# Crises in France

written by Pierre Rousset | September 29, 2024

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!

On 9 June, Emmanuelle Macron unexpectedly decided to dissolve the National Assembly, just as the Rassemblement Nationale (far-right National Rally party of Marine Le Pen) was gaining momentum. Three weeks later, the results of the first round of voting were unequivocal: the parties of the presidential bloc were crushed, and in the second round the National Rally could hope to win an absolute majority of seats in Parliament, or at least be the largest party. (The French electoral system uses two rounds of voting. If no candidate gets an absolute majority in the first round, the names of the top candidates go to a second round. The one with the most votes in the second round wins).

These hopes were dashed. After the second round, the far right ended up in third place, behind the Nouveau Front populaire (the New People's Front formed by parties of the broad Left) and the presidential party.

The electorate wanted neither Macronism nor the National Rally in the corridors of power. Today, thanks to Macron, it has both. It took him eight weeks to choose a prime minister: Michel Barnier, a member of Les Républicains party, which won only 5% of the vote. He had previously negotiated this appointment with Marine Le Pen, to ensure that she would not immediately table a vote of no confidence against him. Madame agreed… conditionally.

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### Government and parliamentary crisis

The new parliament (577 MPs) is even more fragmented than the previous one:

**The New People's Front (NFP)** came first, by a slim margin, with approximately 193 seats. It includes four main parties: the Greens, La France Insoumise (LFI), the Communist Party (PCF), and the Socialist Party (PS), and allies. But it was also supported by a vast mobilisation of trade unions and associations. By convention, the president first asks the largest group to present a candidate for Prime Minister. Macron could easily have respected this, betting that an NFP government would be

brought down by a vote of no confidence. But he preferred instead to send a political message: the NFP's questioning of Macron's neoliberal measures was out of the question.

**The 'presidential camp'** got 168 seats, down from its previous 250. This "presidential majority" suffered an electoral disaster. With the next presidential election on the horizon, disunity and rival ambitions are becoming the norm (Macron cannot stand for a third term).

**Les Républicains**, the former governing party of the traditional right, is now only the fifth largest party (43 seats). Some members left to the National Rally. Now that the prime minister, chosen by Macron (and tolerated by the National Rally), belongs to their party, they are demanding full implementation of their programme! But Michel Barnier, as prime minister, will have to work with Macron's party and assert some independence from Les Républicains.

**The National Rally**, with 143 seats, had a mixed result. Although far from what it had hoped, it almost doubled its number of MPs. This doubles its financial resources, as well as various parliamentary privileges.

No stable majority is in sight; new legislative elections cannot be held before June 2025.

## Democratic crisis: marching towards a new authoritarianism

The constitution of the Fifth Republic is one of the most undemocratic in Western Europe. But this is not enough for Macron and the proponents of neoliberalism. The previous (minority) government had already distorted and abused an article of the Constitution (49.3) which allows a law to be passed without a vote, to legislate pension reform. This was rejected by 90% of active workers, by all unions, and by parliament. Millions of people took to the streets to oppose it. But the government remained inflexible, hoping to crush the will to resist.

This denial of democracy has become natural, a given, for a whole 'social elite' that has taken it upon itself to ensure the direct domination of capital over society. It is dismantling the social gains achieved in the aftermath of World War II and after May 1968. It is transferring all profitable activities to the private sector, while leaving the unprofitable ones to the public sector. And it is marginalising "intermediary bodies" (trade unions…), sites of counter-power—and more.

France's surveillance society is one of the most developed in Western Europe. The powers of the security services have been reinforced. The police are militarised. The army is playing an increasing role inside the country. A shadowy centre of governance has been established. The environmental movement has been criminalised. The influence of dominant ideology is growing. Civil, social, and environmental rights are being curtailed. A preventive civil war apparatus is being put in place.

## The regime crisis

The constitution was designed to protect those in power from any social or political disruption. It provides the framework for the hyper-presidential system driven by Emmanuel Macron. In the process, he is breaking the balance that has allowed this regime to endure: between the presidency and parliament, between the state and capital, between repression and reform… Convention dictated that, if millions of people protested, parliament, even a Gaullist one, would give something in return. That understanding is now over.

We are changing regimes. Macron has embarked on what many analysts call a “conservative revolution”, but in a chaotic manner. The National Rally fits into the same dynamic: the “confrontation-cooperation” combination we are witnessing is not accidental.

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**A new opportunity for the Left?**

The formation of the NFP, and the unexpected success of its electoral campaign, have rekindled hope. But we know that this is only a reprieve. The rise of the National Rally continues, and the dynamic of popular mobilisation remains fragile, but the time gained can be put to good use. After the summer holidays and the Olympic Games, the autumn began with demonstrations in France, on 7 September, against Barnier’s appointment (around 30,000 in Paris, mostly young militants). More are expected.

The unity in the NFP has been maintained, though not without crises and disputes that demoralised grassroots activists in June and again in September, with a violent polemic between François Ruffin, who left the LFI, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s staff. Such posturing is unwelcome. Unity is a struggle, but how it is pursued matters.

The initial success of the NFP was due, in part, to four factors: the state of emergency caused by the National Rally threat; the Left’s history of unity; decisive pressure from mobilisation of trade unions and popular organisations in favour of political unity; and the fact that the dissolution of parliament meant that there was little contestation over constituencies.

The political spectrum in the NFP was broad.  All non-sectarian components of the far Left were able to join and campaign. On the right flank, former President François Hollande invited himself into the elections, and was elected under the NFP banner.

The Socialist Party, the Communist Party, and the Greens had all suffered resounding electoral defeats, although they have regained some momentum by displaying a ‘left’ profile. Conversely, LFI’s image was tarnished when its leader, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, excluded several outgoing MPs who had shown too much independence. Despite this, five of them were re-elected under the NFP banner, against Mélenchonist candidates. The purge was deeply resented in left-wing activist circles, and the defeat sounded a warning for Mélenchon.

Several well-known LFI MPs have denounced the lack of democracy in LFI, which continues to face internal criticism on this issue. The movement has managed to build an electoral base in popular neighbourhoods and suburbs by bringing abstentionists (often Muslims) to the polls. It has consistently advocated a programme of breaking with the neoliberal order (while prioritising state geopolitics internationally). It has been built as an electoral machine, with the presidential election as its permanent horizon. It is a 'fluid' movement, without formal membership lists or internal rules.

A limit may have been reached. Can LFI expand its territorial base without enriching its political discourse and organisational framework? Can it advocate democracy in society while failing to implement it within itself ? Can it oppose violence against women, but too easily cover it up internally? What happens to LFI is of concern to all components of the Left.

The current conditions favour the unity of the NFP. This will be determined in the coming weeks. Will the proliferation of local committees allow it to integrate all the available grassroots forces?

A new generation of young people is stepping onto the scene, bringing with them commitments to solidarity (with Palestinians, migrants, and people facing racism). Social precariousness and the impact of the climate-ecological crisis provide fertile ground for multiple forms of resistance. Everything must be done to encourage their convergence. But to achieve this, the Left must break with its presidential obsession. A real cultural revolution is needed.

This article is re-printed from Amandla.