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BULLETIN

Parliamentary Elections in France: Between the Idea of the Fifth and Sixth Republics

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President Emmanuel Macron's party's majority in the National Assembly (NA) is at stake in France's upcoming parliamentary elections. In the background, however, is a growing conviction that the current electoral law does not reflect the real support for the political parties and that parliament does not have sufficient powers to control the government. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the leader of the left-wing coalition NUPES, proposes institutional reform and aspires to take the office of prime minister. The survival of the traditional parties on the political scene—the Republicans and the Socialist Party—is also at stake, especially in the context of the election alliances, particularly on the left.

Following the revision of the constitution in 2000 and the adoption of the 2001 organic law, legislative elections are held shortly after the presidential elections. Two voting rounds are scheduled for 12 and 19 June. The election calendar, combined with the weakened political position of parliament, means that the parliamentary elections in France are treated as second-order elections aimed at confirming or strengthening the mandate of the newly elected president. This is reflected in forecasts of turnout, which declined over the years, reaching a record low of 48.7% in the first round in 2017.

Context of the Elections. Following Macron's re-election, his and his party's goal is to retain the majority in the NA. This gives the election campaign a different dynamic than in 2017. The debate is dominated by criticism of the president's balance sheet regarding pension reform, healthcare, climate policy, and the rising cost of living. The opposition bases its activity on emphasising the ambition to create a strong contender in the NA to the presidential coalition or even to force cohabitation again. The political parties will try to create a credible alternative to Macron's policy, also within the framework of the future composition of the NA, bearing in mind the president's term limit (Macron will hold office until 2027). The election campaign is accompanied by a re-composition of the left, an unprecedented increase in support for groups representing extreme views, and democratic and institutional crises. The June vote may reinforce the changes taking place on the political scene and the social polarisation around three main forces—the extreme left, the centre, and the far right—which in the long run is beneficial for the presidential camp. Less party dispersion and broad alliances translates into fewer candidates, for example, in 2017 there were 7,882 registered candidates, while this year there are only 6293. This may favour the united left in particular.

An important element of the campaign is the appointment by Macron of a new government headed by the former labour minister, Élisabeth Borne. Postulates of equality found expression in the composition of the government, half of which are women. In line with voters' expectations, Borne announced that one of the first bills considered in the new NA would concern purchasing power, namely lowering the costs of energy, food, and transport. Education, health, and ecology are also among the priorities of the new government. The politicians considered to be the pillars of the previous government remain in office: Minister of Economy and Finance Bruno Le Maire, associated with the liberal direction of reform, and Minister of the Interior Gérald Darmanin, who was associated with the right-wing vision of security policy. Most members of the government come from the centre-right, including the Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna, but the appointment of the Pap Ndiaye,

an academic teacher associated with leftist views, as education minister shows a certain degree of flexibility in Macron's strategy. It is also perceived as a response to the threat posed by NUPES (Nouvelle Union Populaire écologique et social).

Controversial Electoral Law. In accordance with the binding majoritarian electoral system, deputies to the NA are elected in two rounds of voting in 577 constituencies. To win outright in the first round, a candidate must receive more than 50% of the votes representing at least 25% of registered voters in the constituency, otherwise a second round is held, for which only the candidates with votes equal to at least 12.5% of registered voters are eligible. This means that with 50% absenteeism, the candidate must receive a number of votes equal to at least 25% of the votes cast to qualify for the second round. If none of the candidates reaches the required 12.5%, only the two candidates with the best result will go to the second round. In the second round, the candidate with the most votes is elected.

Although the adopted solutions favour the formation of homogeneous parliamentary majorities and stable governments, and thus meet the intentions of the founders of the Fifth Republic's constitution, they are more and more often questioned due to the favouring of large parties and the practical lack of opposition to the presidential majority. Two successive presidents undertook to introduce a certain amount of proportionality: François Hollande withdrew from this project during his term of office, while Macron introduced it to the legislative package of constitutional revision, which was eventually rejected by the Senate. The directions of reforming the electoral system to the NA advocated by political and academic circles assume the introduction of a mixed electoral system. Election research and simulations show that the elimination of the majority effect can only take place if at least 25% of seats will come from proportional constituencies.

The Political Landscape before the Elections. The beginning and course of the campaign have been marked by the creation of a broad bloc on the left (NUPES) under the auspices of La France Insoumise (France Unbowed) with the participation of, among others, the Socialist Party, the Greens, and the Communist Party. Mélenchon has managed to use the support obtained in the presidential election and consolidate his position as a leader of the left. His goal is to persuade voters that he can be prime minister. The ideologically heterogeneous coalition bases its programme on the fight against social inequalities and climate change. The joint project based on an increase in taxation on capital and high incomes is accompanied by support for strong parliamentary and self-governance. Mélenchon emphasises the necessity to change the institutional model towards a Sixth Republic, which would end the primacy of the head of state and increase the importance of local authorities. Although in parliamentary elections the translation of poll support into mandates is not precise, the support for NUPES is steadily increasing, and the coalition can count on up to 170-210 MPs (29-36% according to Ifop).

Agreement of the political centre around the presidential party Renaissance has the best chance of victory (47-54%, which gives 270-310 seats). The campaign is also marked by a crisis of identity and leadership in the centre-right Republican (LR) camp, as evidenced by the poor performance of Valérie Pécresse in the presidential election. The LR, being the first opposition force in parliament in the current term, is estimated to have 35-55 deputies in the next legislature (6-10%). One of the post-election scenarios if the presidential camp does not gain an independent majority in the NA is the participation of some Republicans in its formation. On the other hand, the far right did not manage to form an alliance. Marine Le Pen rejected cooperation with Éric Zemmour and announced the independent start of National Rally, but this party is expected to gain seats (to about 20-50 seats, or 3-9% of the NA composition), which will allow the formation of a parliamentary group.

Conclusions and Perspectives. Macron announced a change in the presidency towards greater inclusiveness, reform of the institutions of the Fifth Republic with consideration for strengthening of the political position of the bicameral parliament, and a change in the electoral law. Actual intentions dictated by political interest may not go, however, hand in hand with these declarations. The introduction of a mixed electoral system may increase the significance of extreme parties in parliament.

Keeping its majority in the NA will enable the president and his party to implement a more reformist approach to domestic politics and will persuade Macron to propose fundamental changes in sensitive areas, such as the ecological transformation of the state or pension reform. The appointment of the Borne government is intended to lend credibility to the president's promises in this area. The unlikely chance of cohabitation with a left-wing parliamentary majority would result in numerous conflicts over both internal and foreign policy directions. Most likely, a left-wing government would be moderate and pro-European in its policy towards the EU.

For traditional political parties such as the Republicans or Socialists, these parliamentary elections could be decisive for their survival on the political scene. Within the coalition on the left, the weakened negotiating position of the SP after the presidential election may result in low representation in the NA. The election results will show whether the Republicans' strategy of rejecting a pre-election alliance with Macron will give the party a better chance of survival.

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