

In France, local elections reveal crisis of popular representation

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he institutions of the French Fifth Republic set up in 1958, with a presidential regime and bipartisanship to the fore, still have the appearance of stability, allowing the bourgeoisie to lead the country in all serenity. But this is only an appearance. If a party representing less than 25% of the electorate, that is to say between 10 and 15% of the population, can govern alone, it is increasingly clear that at every social and political milestone the ingredients of a political and/or major institutional crisis are accumulating.

In this system local elections, such as the departmental ones [equivalent of county council elections] held on March 22-29, 2015, are only an indicator of political developments. The change of local political personnel has only a slight influence on the course of national political and social life. The government was also anxious to declare that the results changed nothing, that the policy of austerity and anti-social offensive of the Socialist government headed by President Holland and Prime Minister Valls was going to continue.

A deep political crisis continues

The lull of “national unity” following the Charlie Hebdo killings in January was of short duration. The fundamental effects of the systemic crisis of capitalism have resumed, and the institutions are an obstacle to any policy of UMP-PS national unity, which actually corresponds to the politics of these two blocks. Valls-Hollande no longer have a stable parliamentary majority, with a number of PS deputies expressing dissent. And forced passage through an expedited procedure (under article 49-3 of the constitution) to silence disagreements within the majority is only possible once in a parliamentary session.

The electoral defeat of the PS

The government resorted to a slick and widespread media operation. The results were less bad than

the polls had predicted, “it could have been worse”... what a victory! While the PS had won these elections hands down in 2011, with 21.8% it came in third position behind the alliance of the parliamentary right around Sarkozy (29.4%), and the far right Front National (25.2%). It lost a third of the departments, leaving the right with 69 departments out of 101!

This result derived for a good part from abstention which affects primarily the popular neighbourhoods. It averaged 50% at the national level in the first round, rising to 70% in some working class and popular towns. For example for the Parisian suburbs, 71.2% in Aubervilliers, 68% in Bobigny, 67-69% in Saint Denis. Without forgetting the number of unregistered voters, which would be, according to a study in 2012, nearly 3 million, or 7% of the electoral body. It has increased since the 1960s, and particularly affects “persons without a diploma” of which 15% are not listed. To this should of course be added foreign residents who do not have the right to vote.

In the second round, when it was still in contention in PS-FN duels [1], the PS played on “all against the Front National”. Overall this worked, with the candidate of the parliamentary left obtaining more votes than the sum of the votes of the left-wing candidates in the first round, either by a mobilization of abstentionists in the first round, or by the displacement of the votes of the parliamentary right against the FN.

A few posts were saved, but this should not hide the results when in the second round the PS was opposed to a candidate of the right. In the latter case, there was no shift to the candidate of the PS of the totality of votes which went to the left-wing candidates in the first round.

The political significance of these results is clear. The abstention shows the repudiation of government policies, of the parties which are involved in them, and the fact that its representatives are today largely in the minority at the electoral level in the country. If many constituents and voters are ready to vote PS, or even UMP to prevent the election of the FN, they do not choose between the PS and the UMP!

The electoral victory of the FN

Because these elections are a victory for the party which has campaigned against the “UMPS” [2]. Traditionally, departmental elections favour the established parties and broad coalitions, such as that built around the UMP by Nicolas Sarkozy. Despite this the FN was present in 760 duels in the second round and obtained 62 elected representatives, something never before seen! Even if it did not win a majority in any department, contrary to what it had hoped, its results represent a new progression.

Because the most important thing is that it won 25% of the voters, while in a number of areas it scored more than 40-50%. This represents 5.1 million voters, less than the presidential elections of 2012, where it won 6.4 million votes with 18% (these are the elections where abstention is lowest), but this is by far the most important result in a local election.

Prevented by the electoral system from having a parliamentary representation reflecting its electoral strength [3], the FN accumulates elected representatives elsewhere, in the European Parliament (23 deputies out of 74), municipalities (1,546 elected representatives out of 587,335, including 22 mayors out of 36,635), regions (112 regional councillors out of 2,040) and now departments. In all, over 1,700 elected representatives, virtually all fully devoted to the strategy of Marine Le Pen. Which of course, is a point of support to build a party, at the activist, human, and financial levels.

The splinter group has become an electoral party

In the 1990s, starting from the analysis that Marxism was dying, and that there would no longer be any alternative on the left, the FN changed direction. Convinced that it could become the expression of social anger, it took a national-social orientation, defending social gains for the French through national preference, and argued that right and left were the same thing, the only solution was the Front National.

