

Snap elections: how Macron is throwing France into potential chaos

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Following the huge success of the French far-right Rassemblement National party (the former Front National) in the polling on Sunday to elect members to the new assembly of the European Parliament, President Emmanuel Macron has called a surprise snap election of France's national parliament, due in three weeks' time. In this op-ed article, Mediapart political correspondent Ellen Salvi argues why Macron's strategy, adopted since 2017, of presenting himself as the only alternative to the far-right has reached its limit, and now threatens a major disaster for the country.

It is the height, the absolute summit, of a dangerous strategy, which has been carefully elaborated for the past seven years: French President Emanuel Macron on Sunday responded to the demand of the far-right Rassemblement National party (the former Front National), after it gained a large majority of votes in France in elections for the new term of the European Parliament, for the dissolution of the country's National Assembly, the lower house, by announcing a snap general election to be held over two rounds, as is custom, on June 30th and July 7th.

While the parties of the Left are in a mosaic of divisions, and the conservative Right are reduced to a shagreen, the French president has once again pointed to what he regards to be his single real adversary. Making use of the weakness of those parties that make up the traditional democratic movements of France's republic, he has taken the alarming risk of offering an absolute majority to the far-right, and with it the keys to absolute power. Using the tactic of calling upon voters to unite to block the ascension of the far-right, he once again employs the stepping stone that he has successfully used to gain power since his first election in 2017.

"The far-right is both the impoverishment of the French people, and the relegation of our country," Macron said following the exit poll results of the European elections on Sunday evening. "I cannot, then, at the end of this day, behave as if nothing has happened."

However, he has for years carried on as if "nothing has happened". As if he had not been twice elected as president in the final, second-round vote in successive presidential elections in a two-horse competition against the far-right Rassemblement National candidate Marine Le Pen. As if her party was also, if not even more, as politically respectable as others, and as if there was still time to play with fire.

Emmanuel Macron pictured after casting his vote in European Parliament elections in the town of Le Touquet, northern France, on June 9th 2024. With the gamble of snap elections called for within three weeks, the far-right hope to obtain a majority in the National Assembly. © Photo Hannah McKay / AFP

Emmanuel Macron now continues with his game of poker, believing himself to be still the master of the game, but this with the risk of sending everyone into the abyss. He does so by attacking the Left, to which he imparts a responsibility in his decision. "In this situation," he said in his televised address to the French nation on Sunday, referring to the rise of the far-right, "is added the fever that has these last years gripped the public and parliamentary debate in our country. It is a disorder which I know worries you, which sometimes shocks you, and to which I intend to concede nothing."

A deadly dance of pas de deux

Following his re-election for a second term in office in May 2022, but which was followed the following month by legislative elections which left his Renaissance party without an absolute majority in parliament, Macron has been forced into manoeuvring legislation as best he can through the lower house, the National Assembly. The various opposition parties kicked up storms, attempting, through many diverse procedures, to make him understand that parliament was not a chamber that would simply rubber stamp his policies. They battled against budget proposals, the reform of the pension system, and against the reform hardening immigration laws. But in vain.

Instead of trying to negotiate with the legislative corps in parliament, the executive chose to override them by force, employing a distortion of the Constitution, and political intrigues. At the same time, it strived to demonize the broad leftwing coalition, the NUPES, and in particular one of its components, the radical-left party La France Insoumise (LFI), distributing here and there commendations for "republican values" - meaning democratic values - which it otherwise trampled over.

During the legislative elections in 2022, when Macron's Renaissance party found itself in a direct duel with the NUPES in a number of constituencies, it compared its leftwing adversaries with the far-right, and this in an outrageous manner of bad faith. That was with a contempt of principles, and of political history, and of everything it supposedly championed during the period of the two-round presidential election that year and which was simply in order to win over voters against far-right candidate Marine Le Pen.

Now, Le Pen's Rassemblement National, which in the first round of the 2022 legislative elections garnered a majority in more than 200 constituencies out of 577, can hope to conquer many more. This is the only calculation he has made in his announcement on Sunday evening - namely "it's me or chaos". With just three weeks of campaigning now before the snap elections begin, it leaves very little time for parties to present their alternative to this deadly *pas de deux*.

The French president did himself raise the alarm, during the two rounds of the presidential elections in 2022, of the disappearance of a "republican" front to unite behind him against Le Pen. While it had indeed become eroded, it nevertheless allowed his re-election, but that led to nothing. Quite the opposite, he continued to fan the fire, flirting with the ideology of a "national preference" concerning the social rights of foreign nationals, complicit with the line put about by hardright tycoon Vincent Bolloré via his media empire, refusing the least criticism and dismissing any challenge against his authority.

Shut-off within a presidency evermore solitary and indifferent to the aspirations of citizens, Emmanuel Macron has constantly opposed the many hopes, and demands, of society. Words have been emptied of meaning, the chin-jutting has taken priority over convictions. This confusion, the levelling down, and the intellectual dishonesty of the French head of state and his camp have served to provide a gangway for the ideas he pretended to fight.

On Sunday evening, French foreign minister Stéphane Séjourné, secretary general of Macron's party Renaissance, announced that in the upcoming elections, his party would back those candidates in constituencies "who are part of the republican sphere", including from (non-far-right) opposition parties, who wanted to "invest in a clear project for the country". In doing so, he revived his movement's previous deleterious strategy of creating a large hegemonic movement to supposedly fight alone against that of Marine Le Pen.

But, as former French president Nicolas Sarkozy's advisor Emmanuelle Mignon (and he can hardly be labelled as leftwing) argued in 2019 on the subject of a face-off between progressists and populists: "If it's the true political split, then it's vertigo, because by force of telling the French people that it's me or the Rassemblement National, we'll end up with the Rassemblement National." That was a prediction that was partly proven true three years later, when the far-right party won 89 seats in the French parliament, becoming the largest single opposition party.

Now, following Macron's decision to call early elections, it can hope to increase that number, and perhaps even obtain a majority in the National Assembly.

Ellen Salvi

P.S.

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