

France in the grip of multiple crisis

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This article was written for the South African magazine *Amandla!* It had to be very brief in order to respect the format of the publication. A much more developed contribution is in preparation, with the aim of addressing an international readership. The version below includes data and developments that were 'skipped' in the English version when the *Amandla!* editorial team had to make the final cuts.

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On 9 June, Emmanuelle Macron decided on the surprise dissolution of the National Assembly (Parliament), at a time when the Rassemblement National (National Rally, RN) had the wind in its sails. Three weeks later, the ballot box verdict was clear: the parties in the presidential bloc were wiped out, with the RN able to hope for an absolute majority of seats in Parliament, or at least a strong relative majority. These hopes were dashed. At the end of the second round, his group found itself in third place, behind those of the Nouveau Front Populaire (New Popular Front, NFP) and the presidential party [1].

The electorate wanted neither Macronism nor an RN in the corridors of power. Today, they have both, thanks to Macron. Macron took eight weeks to choose a Prime Minister, Michel Barnier, a member of a party, Les Républicains (LR), which only received 5% of the vote in the elections. He negotiated his appointment with Marine Le Pen, leader of the RN, to ensure that the latter would not table a motion of censure against him from the outset. Madame agreed... with reservations. Now the choice of Prime Minister depends on the goodwill of the far right!



Marine Le Pen, leader of the far-right Rassemblement Nationale. Now, the choice of a Prime Minister depends on the goodwill of the far right!

Governmental and parliamentary crisis

The new parliament (577 deputies) is even more fragmented than its predecessor. Following a ballot

that was particularly representative for a legislative election in France (66.7%).

- **The New Popular Front (NFP)** came out on top, with a very relative majority (182 seats, 193 with the various other left MPs). It is represented by four parties: the *Ecologistes*, *La France insoumise* (Unbowed France, LFI), the *Parti communiste* (French CP, PCF) and the *Parti socialiste* (Socialist Party, PS), but was supported by a vast mobilisation of trade unions and associations. Institutional practice dictates that the President should first ask the leading group to put forward a candidate for the post of Prime Minister, in this case Lucie Castets, a senior civil servant committed to the fight against tax evasion and the defence of public services. Emmanuel Macron could very well have respected this practice, banking on the fact that an NFP government would be toppled by a motion of censure. Instead, he chose to send a political message: the neoliberal counter-reforms he has implemented cannot be called into question - which is what the NFP was preparing to do.

- **The 'presidential camp'** is credited with 168 seats. It previously had 250. The fall would have been much more drastic had the social and political left not allowed the election of many Macronists to block the RN. The so-called 'presidential majority' has suffered an electoral disaster. With the next presidential election on the horizon, disunity and rival ambitions are becoming the rule (Macron cannot run for a third term).

- The former governing party of the traditional right, the **Républicains** group is now only the fifth largest component of Parliament (43 seats, 66 with their allies). It has split and joined forces with the RN. It did not join the 'Republican Front' during the legislative elections. Now that the Prime Minister chosen by Macron (and tolerated by the RN) belongs to his party, they are no less demanding the full application of his program! Michel Barnier will nonetheless have to come to terms with Macron and assert a degree of independence from the LR.

- With 143 seats, the **Rassemblement National's** results were mixed. Although the result is far from what it could have hoped for, it has almost doubled its number of MPs - and therefore its financial capacity and the various rights granted to parliamentary groups.

No stable majority is in sight, and new general elections cannot be held before June 2025.

Democratic crisis, on the way to a new authoritarianism

The Constitution of the Fifth Republic is one of the most undemocratic in Western Europe, but that is not enough for Macron or the proponents of the neoliberal order. The previous (minority) government had already misused and abused an article of the Constitution (the 49.3) that allows a law to be passed without a vote. The pension reform has become a typical example of a widespread denial of democracy. It was rejected by 90% of working people, by all the unions, by Parliament - millions of people took to the streets. The government was inflexible, hoping to crush any hint of resistance.

The denial of democracy has become natural, a 'given', for a whole 'social elite' whose mission is to ensure the direct domination of Capital over society by completing the dismantling of the social gains won in the aftermath of the Second World War and after May 68; by transferring to the private sector everything that is profitable and leaving to the public sector everything that is not; by marginalising the 'intermediary bodies' (trade unions, etc.), places of counter-power - and more.

Numerous articles of the law relating to the state of emergency have been incorporated into the current legal apparatus. The surveillance society is one of the most developed in Western Europe. The powers of the special services have been strengthened. The police are militarised. The army is

playing a growing role throughout the country. A secret centre of governance has been set up, the National Defence and Security Council (whose deliberations are subject to defence secrecy). Environmental movements and solidarity with Palestine are criminalised. The factory of the dominant ideology is extending its hold over the media and the polling industry. Civil, social and environmental rights are being restricted. A civil war preventive mechanism is being put in place.