This orientation took on a new dynamic from 2008-2009, both because of the exacerbated crisis of the PS, and the discrediting of Sarkozy, who had limited the electoral breakthrough of the FN, and the arrival of Marine Le Pen at the head of the party. She embarked on a strategy of “de-demonization” aimed at integrate within the institutions, municipal first of all, then regional, to prepare for the presidential election of 2017. She revived the national-social discourse of the 1990s, eliminated the provocations and anti-Semitic slurs, and adopted a discourse incorporating notions from elsewhere, on the damage caused by globalization. The substance did not change, that of national solutions, a capital/labour alliance, protectionism, the rejection of immigration. On all the issues it presented a modified form of a reactionary substance.

During the demonstrations against the draft law on gay marriage organized by Catholic fundamentalist currents, which reject abortion, contraception, are homophobic and for the return of the woman to the home, the FN as such did not support the biggest demonstration, but the elected representatives were there! It conducted a campaign on the theme that this distracts us from the real problems of unemployment. At the same time the homosexuality of one of its European elected representatives and the mayor of Henin Beaumont does not prevent him from being one of the vice-presidents of the FN.

What is the political project of the FN?

In the current context of economic, social and political crisis, this policy has allowed incursions into a part of the popular electorate, both that which traditionally voted right, and a part of the left electorate. The popular categories, when they vote, are heavily oriented to the FN with a total of 43% of the vote of which 38% among employees and 49% among workers. The vote is significantly lower among senior executives and the liberal professions (13%), the retired (20 %) and women, at 22% against 30% of men.

This insertion among the popular classes is found among the 62 elected representatives, a third of them employees of the private sector, one-third civil servants, the last third made up of pensioners, liberal professionals, executives, business leaders, artisans and so on. In the town halls held by the FN since 2014, the results of these elections of 2015 are very good, sometimes even better. The FN is beginning to be an important party. It claimed 42,100 members at the day of contribution in October 2014, and 53% of these adherents, or 22,329, voted to re-elect Marine Le Pen. Its website now claims 83,000 activists.

Whatever the reality of the figures, the presence of FN activists in the course of the election campaign was very significant, and accepted by the population. The most violent activists feel empowered: threats against journalists, participation of FN elected representatives in the militias of the productivist farmer's association (FNSEA) against the occupants of the site of the proposed dam at Sivens, not to mention numerous provocations and racist insults.

One of the paradoxes of the current political situation is that the institutions that are supposed to

guarantee stability through the game of bipartisanship have become a machine to promote the FN while the PS and the UMP are threatened with disintegration (7). Marine Le Pen wants to transform this logic to her advantage to unblock the political relations which exclude the FN from possibilities of access to the government. This strategic choice imposes a profile of “best opponent of the existing system”, dynamic and rooted in the popular classes. At the same time it preserves and cultivates its image as a reactionary force, “conservative on morals”. This policy of being alone against all is reinforced by the present attitude of Sarkozy, in the second round, neither for the PS, nor for the FN.

While the leading nucleus around Marine Le Pen plays to the full this card of demagoguery “contesting the system” in its economic and social character, some in the party see this with increasing concern. They make the calculation that an alliance with the right would open to them the doors of government departments, and of business.

Nothing is decided between these two options. For the bourgeois class, the central areas of capitalism who build their domination through the European Union, the willingness of the FN to get out of Europe is for the moment still incompatible with their choices. But the evolution of the relationship of electoral forces can have an effect on the calculations of the privileged. All the reflections on the possibility of dealing with an FN majority or an FN presidency will grow. The mainstream right/FN electoral porosity amplifies these reflections. A poll indicates, for example, that 50% of UMP supporters would vote for “local alliances on a case by case basis” with the FN. And already the weight of the FN acts as a spur on the right more to the right than ever before, or to release the most rightist tendencies. Which also affects the governmental left.

The Socialist Party IS the system

Because one of the reasons for this evolution of the situation is the evolution of the main electoral party of the left, which traditionally represents the largest part of the popular classes. The PS has become the system, in the same way as the UMP, the parliamentary right, in its economic and social policy, but also in its values, including its lies. Its political personnel has only conflictual links with organizations of struggles of the exploited and oppressed, whether the trade union organizations whose bureaucratic leaderships have their own dynamics, or the associations of struggle for human rights, links that have no bearing on the important decisions. On the other hand the Socialist leaders have strong and multiple links with the capitalist establishment: they come from the same schools, pass through ministerial offices, from the Ministry of the economy to the directorates of businesses, attend the same places, are of the same world.

The vote for the PS expresses this deep division: 28% among executives and professionals against only 16% from popular milieus and 29% among public employees against 18% in the private sector. It sees the numbers of its activists melt. According to the figures provided by the party, it had 235,511 members in November 2008, 209,000 in September 2009. Today it claims 150,000. Given that the PS has 18,300 elected representatives, we see that membership of the PS looks more like a political career plan than the will to fight to change the world, or even to improve it [To compare the main party of the right, the UMP claimed 268,000 members in November 2014]].

