

# Pensions crisis (France): The beginning of the end for Macron's presidency?

Saturday 18 March 2023, by [RAMDANI Ilyes](#) (Date first published: 16 March 2023).

**The French government on Thursday announced it will use an article of the constitution that allows it to adopt as legislation its proposed and hotly contested reform of the pensions system without a vote in Parliament. In this op-ed analysis of the move, Mediapart political correspondent Ilyes Ramdani argues that it is not only the latest manifestation of President Emmanuel Macron's top-down exercise of power, but it may also represent one too many, opening up a profound crisis into which his second and final term in office is now plunged.**

French prime minister Élisabeth Borne on Thursday announced that her government, which has no absolute majority in the National Assembly, the most powerful of Parliament's two houses, is to use Article 49-3 of the constitution which allows it to force through the chamber, without a vote, its hotly contested draft legislation to reform the pension system. In doing so, France has been plunged into a political, social and institutional crisis.

After having ignored for two months the social movement of protest against the bill, one of historic proportions, and insisting that the legitimacy of the proposed legislation would lie with Parliament, Emmanuel Macron and his camp on Thursday faced the reality that the reform has no majority support in the National Assembly either. "The uncertainty hangs on just a few votes," said Borne, addressing the chamber on Thursday afternoon. "We cannot chance a bet on the future of our pensions."

*Élisabeth Borne (left and addressing the National Assembly) and Emmanuel Macron are plunged into a deepening crisis. © Photo illustration Sébastien Calvet / Mediapart avec AFP*

The French prime minister had attempted to avoid using of the special powers of the 49-3 article of the constitution, a legal last resort but which represents a snub to the democratic process. "I don't envisage the hypothesis of a 49-3," she told French TV channel France 2 in early February, while government spokesman Olivier Véran has repeatedly declared that it did not want to use the article. Even on Thursday morning, Borne was in fact trying to convince President Emmanuel Macron to proceed with a vote in Parliament despite the uncertainty of the result.

For what had appeared until recent days a successful alliance negotiated with the conservative Les Républicains (LR) party to gain a majority in favour of the bill, that support had become contested by a number of LR Members of Parliament (MPs) who, together with some rebels among Macron's ruling centre-right Renaissance party, which has no absolute majority in the National Assembly, placed the outcome of a vote on a knife-edge.

Well aware of the shockwave that would result from using the 49-3, Macron played for time,

mobilising his camp to throw all their energy into winning over the potentially missing votes. On Wednesday evening and Thursday morning, he held urgent talks at the Élysée Palace with members of government and its political allies. Another meeting was held at Thursday midday. But at 2.45pm, just 15 minutes before the session for the vote in the National Assembly was due to commence, the president made the decision to proceed with the 49-3 article and called together a special meeting with government ministers to approve and enact the measure.

*Above: Prime Minister Élisabeth Borne addresses the National Assembly to announce the use of article 49-3. © Twitter / LCP*

For Élisabeth Borne, the events amount to a disavowal. She had been publicly on the frontline of the efforts to secure parliamentary approval of Macron's reform, obtaining agreement from him for certain amendments to be made to the original texts and timetable of the proposed legislation, which she argued were necessary to get it past the vote. But she now becomes the emblem of the failure to do so, and it is difficult to see how she can remain in office.

### **Emmanuel Macron's responsibility**

However, this political defeat for the government is far from being down to Borne alone. While he has cleverly hidden behind her over the last two months of rolling demonstrations against the reform, Macron is principally responsible for the debacle.

When the scandal broke in 2018 over [the rogue practices of his disgraced security aid](#) and protégé Alexandre Benalla, Macron, addressing a group of his party's MPs, declared: "If they're looking for a person responsible tell them: you have him before you. Let them come and get him!"

What would he say today? The events of this Thursday illustrate the incompetence of his exercise of power, the inconsequence of his conduct, the perverseness of his governance. In his desire to lengthen the age of retirement on full pension rights, from 62 to 64 (and originally to 65), the French president has antagonized what democracy counts as actors of vitality, from trades unions to Parliament, and a section of the population mobilised against the reform and which have turned out by the several million in nationwide protest marches.

For him, they are but episodes along his political path. He thought he could climb over it all, bypass or dismiss whatever he came up against. The reality of democracy has finally caught up with him and his allies, just as it did in June last year. At the time, after his deliberate anaesthetising of the presidential and subsequent legislative election campaigns, Macron offered the far-right historic electoral gains, while also losing the absolute majority of his party in parliament.

Alone against almost all, the president could – still this Thursday – have emerged from the crisis with his head held high: he could have withdrawn his reform, or call a referendum, or take measure of the parliamentary debacle and dissolve the National Assembly. But instead, he has preferred to force his way through, yet one more time.

But it would be a mistake to forget that, while the government has been significantly damaged by Thursday's events, the pensions reform is just a step away from being adopted in legislation. It is only if a motion of no-confidence in the government is approved – improbable at the time of writing but, after all, probabilities are variable amid a crisis of the sort – that the reform can be blocked.

It is one more snub to parliamentary democracy, and an episode that considerably weakens it. By using as its vehicle for the reform an envelope of draft legislation for modifying the financing of the

social welfare system, the government deliberately limited the time given to pensions in the parliamentary debates. To this it added its powers to block voting in the Senate, the upper house, and now forces the adoption of the pension system reform. The executive has used every power that the constitution allows it, from article 47-1, to articles 44-3 and 49-3, to climb over Parliament.

Persuaded that he has right on his side, Macron had thought he could decide against the will of all others. Far from his re-election campaign promises of political “reinvention” and a “new method”, he has centralised decision-making and choice over the rhythm of a reform that has hit a brick wall. Just a quarter of an hour before Élisabeth Borne began her address to Parliament on Thursday, most of the members of government and the senior members of his political camp were unaware of Macron’s decision.

His strategy that combines bulldozing and scorched earth policies may be applauded by some, namely the financial markets, economic forces, the wealthiest in the country and a section of the retired (and even then...), but that does not keep a democracy alive, nor preserve the unity of a society already fractured in part.

The broad alliance of trades unions against the reform announced on Thursday their intention of continuing and widening the mobilisation of the past two months. On the ground, prefects and local politicians have warned of the dangers of the rising anger at the government’s handling of the reform and voice concern that the outcome in Parliament on Thursday may be the last straw. Meanwhile, the far-right is already rubbing its hands in glee at the fire that has been lit by the arsonist inside the Élysée Palace.

After all that has happened, what remains for Macron’s second five-year term in office? His prime minister is discredited, and his government is paralyzed. Inside the National Assembly, not only does his party not have an absolute majority but it would also have every difficulty in gaining one. Beyond the political sphere, the rupturing of relations with the trade unions appears now so profound that it bodes the worst for social dialogue.

The emperor has no clothes, other than the veil of legitimacy leant by his election by default in face of the danger represented by the far-right. But the crisis is not about him alone, for it is leading the whole country into a worrying fog that is menacing its democracy.

**ILYES RAMDANI**

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**P.S.**

- MEDIAPART. MARCH 16, 2023:  
<https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/160323/beginning-end-macron-s-presidency>
- The original French version of this op-ed article can be found [here](#).
- English version by Graham Tearse.

*Ilyes Ramdani’s articles on Mediapart:*  
<https://www.mediapart.fr/biographie/ilyes-ramdani-0>

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