The crisis of the regime

The Constitution of the Fifth Republic was designed to protect power from any social or political hazard. It provides the matrix for the hyper-presidentialism driven by Emmanuel Macron. In so doing, he has broken the balance that has allowed this regime to last: between the presidency and parliament, between the state and capital, between repression and reform, and so on. It used to be that if millions of people demonstrated, parliament, even a Gaullist one, would give up something. That is no longer the case. The current offensive against rights is intended to be merciless and thus is losing all legitimacy. The regime is also destabilised by international upheavals (globalisation and its crisis, the geopolitics of the great powers): a minor imperialist like France no longer has the means to make its claims.

The very nature of the political regime is changing (a question that deserves to be discussed in greater depth). Macron has embarked on what many analysts call a 'conservative revolution', but in a chaotic way. The RN is part of the same dynamic: the 'confrontation-entente' duo we are witnessing is not fortuitous.

A new opportunity on the left?

The formation of the New Popular Front and the unexpected success of its election campaign have given new hope. We are well aware that this is only a reprieve. The rise of the RN continues and the momentum of popular mobilisations remains fragile, but the time gained can be put to good use. The momentum generated by the NFP was 'suspended' by the school holidays and the Olympic Games. The autumn season began with demonstrations in France on 7 September against Barnier's appointment (around 30,000 in Paris, mainly young people, who were very committed). More are planned.

The Macronists have done their utmost to poach left-wing MPs, without success. The unity between the four main parties representing the NFP has been maintained, although not without crises and outbursts that had a demoralising impact on the activists carrying the process forward at grassroots level in June. It happened again in September, with a very violent polemic between François Ruffin, who left the LFI, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's staff. We could do without such posturing. Unity is a battle, but the way in which it is fought matters. The question is not anecdotal.

The present conditions are favourable to maintaining the unity of the NFP. After Barnier's appointment, in agreement with the Rassemblement National, even the most right-wing wing of the PS cannot envisage participating in the government.

The initial success of the NFP was due in particular to four conditions: the state of emergency provoked by the threat of the RN, the history of left-wing unity which provided a reference matrix (the NUPES) [2], the mobilisation of trade unions and associations which exerted decisive pressure in favour of political unity, and the fact that the distribution of electoral constituencies was essentially a given since there was dissolution: quite logically, outgoing MPs had to be allowed to

complete their term of office.

The political arc included in the NFP was broader than the parties 'in charge'. All the non-sectarian components of the far left were able to get involved and campaign. On the right, former French President François Hollande invited himself into the elections, getting himself elected on behalf of the NFP.

In the recent past, the PS, the PCF and the Ecologistes have suffered resounding electoral failures. Anne Hidalgo, the mayor of Paris, took 1.77% of the vote in the 2022 presidential election under the PS banner! This consolidated the LFI's hegemony on the left. Since then, its allies have regained their colours, displaying a 'left' profile. On the other hand, the LFI's colours were tarnished when Jean-Luc Mélenchon expelled a number of outgoing MPs who had shown too much independence. Four of them maintained their candidacy and three were re-elected under the NFP banner in the face of competition from Mélenchonist candidates. The purge was very badly received in left-wing activist circles and the defeat of three out of four of his close allies sounded a warning to Mélenchon.

A number of well-known LFI MPs have broken ranks, denouncing the lack of democracy within the LFI, which continues to face internal criticism over the matter. The history of this formation is very complex. It has managed to win an electoral base in working-class neighbourhoods and suburbs by getting abstainers (often Muslims) to vote. It has consistently projected a program for breaking with the neo-liberal order (while favouring the geopolitics of states at international level). It has been constructed as an electoral machine whose permanent horizon is the presidential election, a 'gaseous' movement with no formal membership status and no internal operating rules, even if there are structures that allow personalities to be associated with its programmatic development.

A limit may have been reached. Can the LFI expand its territorial coverage without enriching its political discourse and organisational structure? Can it advocate democracy in society, but not implement it within its own movement? Can it speak out against violence against women, but cover it up too easily internally? Can it announce the Sixth Republic, while Mélenchon plays to the presidential posture of the Fifth Republic? What becomes of the LFI obviously concerns all the components of the left.

What becomes of the NFP will be decided in the coming weeks. Will the proliferation of local committees make it possible to integrate all the vital forces available today into its dynamic?

A new generation of young people is coming on to the scene, bringing with them a sense of solidarity (in defence of Palestinians, migrants and racialised people). Social insecurity and the impact of the climate-ecological crisis are providing fertile ground for a wide range of resistance movements. Everything must be done to encourage them to converge. But for that to happen, we need to break with the left's presidential tropism. A real cultural revolution.

Pierre Rousset

Footnotes

[1] The Members of the National Assembly are elected through a two-round direct voting system in 577 electoral districts, the circonscriptions or constituencies. In the first round, all candidates compete against one another. If no candidate wins a majority of the votes, in the second round,

voters choose between the two (sometimes three) remaining candidates.

[2] La Nouvelle Union populaire écologique et sociale (The New People's Ecological and Social Union, NUPES) was formed in the 2022 general election.