On all the issues, the choices, these are the same decisions as those of the governments of the right, of attacks on social gains, gifts for the employers, restraint, cuts for those at the bottom, the disappearance of public services, the desire to reduce drastically the amount of wages (direct and indirect), to the order of 20 to 30 %, while increasing the profits of the shareholders of large capitalist companies, so they “continue to invest in France”. At the national level as in the

departments and regions, the PS elected representatives are the allies of the capitalist groups of the BTP in imposing useless and even harmful major projects, marked by a productivism without limit, on people who don't want them.

On those social subjects which were markers for the left, the slide toward reactionary positions is impressive. The repression against the Roma is shameful, the attitude to immigrants unbearable, the daily attacks against Muslims are feeding a state racism of a force unknown since the end of the war in Algeria, the security policy involves a suppression of mobilizations, demonstrations, and convictions more serious than under Sarkozy. For example the refusal to conduct an ideological and political fight on the question of medically assisted procreation at the time of the vote on the law on marriage for all has left the possibility for the reactionary offensive to take its full extent.

Politics is seen by the Socialist leaders as a market to which it must respond. The general idea provided from tribunes, speeches, polls is that society is going to the right, that realism is of the right. It must, therefore, respond to this evolution and move to the right to remain in government. If it is true that the defeats accumulated since 2010 do not favour the emergence of answers for those at the bottom, this policy of the Socialists is a self fulfilling prophecy. In nurturing these reactionary ideas, the leaders of the PS are powerful actors in manufacturing an ideological hegemony that we must combat.

Over the last century this governmental left, which places its prospects in management within the framework of the capitalist system, has shown to the wealthy that their economic, political and ideological domination over society was not challenged by a Socialist government, even with Communist participation. It has crossed a threshold over these past 15 years, and what has disappeared is the very idea that we could transform society. It is the triumph of success and capitalist legitimacy. This is the TINA ("There Is No Alternative) of Margaret Thatcher à la française.

The impotence of the Front de Gauche

One might think that the Front de Gauche, which is not in the government, could occupy a position like that of Syriza. This is not the case, even if here and there, the results of its candidates during these elections were very good. Because to offer an appropriate response to the situation, it is not enough to be outside of the government. It is necessary to oppose the PS and its politics everywhere, to be the force which is everywhere fighting against its vile measures and which offers an alternative political perspective.

The Front de Gauche is composed of three parties of unequal strength. The PCF (French Communist Party) is dominant, followed by the Parti de Gauche of Jean Luc Mélenchon and the group Ensemble!, made up of former NPA members, what remains of the PCF oppositions and alternative currents.

The PCF is a party in regular regression. With these elections it lost one of the two departments that it controlled, and the same proportion of elected representatives as the PS. In 2013 it claimed 130,000 members, but less than 40,000 voted at the last congress. It is now wholly turned towards electoral politics. Its leadership, its intermediary cadres, and its financing are entirely linked to positions occupied in various institutions, notably the town halls. The contribution of the elected representatives accounts for 46.4% of the total resources of the party (as against 26% for the PS, 28.4% for the Greens and 13% for the Parti de Gauche). The distinction between the apparatus leaders and the elected representatives, who have their own concerns, has disappeared. Because of the increasingly technical nature of local activity, they are surrounded by public management cadres and are transitioning away from activist or associative relays and towards professionals who

resemble them socially. The social universe of Communist elected representatives is detached from that of their citizens. An interview with a defeated PCF candidate at the last election in Le Havre is significant, indicating her distance from the voters: "It is hard to swallow. A township historically to the left that I had won covering every inch... I think I have done a lot for these neighbourhoods ... I am sensitive ... I spent my life helping these people and they are not there for me ... To see the FN coming top really hurts me. I do not know where I will find the strength to continue to fight for them".

However, the electoral results are directly related to the agreements concluded locally with the PS in municipalities, departments and regions where the PCF often rules in common with the PS and draws from this all the material benefits derived therein. It is therefore very widely identified on the left with the PS. If the strategy of the Front de gauche has halted its electoral decline, it is not for now going to make it a left opponent to the PS government, there are too many obstacles to such a rupture.

The policy of the PG is different, because it is not dependent on alliances with the PS. Its leadership has understood the need to have a clear independence in relation to the PS and a policy of more frontally opposing the government. This translates into little in fact, but at the political level is reflected by a campaign for the 6th Republic. But this loses any credibility, the essential questions of democracy are erased behind the desire of Jean Luc Mélenchon to be a credible alternative during the presidential elections. Thus it appears, not as a political objective, but a policy for a place, places, it cannot be a mass perspective.

These differences between the PCF and the PG materialized during these last elections in the second round, the PC calling to vote PS against the right, even by removing its candidates to allow the election of the PS, the PG not giving any voting recommendation. This makes the existence of the Front de Gauche very limited. It is now no more than an electoral label and even at this level it is wobbly.

