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The New French President: Macron's 'Jupiter' model unlikely to stand test of time

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The new French president's aloof leadership style has put his party on course for a big majority – but may be impossible to maintain. Emmanuel Macron thinks power is best exercised when wrapped in a cloud of mystery.

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PARIS — The French noticed a radical change in Emmanuel Macron when he became president a month ago and they seem to like it.

Exit the easy-going candidate of the campaign trail, enter an imperial and icy leader. The question is whether the honeymoon will last when Macron is tested by the unavoidable political and social crises that will force him down from his throne.

The transformation has been spectacular. Gone is the economy minister who never met an interviewer he didn't like, the presidential candidate who loved a good chat, who was chummy with reporters and went out of his way to hone media-friendly soundbites.

The French head of state has retreated into the Élysée Palace, ordered his aides and ministers into media silence, and tightened presidential communication to the few calibrated messages he thinks opportune. Power, he thinks, is best exercised when wrapped in a cloud of mystery.

This is the "Jupiterian" concept his team developed in the last few months of the presidential campaign to illustrate his vision of the presidency. Jupiter, of course, is the supreme god of Roman mythology, god of the sky, thunder and lightning.

Applied to Macron's actual presidency, this means former friends and crucial campaign aides have been shunted aside, direct access to the president is restricted to a handful of young advisers, and Macron's mobile phone seems to have gone silent [1].

"The French like the Jupiter idea. But they also expect Jupiter to muddy his hands whenever needed"
— Former Macron campaign aide

The president gives marching orders, ministers and bureaucrats are expected to execute. No dissent is tolerated in the ranks, nor are the cozy and self-interested off-the-record chats that long provided fodder for political commentators.

Macron doesn't speak much, and when he does, he doesn't say much. He has mostly been heard in

almost-daily meetings with visiting foreign heads of state. They've come from Guatemala and Senegal, Belgium and Bulgaria, Denmark and Peru and elsewhere to meet the new boy wonder. Sober statements in the Élysée gardens are staged for the media, rarely with time for questions.

The president also travels to make focused speeches — such as one last week to the students of an agricultural vocational high school near Limoges. And he has made clear that when visiting the provinces, he will only answer reporters' questions if they are on the subject of the day. "When I travel on a topic of my choosing, I speak of the topic of my choosing, I won't answer newsy questions," he replied sternly that day when asked about his government's ethical challenges [2].

The French, aides explained, don't want a buddy in the Élysée Palace. They want someone distant, and even mysterious.

But the aloof posture Macron has assumed in the name of restoring dignity to the presidency may not withstand long the shock of political reality in a system where voters expect the head of state also to be the chief of the parliamentary majority.

"The French like the Jupiter idea," a Macron former campaign aide noted. "But they also expect Jupiter to muddy his hands whenever needed."

Supreme authority

The Jupiter theory contends that the president is the supreme authority. He cannot be a micro-manager. The cabinet, under the prime minister, must deal with daily politics. To the president the long-term thinking, as well as domestic and diplomatic strategy. His authority depends on the scarcity of his words. And everyone, from the PM on down to the presidential party's MPs, must just work toward implementing the presidential platform.

The political reality of his first month in office is that Macron, waiting for the election of a parliament [3] that could implement his legislative program, chose to rule through signs and symbols.

It started just a few days after his election. At his first international gathering, Macron withstood Donald Trump's infamous handshake with white-knuckled fortitude [4] and later staged a solitary walk toward the NATO heads of governments that ended with him saluting Angela Merkel and others before shaking Trump's hand again.

Macron has long said that he wanted to restore some dignity to a job that seemed to have lost it with the last two holders, François Hollande and Nicolas Sarkozy.

Just in case anyone had missed the point of it all, Macron then gave an interview (just a few sentences) to *Journal du Dimanche* to underline that the handshake was full of profound, deliberate meaning [5]. An aide later recounted that the new president had watched several Trump handshake moments before attending the NATO meeting.

The remarks to *Journal du Dimanche* to this day remain President Macron's only media interview.

"Note how he has physically changed, as if he thought that to be a real president he needed to rework his own face," the former aide noted.

New look

The French discovered Macron's new look — short hair, clenched jaw, no smile, eyes solemnly lost in some distant meditation — on the very day he was inaugurated as president in a traditional ceremony at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. A few minutes before, Macron had been driven up the Champs Elysées in a Renault-built tactical vehicle, while his media team texted reporters to make sure they understood this was to “illustrate his support for the military.”

