

FRANCE

How France's Fifth Republic was born against a backdrop of insurrection

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In October the Fifth Republic will become France's longest-surviving regime since the 1789 Revolution, its 65th anniversary eclipsing the previous record held by the Third Republic. In this first part of a Mediapart series devoted to the issue, Fabien Escalona looks at the unwitting role played in the establishment of the new republic by the attempted coup d'état staged by members of the French military and some senior officials in May 1958. Though the Fifth Republic which emerged later that year was formed without their involvement, this presidential regime owes at least some of its creation to the dramatic political mood caused by the attempted putsch.

On October 4th this year France's Third Republic, which straddled the 19th and 20th centuries, will lose its record for longevity. On that date the current Fifth Republic, founded by General Charles de Gaulle in 1958, will celebrate its 65th anniversary and become the longest-surviving regime since the French Revolution of 1789.

This landmark occasion will undoubtedly be marked by praise for the institutional stability that the presidential Fifth Republic has delivered to the country. Yet it remains increasingly hard to ignore the growing crisis of legitimacy that has afflicted it for so long, especially as this crisis has only deepened during President Emmanuel Macron's second term of office with the [forcing through of his pension reforms earlier this year](#).

Interestingly, that pension reform episode led to [analysis](#) about the "return of authoritarian repression under the Fifth Republic". This reminds us that during the forthcoming anniversary celebrations it is not just the poor state of our current political life that risks being overlooked, but also the controversial origins of the 1958 Constitution as well. This founding text of the Fifth Republic was drawn up against a backdrop of insurrection and written in urgency by a handful of men, even though it marked a major turning point in the history of the Republic.

In other words, there is a risk that we will simply witness a continuation of the public relations operation that Gaullists began as soon as the Fifth Republic was established. "The construction of the regime against its origins," as the political scientist Brigitte Gaiti puts it in an [article](#) written in 1999, in which she highlights the "suspicions" that surrounded the "new institutions" at the time of their creation. And with good reason, too.

General Raoul Salan (arms raised) at the balcony of the offices of the governor-general in Algiers on May 15th 1958 (where he shouted 'Vive de Gaulle!') © AFP

For the dawning of de Gaulle's regime was intrinsically linked to the events of May 13th 1958 at the height of the [Algerian War of Independence](#). This was one of the "days that made France", according

to the well-known collection of books published by publishers Gallimard. Author of a [book](#) dedicated to this date, the historian Michel Winock speaks of a “pure political event ... it was the conflict between Algerian nationalism and the French colonial authorities which was at the origins of an explosive day, the prelude to regime change”.

On that day, with emotions running high after three French soldiers held by the Algerian independence group the FLN had been executed, people who supported Algeria staying as a French colony took part in a general strike there. They demonstrated in Algiers against the “imminent formation of what is undeniably a government of abandonment” in Paris under [Pierre Pflimlin](#). He was taking over as prime minister from Félix Gaillard, who had remained in office for a month after his government lost a vote of confidence in the National Assembly – the fate of many of his predecessors in the Fourth Republic.

That afternoon the crowd descended on the offices of the governor-general in Algiers, the symbol of French authority in the North African country. A committee of public salvation with senior military officers at its helm was set up that evening, calling for the Republic’s president René Coty to set up a “government of public salvation, as the only way to keep Algeria as part of metropolitan [France]”. A coup d’état was being organised in mainland France itself whose leaders did not recognise the authority of the new prime minister [Pflimlin](#) even though his administration had won the backing of Members of Parliament in the National Assembly.

Highlighting the potential scenarios in these events, Brigitte Gaïti points out that before May 13th the likelihood of wartime leader de Gaulle returning to power seemed unlikely, despite his prestige. Such a move needed much higher levels of support for him over other options and “above all” the backing of people who were “mostly much more reticent, whether over De Gaulle’s personality or over the type of political solution that he represented, be they soldiers, Parliamentarians, ministers or demonstrators in Algiers”.

A ‘legalised takeover’

The Gaullists were also caught unawares by the actions of the Algiers-based activists. The general’s supporters did not set the wheels in motion for his potential return to power until after the governor-general’s offices had been occupied on May 13th. One of these loyal followers, Léon Delbecq, managed to get himself made vice-president of the committee for public salvation and to get it to call for the nation to “turn to a national arbiter” - whose identity was not hard to guess. On May 15th the Commander-in-Chief of the French army in Algeria, General Raoul Salan, made an explicit appeal to de Gaulle.

The latter then issued a statement in which he said he was “ready to assume the powers of the Republic”. Four days later the general gave a press conference in which he refused to condemn those involved in the uprising, while at the same time insisting that at his age – he was 67 – he was not planning to “start a career as a dictator”. His comments failed to reassure the Left, whose support he needed to a degree in order to be installed in power legally as head of government.

