

Fractured verdict reveals polarised French society

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By Mohan Kumar

France may be headed for an unstable period in its political history. It will have profound ramifications in the EU and beyond

It is a matter of political irony that the current imbroglio in France was triggered by President Emmanuel Macron, who called for snap legislative elections. When asked what made him do it, Macron responded by saying he wanted to seek “clarification” from the electorate following the heavy defeat his party suffered in the European elections. Well, Macron has now obtained the clarification he so desperately sought: France remains a bitterly divided nation between three blocs i.e. the Left parties constituting the New Popular Front, Macron’s centrist and other parties, and Marine Le Pen’s National Rally. None of the three blocs have anywhere close to an absolute majority.



Participants wave French national tricolors during an election night rally following the first results of the second round of France's legislative election at Place de la République in Paris on July 7, 2024. (Photo by Emmanuel Dunand / AFP) (AFP)

Predictably, French voters have returned a fractured verdict in the legislative elections held on June 30 and July 7 resulting in a hung parliament. But the real surprise was that the New Popular Front came first in terms of votes secured in the second and final round of legislative elections. The far-Right National Rally, expected to come first, finished third because of a monumental effort by the rest of the political parties ganging up against it in the form of a Republican Front. In practice, this meant that well over 200 candidates belonging to the far-Left and centre-Right parties withdrew from the race so that they did not split the votes.

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Le Pen and her party will certainly feel cheated, but her ultimate prize remains the presidential elections due in three years when she hopes to make a bid for Macron's position as President of the French Republic. Macron is now left with two options: One, he could call on the largest grouping in parliament i.e. the New Popular Front (from the Left) to form a coalition government. If that fails, he could appoint a technocratic government to tide over a period of one year after which fresh legislative elections can be called again. Either way, France enters an extremely unstable period in its political history.

The New Popular Front's agenda is quite radical. It talks of reducing the retirement age, increasing minimum wages, reintroducing wealth tax and increasing corporate tax. France's budget deficit and public debt, already high at 5.5% and 110% of Gross Domestic Product, will increase exponentially, bringing it into direct conflict with Brussels.

The timing of the French elections could not be worse because the geopolitical situation in the world is fraught, to put it mildly. The war in Ukraine rages on, the conflict in Gaza shows no sign of abating and the situation in the East and South China Sea, not to mention the Taiwan Strait, is becoming more alarming by the day. All this against the backdrop of an internally divided America, a disruptive Russia and an assertive China.

As has been pointed out by observers, France is not just any country in Europe. It is the second largest economy in the European Union (EU), but really the first in political terms if you consider its UNSC membership, its nuclear deterrence, and its indispensable role in the European project. So, political uncertainty in France will have profound ramifications in the EU and beyond.

First, the political turbulence in France combined with the travails of the ruling coalition in Germany, makes the EU geopolitically weak. This is supremely ironic, considering that the European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen said in 2019 that she wanted a strong "geopolitical European Commission". That idea is now dead in the water. Along with the possibility, nay probability, of Donald Trump becoming United States president, the EU has never been this divided in recent times. China and Russia cannot but be thrilled.

We are between two world orders. The progress towards a multipolar world order has been uneven and messy. With an EU that is geopolitically weak, this becomes even more messy and difficult. India, which is a strong proponent of a multipolar world, may see its strategic space shrink further because of this. With France and Germany facing internal political turmoil, the famous Franco-German motor will sputter with negative implications for the EU's foreign and security policy. Serious differences between France and Brussels could come to the fore, especially on issues such as budget deficit and public debt. This is particularly true with the tax and spend agenda of the New Popular Front.

Where does all of this leave Macron? Macron has still three years left as president. He has let it be known that he is not resigning as president and will continue till 2027 when his current term ends. The trouble is he has to appoint a prime minister from the coalition of Left parties in which case the arrangement known as cohabitation kicks in. Given the differences between Macron's party manifesto and the one put out by the New Popular Front, it is hard to see how there can be a meeting of minds.

Even at the best of times, France is a difficult country to govern and to reform. With a hung parliament and possible cohabitation, France has clearly entered a period of political limbo.

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