

French Legislative Elections: Part 3, Conclusion

by Nidra Poller



The third and final cycle of the French elections has concluded with a smiley. President Emmanuel Macron did indeed obtain the parliamentary majority he needed and now stands alone in majestic elevation. The Socialist party is ground to dust; the Front National's pretention to be The Opposition amounts to 6 deputies, not even enough to form a parliamentary Group; FN Mayfly ally Nicolas Dupont-Aignan narrowly won re-election as deputy but his party *Debout la France* is flat out; Lider Maximo Jean-Luc Mélenchon's *France Insoumise* is already bellowing promises to take the struggle to the street while sitting pretty in the Assemblée; the Greens are nowhere to be seen; Bayrou's MoDem reaped the harvest of his devotion to candidate Macron before getting pushed aside (more below) ; and *Les Républicains*, having lost more than they should have and less than predicted, are further weakened by an internal

split but remain the only credible Opposition...as things now stand.

Having won the presidency with the lowest score of the 5th République, Emmanuel Macron will govern with a majority of allegiance grasped by the skin of its teeth with an abstention of 57.36%. Still, the smiley punctuates every word and every phase of the new presidency. Some of this can be chalked up to the utter relief of deliverance from François Hollande whose absence shines upon us. After five years of a “normal president” who did a poor imitation of the Scandinavian model, we now have a slim trim elegant youthful *très français* head of state upgraded, in the first month of the presidency, from Bonaparte to Jupiter. What do the citizens want? Told that they were tired of the same old politicians from the same old Right and Left alternating power and getting nowhere fast, they chose, lo and behold, a new face without a party, just a movement, a Right Left and Center hybrid *en marche* on the go. Reminded that voters always give the newly elected president a legislative majority they managed by omission or commission to do just that. Leaving the predicted landslide to slide on its own, voters sat on their convictions and let it happen, though many key races were quite close. *Le peuple de la droite*, the Right wing nation, supposedly furious at being deprived of its rightful victory was diminished by individual lassitude and undermined by a split in the elected LR (Les Républicains) deputies into two distinct parliamentary groups, the “Constructives” and the others. The former are somehow committed to constructive cooperation with the ruling party, leaving the latter holding the Opposition bag. All of this is subject to change when the government starts passing measures.

Washed clean of their sins

Readers will remember that the LR candidate François Fillon, who started out with a huge lead over the other presidential

candidates, was reduced to tatters by an indelible scandal. Accused of paying his wife Penelope a real salary for a fictitious job as his parliamentary assistant, he was further humiliated for accepting the gift of two very expensive bespoke suits from an old friend. This was the beginning of the current rift between elements that remained loyal to Fillon to the bitter end and those that argued for his replacement by Alain Juppé, the rival he had defeated hands down in the LR Primaries. It is not just a question of personalities: Fillon represents conservative values-free enterprise, frugal government spending, increased national sovereignty, and tough security-while Juppé the soft & lite Centrist leans toward compromise on all these issues. Many of his disciples hopped onto the Macron bandwagon. It didn't earn them cabinet posts but they maintain their Macron-friendly stance. Is it true that the charming young François Baroin did not put any starch into the legislative campaign? If so, it would be a reflection of the consensus that François Fillon was not only tainted but also too tough & mean. He scared citizens by telling them their welfare state was going bankrupt, he frightened them by promising to reduce the obese civil service, and he scared them by saying we have to fight Islamic totalitarianism.

The thing about democratic elections is they are over once the votes are counted. Replaying them with what might have been is worse than trying to recover the dropped stitches of an unraveled love story.

However, some questionable financial dealings by personalities in the now victorious camp had to be dealt with before the government reached cruising altitude. Emmanuel Macron's right hand man Richard Ferrand, who served as Minister of Territorial Cohesion in the interim cabinet, was dropped in this week's shuffle. And François Bayrou, short-term Justice Minister charged with drafting the political moralization law, was sent back to his day job as mayor of Pau, while his MoDem

party partners Marielle de Sarnez and Sylvie Goulard were bumped from first class seats as, respectively, European Affairs Minister and Defense Minister, to serve as simple deputies.

Though the suspected financial irregularities that led to the downsizing of Ferrand and the three MoDem cabinet ministers had been amply exposed during the presidential race, they apparently had no sting. They did not jeopardize Macron's campaign, and all of the suspected culprits were duly elected as deputies (except for Bayrou who was not a candidate).

Moralizer-in-chief Bayrou is a one-man show. After giving journalists an offhand lecture on *le mot juste* ("I did not resign...it's just that I will not serve in the newly shuffled cabinet") he went on to claim-convincing no one- that he had already raised the possibility three weeks earlier of an eventual resignation. As for the misuse of EU Parliament salaries, that's easy: faced with a financial crunch, the MoDem hired many of its operatives as EU parliamentary assistants but there was no fictitious employment. Meaning? The employees really did work- for the party, not their Eurodeputies-and let the EU foot the bill. The Front National is accused of the same trick & treat to the tune of 5 million euros. This explains why François Fillon was not worthy of high office whereas François Bayrou was the perfect fellow to draft the Macron government's cornerstone political moralization law.

Richard Ferrand, who directed Macron's campaign and remains one of his closest advisors, is accused of using a mutualist health insurance company as a cash cow for himself, his soon to be ex-wife, his new companion, and his IT engineer son. It is alleged that Ferrand, then director of the Mutuelle de Brest, was instrumental in accepting a bid for a rental property that would house the Mutuelle's clinic. But the successful bidder, who happened to be Ferrand's lady friend, did not acquire the property until after her bid was accepted.