As for Ensemble, its political future is so tied to the existence of the Front de Gauche that its present policy is centred on the maintenance of this front. During the last elections, the FG tried to establish an axis with the Greens, a small current originating from the PS, Nouvelle Donne, and contacts with the "frondeurs" (PS dissidents). Nothing which is a radical alternative to current policies. Their opposition is an institutional opposition which seeks to gain a majority to run the government, not an opposition to the capitalist system itself. This culture of government, of realism, pervades the whole of their activity, and makes them unable to offer a perspective to build a new political representation of the popular classes, exploited and oppressed. The same differences divide the Greens, between those who wish to return to government and those who have made a covenant with the Front de Gauche. It can be questioned to what extent this organization can avoid splitting given such a level of confrontation.

The far left was not visible in this election. The NPA was present in 5 cantons, two unitary lists (one of which obtained 16.8%), three NPA lists (one of which obtained 8.5 %) but it is not possible to draw conclusions from such piecemeal results. As for LO, it was present in 16 cantons, scoring around 3 %.

A new political representation of those at the bottom

These elections confirm the observation which becomes more evident every day: the exploited, the oppressed, and those at the bottom, the popular classes, do not have a party that represents them, that is a point of support for struggle, for ideological battle, for political battle. The NPA has not

managed to bring together all the anti-capitalists. The Front de Gauche is not this representation. All the parties which we have just talked about have a certain implantation, a certain activist strength, a certain electoral echo, but none is perceived by a significant fraction of those at the bottom, entire sectors, as a party which is useful to them, which serves their daily existence as a class, which allows them to have an expression.

In a number of enterprises, some union branches, some unions play this role in relation to the employer. It is far from being the case for the confederations, widely perceived also as institutions. The ejection of the secretary general of the CGT, after the revelation of the luxurious work done on his apartment at the expense of the membership, can only reinforce the feeling of not being represented by them.

Even the combative sectors of the trade union movement are today little involved in forming a single expression against the government, taking refuge often in activity at enterprise level, it is truly increasingly difficult. In a number of areas some activists are perceived by the milieu as being useful for the struggle. But this is not enough to build a political perspective, any more than the upsurge of strikes in some sectors during the annual wage negotiations.

It is this absence that basically explains the political and social situation, the electoral results, the difficulty of organizing struggles even on an ad hoc basis. This is what allows the bourgeoisie to pursue its offensive without an appropriate reaction, even if in France the resistance since 1995 has limited the erosion of social gains.

The construction of a new representation of those at the bottom is what we should devote all our forces to, by changing our organizational practices, on the basis of the experiences of struggle, by opening ourselves to all the political confrontations, working for the convergences of all those who are the essential elements for this objective. We will not begin by saying that this will be a party, in view of the experiences of this century, the forms of democratic organization will inevitably be new, we will build ourselves by moving forward. We will not begin by defining a program that will have to be explained, it will be constructed on the basis of needs, concerns, struggles and will be far richer than anything we could write.

We will work for this tirelessly with an unrelenting compass of class struggle: total political independence in relation to the old political world, even if many of the activists will originate from that world, they will agree to do something else, in all honesty, and with the enthusiasm to participate in a new adventure in the fight against capitalist society, exploitation and all oppression.

How can we progress?

On the one hand, to work on the construction of the broadest possible mobilization against all governmental measures, but also of a left opposition to the politics of the government. For example, by seeking to federate the whole of the social and political left, as much as is possible, against the Macron law, despite the difficulties due in part to the difficult relations between political parties, trade unions and associations. To be useful activists in the mobilizations which often take place outside activist frameworks, such as those of the precarious, the intermittent, the opponents to the large useless projects and so on.

On the other hand to give new meaning to the political struggle. It is political battle which builds the unity of the exploited class, which allows a real fight against oppression. It is production by struggle of a political alternative that allows democracy, action for partial objectives. There is no need to be a majority to weigh on the whole of the political debate, to influence the situation, to build a vision

that becomes hegemonic, inescapable. People mobilized on a just, understandable cause weigh more than their arithmetical weight.

For example, we must see how the popular layers respond to a request for free public transport, which poses all kinds of economic, ecological, management issues to measure the extent to which current forms of political struggle do not meet popular aspirations. The answers can be subversive, the world as it is being unbearable, as millions of exploited and oppressed people know. Faced with the current political, institutional crisis, we are charting a new project, a new schedule for those at the bottom.

Patrick Le Moal

P.S.

* Translation IVP. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>

Footnotes

[1] It was eliminated for the second round in 580 of the 2054 electoral districts of this ballot

[2] An appellation used widely in the agitation of the FN against the UMP and PS, conflating the two

[3] One FN deputy out of 577 for 13.6% of the vote in the 2012 parliamentary election, and two senators out of 348