mélenchon, and the alliances of the PCF with the PS or those of Mélenchon's Left Party with the Greens have blurred its message and its policies. The recent decision to make lists for the second round of the regional elections with the Socialist Party certainly does not contribute to independence from a ruling party that embodies neoliberal austerity and the state of emergency!

Independence with regard to the PS and the government remains a key issue. Many people on the left recognize this. We must rebuild. We need something new. It cannot come only from the existing organizations. We must go beyond them. This new force should not however become a satellite of the PS! It cannot emerge if the radical left appears to be linked to the governmental left.

In a situation of retreat, like the one we are living through, there are nevertheless struggles of resistance – economic, anti-racist, ecological, feminist, local and sectoral struggles – and those against the state of emergency.

These movements are not enough to relaunch a broad recomposition on the left of the left. To reach this objective, there will have to be new social and political founding events of historic dimensions, but concrete integration into these "real movements" is the condition *sine qua non* for being able to move forward today.

The political recomposition to which we aspire is prepared by participating in daily struggles, class struggles and struggles for emancipation in all their forms.

Thus, the considerable mobilization on the occasion of the COP 21, which was maintained despite the state of emergency, shows that a young generation is posing the problems of changing the system through climate issues and their implications (energy, transport, trade, justice, people's rights...). It will continue. We have to be more closely linked to it, on a more daily basis, we have to engage in dialogue with its main organizers. Similarly we must take part in local experiences, in activist networks and in the building of social or political fronts that bring together activists from different origins, activists who have emerged from these struggles, who are able to begin formulating an alternative to austerity policies, to capitalist productivism. Without forgetting international solidarity, welcoming refugees and migrants, support for victims of humanitarian disasters and for all our comrades who face particularly dangerous situations.

The fight for rights provides a foundation that enables to resist today while preparing the future: workers' rights and demands, women's rights, rights of the oppressed, ecological and social rights, citizens' rights. The struggle against the state of emergency and the constitutional reform represents a key axis. In fact, on its success depends to a great extent the defence of a democratic space, a space of freedom, helping us better to continue all of our actions of resistance. The stakes are high. It is possible to win on this terrain: it is not certain that François Hollande will obtain the necessary 60 per cent majority for the adoption of constitutional amendments in Congress (Parliament and the Senate meeting together) or through a referendum.

To defeat the government on this issue would give a boost to the struggles against austerity, against the FN, for solidarity-based alternatives, feminist and ecosocialist.

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P.S.

* This article was originally written for [Viento Sur](http://www.vientosur.info/spip.php?article10785), "Francia tras las elecciones regionales: ¡Última advertencia!" <http://www.vientosur.info/spip.php?article10785>.

* Original French version online on ESSF.

* Translation IVP. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>

Footnotes

[1] <https://histoireetsociete.wordpress.com/2015/04/04/debats-les-idiot-utiles-du-fn-avec-jacques-ranciere/>

[2] The French for "navy blue" is "bleu marine"