She created a real estate holding firm, let the Mutuelle pay for the costly renovation, and has been collecting rent ever since. When monsieur Ferrand stepped down, he was replaced by a trusted friend. Ex-madame Ferrand was reportedly remunerated for consultant's work, their son for IT services, and Ferrand for numerous missions. A preliminary investigation is underway. It may well conclude, in agreement with Richard Ferrand, that all of this was normal, legal, and moral. No sooner was Ferrand bumped out of the cabinet than the *Marcheurs* unanimously chose him as their whip.

Drinking smoothies on a hot summer day

Was it a glitch? A snitch? Or a proof of integrity? Welcoming the pompous Bayrou with open arms at a crucial moment in the presidential race after Emmanuel Macron, on a visit to Algeria, had accused France of committing "crimes against humanity," giving the overblown MoDem party the biggest boost in its pale career, appointing the warmed over Bayrou Minister of Justice of all things when his party's questionable use of EU Parliament funds was an open secret, and then dropping him from the cabinet like a mismatched sock once *En Marche* had won an absolute majority in the Parliament... without the MoDem votes...is that the brave new politics we were promised? Was it snidely cynical to appoint Richard Ferrand to the interim cabinet and let the voters of the Finistère, home of the Mutuelle de Brest, send him to Parliament? If they see nothing wrong with all that alleged nepotism, then it shouldn't be so hard to moralize political life.

Emmanuel Macron wanted to be president. He is. Wanted to fabricate a party out of a movement and a parliamentary majority out of disparate bundles of neophytes and he did it. As long as he doesn't have to use that power to accomplish any radical transformations of French society, it's just there, like delicious smoothies on a hot summer day. Everyone loved him at the Brussels conference. A few days later he was playing tennis at the facsimile Olympics set up in the center

of Paris to show how much we want the 2024 Games. Journalists admire his mastery of communications. Nothing is left to chance and yet it's all so smooth and natural. The blonde first lady in powder blue visible in the background chatting with her Colombian counterpart, then sexy in black lace holding hands with her husband the President. Macron and Schwarzenegger doing a "make the planet great again" selfie. What could go wrong?

Hot rod on the Champs Elysées

A few days before a floating track was launched on the Seine and Place de l'Etoile was turned over to bicycle races, Adam Dzaziri set out to wreak havoc on les Champs Elysées. After an alert by Tunisian authorities in 2013, French services flagged Dzaziri as a security risk in 2015, assigned him to house arrest in 2016, observed with surprising indifference as he traveled three times to Turkey (notorious crossover point to the ranks of Daesh), granted him gun permits for sports shooting and renewed them in 2016, and waited patiently while he missed three appointments for an interview with law enforcement this summer. Neighbors had been complaining about suspicious activity at the home where Dzaziri lived with his parents, brother, sister-in-law, estranged wife and three children. Weapons and material for explosives were stored in the basement.

Having transmitted to several people his pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State, Dzaziri drove up the Champs Elysées in a car packed with gas canisters, handguns, an automatic Kalashnikov type rifle and 8,000 rounds of ammunition. The idea was to turn the car into a super weapon that would explode, sending shrapnel, flames, fumes, and bullets in all directions. He didn't get past the first step. He crashed into a van full of gendarmes. Yellow smoke poured out of the car. The gendarmes smashed a window, opened the door, pulled the brave jihadi out of the car, extinguished the fire, stripped the inert assailant to make sure he didn't have an explosive

vest. He died of asphyxiation. President Macron, whose government is working on a new improved anti-terrorism bill is said to have remarked that gun permit files should be cross-checked with security risk files, but it was another smoothie, no one got hurt but the stupid jihadist. Family members were detained. And released. The Macron presidency is off to an impeccable start.

Reality check

On the way back from a brief but fruitful meeting with documentary film maker Bo Persson (the masterful *Watching the moon at Night*) I am drawn into conversation by a lovely young couple with an 8 month-old baby boy and a sister-in-law who asks if she can take a picture of me. I'm in a buoyant mood, back in Paris after 2 weeks in the United States, basking in a heat wave, no icy air conditioning beaming on me like a laser weapon. Why not? She snaps the photo, I think I can roughly situate their language. Where are you from? Georgia, the young man replies. His French is excellent. The conversation broadens and deepens.

Georgia. Tbilisi. As if I had been there myself, I knew Tbilisi from translating a fascinating memoir by the late Leon Chertok, the courageous *résistant* and pioneer of hypnoanalysis. He made inroads behind the Iron Curtain with scientific conferences in Tbilisi. And, more recently, I had written about how Russia bit off a chunk of Georgia without disturbing Europe's self-satisfied peace.

Are the Russians leaving you alone now? Not at all, he replied. The Russian mafia is all over the country. They steal, they kidnap people, kill people. We're an island of Christian civilization...trying to defend ourselves...without help...since the fall of Byzantium...

The wages of peace. In 2003, the French badge of honor was opposition to the "invasion" of Iraq. Peace was the precious

achievement of European unity. Peace for decades while Central Europe lay crushed under the Soviet yoke and peace when Putin's Russia munched on Georgia and served itself a piece of Ukraine. And today, when Russia fills the gaps wherever the West fears to stray.

Suddenly the question coalesces in this sweet family, an island of civilization surrounded by barbaric conquest..

Breaking news

After meeting with Ukrainian president Petro Porochenko., Emmanuel Macron declares that France does not recognize the annexation of Crimea.

Ça alors! No smiley on that one.

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