For Macron, the posture was a way to distance himself from his predecessor and former boss François Hollande, who had promised to be a “normal president” only to discover that the French didn't like the idea. It was also a way to affirm his historical filiation with presidents such as Charles de Gaulle in the 1960s and François Mitterrand in the 1980s, masters at both distance and mystery.

Macron has long said that he wanted to restore some dignity to a job that seemed to have lost it with the last two holders, Hollande and Nicolas Sarkozy. While the former prided himself on his normalcy, the latter was accused of being a “hyper-president,” obsessed with saturating the media landscape every single day.

At some point, Macron will have to govern in acts, instead of gestures and cryptic pronouncements.

The 39-year old Macron also saw the Jupiter concept as functional: It was meant to help him signal early on that his young age wouldn't be an obstacle to exercising all the powers of the presidency.

The question is whether he has found the appropriate stance. “Every French president in modern times has struggled with the question of what distance they must keep with the people,” said Harold Hauzy, a PR adviser who served as former prime minister Manuel Valls' communications guru. “And experience shows it's hard to find the right position. Some go for too distant, others for too close.”

It has long been a cliché for historians and commentators to call the Fifth Republic, founded by de Gaulle with a new constitution in 1958, a “republican monarchy.” The president is tasked with both incarnating the idea of a nation, and leading a political majority — a more down-to-earth endeavor.

Now that Macron's own party, La République En Marche (LRM), is on track to obtain about 70 percent of the National Assembly's MPs, one big question is whether his idea of the presidency, coupled with his domination of parliament, amounts to too much concentration of power.

Within the political system, the tiny parliamentary opposition will struggle to make itself heard. But outside, the Macron team's overt defiance of the media could mean it can't count for long on the generally favorable coverage it enjoyed during the presidential campaign.

Then, at some point, Macron will have to govern in acts, instead of gestures and cryptic pronouncements.

'King and employee'

Another cliché about French institutions is that the prime minister is only there to serve as a “fuse” for the president — blowing if need be in times of crisis, to be replaced as part of a major cabinet reshuffle. But there are times when even Jupiter himself needs to deal with earthly things.

That's when the pose of the distant, cold ruler would stop being sustainable.

“In the French democracy, the elected president is both the king and our employee, after all. I’m curious to see how he will deal with that contradiction, but we should find out shortly,” a top government adviser said.

Among the faithful, there is no doubt that the new Jupiter will not hesitate to dirty his hands when the moment comes.

“The monarch thing can quickly turn against you” — Former Socialist minister in François Hollande’s government

“I’ve seen him throughout the campaign and this is a man who will come to help us to push through the reforms if we need him,” said Olivia Grégoire, an LRM candidate who looks the strong favorite to win a seat in the 15th arrondissement of Paris in the second round of the parliamentary election on Sunday.

Others aren’t so sure. “The man is pure, cold resolve,” explained a former Macron adviser at the economy ministry. “If he has decided that he is Jupiter, he will govern from above through surrogates like the PM and cabinet ministers — delegating and firing if he’s not happy with results.”

In the longer term, there is also the question of whether the French will grow tired of their new president’s royal demeanor.

“The monarch thing can quickly turn against you,” noted a former Socialist minister in Hollande’s government. “Mitterrand used it with great effect against [former President Valéry] Giscard d’Estaing in 1981. In times of trouble, voters resent the haughty distance, which they take for indifference.”

However, judging by the expected landslide his party will win in the parliamentary election on Sunday, voter resentment is not a problem that sits high on Macron’s list of worries.

PIERRE BRIANÇON

P.S.

* POLITICO.6/16/17, 4:06 AM CET Updated 6/16/17, 6:28 PM CET:

<http://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-jupiter-model-unlikely-to-stand-test-of-time-leadership-parliamentary-majority/>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.politico.eu/article/trump-gave-macron-private-cell-phone-number-report/>

[2] Available on ESSF (article 41338), [France: Ethics questions raise tensions in Macron government.](#)

[3] <http://www.politico.eu/article/how-to-watch-the-french-parliamentary-election-like-a-pro/>

[4] <http://www.politico.eu/article/macron-says-long-trump-handshake-not-innocent/>

[5] <http://www.lejdd.fr/politique/macron-au-jdd-ma-poignee-de-main-avec-trump-ce-nest-pas-innocent-3343352>