Video: Extract from Charles de Gaulle’s press conference, May 18th 1958. © YouTube

In this respect, the backing at the end of the month from Guy Mollet, first secretary of the socialist [SFIO](#) party, was to prove crucial. For while prime minister Pierre Pflimlin had resigned on May 28th as head of the government, nothing had been settled. Indeed, just hours before that resignation, the socialist group of MPs had voted as a bloc that they would “in no circumstances” accept the general returning to power.

In the meantime the putsch had reached the French Mediterranean island of Corsica and some in the military were preparing 'Operation Resurrection', which involved plans for thousands of troops to be parachuted into Paris. On May 30th, invoking the dramatic nature of these events, Guy Mollet used all his influence to get the socialist Parliamentary group to change its stance. It was finally agreed that its members would be allowed a free vote, which left little doubt that de Gaulle would be able to obtain a majority at the National Assembly.

Indeed, on June 1st, following de Gaulle's speech in the Assembly chamber – which he left immediately afterwards – Members of Parliament approved by 329 votes to 224 a proposal that the general should form a new government. Forty-two of those votes in favour came from members of the socialist group. Had they not done so, the vote would have been closer and other MPs might also have hesitated over backing the plan. Up to that point it had been hard to imagine, but in the end there was broad backing for de Gaulle for the simple reason that there seemed to be no other convincing alternative.

To come to power 'on his terms' ... the general played with fire.

In general terms, one of the characteristics of the final years of the Fourth Republic was that it was no longer possible to muster a clear Parliamentary majority for any clear strategy, whether this was doubling down on fighting the war in Algeria or negotiating with Algerian nationalists. As he waited in the wings "de Gaulle's greatest strength was his silence", says his biographer [Julian Jackson](#). "[H]is silence allowed everyone to read the saviour as they wished ... he was a blank sheet on to which the French could project their hopes and aspirations. This is how he intended it to be."

In terms of more immediate events, as the crisis in Algeria deepened during May 1958, the remaining options became dramatically starker as far as politicians at the time were concerned: a choice between a military coup or backing de Gaulle. But this situation did not arise out of nowhere. In wanting to return to power "on his terms", in other words "to break the system, not to enter it" as Julian Jackson puts it, the general had played with fire.

Having thrown his lot in with the democratic cause, de Gaulle knew that the use of armed violence would have marred his accession to power and undermined his plans. However, it suited him that this possibility remained right to the end. "His desire for a legal outcome was accompanied by a threat of insurrection that he did not denounce at any point in the crisis," confirms Michel Winock. Brigitte Gaïti, meanwhile, writes that the "complex game" played by the Gaullists involved "maintaining and containing the military momentum on which the threat they were constructing depended, and reassuring Parliamentarians upon whom their boss's legal accession to power depended".

Should we go as far as describing it as a "Gaullist coup d'état", as the American historian Grey Anderson [bluntly describes it](#) in a work that highlights the violent origins of the Fifth Republic? "In law General de Gaulle will this evening assume his powers from the national Parliament; in fact he already holds them through a takeover," the future socialist president François Mitterrand stated in the Assembly on June 1st 1958. The "legality [of his return] is doubtful" admits Michel Winock, who

adds nonetheless that the general benefited from a “certain legitimacy”, which was visible in public opinion and was soon confirmed at the ballot box.

Questioned by Mediapart, political scientist Brigitte Gaiti preferred the phrase “legalised takeover”. Rather than characterise the events in one particular way or focus too much on protagonists whose strategies and stances changed during the crisis, she emphasizes the “process” that was unfolding, one that began in a mood of sedition and which ended in an institutional climax.

One should also not overlook the level of official subversion that continued even after General de Gaulle was sworn in as head of government. The following day, on June 2nd, the general assumed special powers in Algeria and the power and responsibility to prepare a new Constitution for France. Yet the existing Constitution of the Fourth Republic only allowed the political authorities to undertake constitutional amendments.

Not only was the process for these amendments - under Article 90 - altered by a constitutional law approved by President René Coty on June 3rd, this law went even further in approving regime change. According to professor of public law Alexandre Viala: “De Gaulle shifted from having derived constituent power (which can change the Constitution within the limits fixed by that Constitution) to original constituent power (which can create a Constitution from scratch). In other words, he changed Constitutions when he should only have been entitled to change the Constitution.”

However, a majority of figures in the Fourth Republic consented to this shift, and to the particular way that the new constitutional text was drafted.

Fabien Escalona

P.S.

- MEDIAPART. 18 August 2023 à 12h04 :
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- FRENCH original MEDIAPART. 14 août 2023 à 12h06 :
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