

FRENCH POLITICIANS AND THE ART OF COMPROMISE

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French far right, Rassemblement National, came third in July 7 elections despite having won the first round. The leftist Nouveau Front Populaire won the most seats and Emmanuel Macron's Ensemble ended in a second position. However, without a clear majority, the country is now heading towards a hung parliament. Having stared into the abyss, will French politicians learn the art of compromise? A lot depends on Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the long-time leader of La France Insoumise.

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Few observers of French politics predicted that the hastily assembled left wing alliance *Nouveau Front Populaire* (NFP) would win the biggest share of seats in the new National Assembly and have a chance to lead the new government. Nor did the leaders of the parties which compose it (*La France Insoumise*, the *Parti Socialiste*, *Les Écologistes* – *Europe Écologie Les Verts* and the *Parti Communiste*). However, NFP does not have an outright majority and will have to learn the art of compromise if it wants to overcome a no confidence vote in parliament. Negotiating such alliances is the key to a stable government as the political dynamic moves from the presidential palace to a very fragmented National Assembly for the first time since the founding of the Fifth Republic in 1958. President Emmanuel Macron and other political leaders are in uncharted territory. So are French electors who will not forgive their leaders if they fail to offer policies which can, at the very least, meet some of their needs.

The tactical agreement between the NFP and Macron's centrist coalition to withdraw their candidates in the second round in favour of the best placed runner up to defeat the hard right *Rassemblement National* (RN) reversed the dynamic that had served the latter so well in the first round. Very high turnout also helped to hand Macron's political friends the second large group of deputies, relegating the RN to third position. Still, another factor was at play: millions of voters came to the conclusion that Marine Le Pen is far right, whatever lipstick on a pig routine may convince people who have been following her and Jordan Bardella, whom she had all but anointed prime minister after the first round, may think. The hard right maybe crestfallen and indulging in conspiracy theories to explain its unexpected reversal but its unhappy voters will have to be taken into account by parties which support the next government and whoever becomes prime minister. Left wing parties will have to confront some uncomfortable truths regarding violence and illegal immigration.

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Having stared into the abyss, will French politicians learn the art of compromise which is standard practise in Germany and Italy, the other two economic heavyweights of the European Union? A lot depends on Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the long-time leader of *La France Insoumise*, whose very undemocratic way of running his party have pushed leading figures who dared criticise their leader, such as François Ruffin and Alexis Corbière, to leave. Nor are the leaders of the other parties in the NFP shy of taking Mélenchon to task for his controversial views. He, however, remains adamant that the alliance would implement “its whole programme and only its programme”, by decree if need be. This is cynical coming from a man who is so fond of denouncing president Macron for such practises. Mélenchon is not interested in helping govern France but in setting himself up as the candidate of the Left in the 2027 presidential elections. Such behaviour would destroy any hope of compromise between NFP and the centrist deputies who support Mr Macron. Nor would it go down well with an electorate whose tactical voting in the second round pointed to a preference for compromise over the endless hectoring and insults which have become the daily fare of politics and many media debates in France since 2022.

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The NFP economic programme – which would cost 150bn euros, cannot be implemented as it stands. Going back on Mr Macron’s unpopular decision to lengthen the working age would cost the country an arm and a leg at a time when the European Commission and international notation agencies are both unhappy at France growing foreign indebtedness. The employers’ federation would not welcome a government more inclined to levy taxes on the wealthy and place added pressure on already bloated state finances, but may have to resign themselves, at the very least, to an increase in the basic minimum wage. Freezing prices of basic necessities as suggested in the NFP program is a recipe for disaster. Whatever his political shortcomings, the economic policies pursued by Mr Macron have brought unemployment down significantly and made France far more attractive to foreign investors. The NFP is caught in **the historic dilemma of the Left in France** – it promises revolutionary change only to find that, in government it must compromise with what remains a capitalist system. A centre-left government would be more critical of the policies of Brussels on many issues but, despite Mr Mélenchon and his close allies traditionally very hostile attitude, would be willing to work within the broader European framework. The majority on the Left and the president can find common ground in Brussels. The RN for its part never disguised its desire to emasculate the EU.

Whoever becomes prime minister will be faced with a broader challenge, one which has never been explained to the French electorate. The French state and many of its citizens are living way above their means but as long as they do not acknowledge that awkward fact and prefer to blame the others, many issues cannot be discussed in any realistic way. The RN are rank amateurs in economic affairs, preferring to blame immigrants or Islam for the relative decline of France. But any consideration of the international environment, of the weight of China, India or Brazil is absent from the NFP's discussion of economic affairs. Mr Macron struts the international stage as if he were General De Gaulle. The learning curve is going to be very steep on all fronts for all French politicians. But if they refuse to compromise among themselves and to tell the wider truth of France's lesser standing in the world, French political leaders will fail their country and risk plunging it into chaos. François Ruffin, one of the new generations of Left leaders made clear on Sunday night that his peers, particularly in the NFP had been given "one last chance". The next few weeks and months will show whether the left alliance and centrists – let alone the president, are able to reinvent themselves.