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Macron: the honeymoon's over

Professor Rainbow Murray discusses the French president's rapidly declining popularity

Back in May, Emmanuel Macron swept to power on a tide of liberal hope. Rejecting the traditional parties that have dominated French politics since Charles de Gaulle founded the Fifth Republic almost 60 years ago, the new president promised greater transparency and a revival of France's fortunes. But three months on, euphoria has given way to disappointment and cynicism. His popularity has taken a huge hit with just 37 per cent of voters satisfied with the job he's doing: a 20 point drop since his election. Professor Rainbow Murray, an expert in French politics, spoke to Ellie Mears about Macron's downfall.

How would you assess Macron's first three months in office?

Overall, Macron's had a proactive start to his presidency and has already achieved a lot. His first and most significant success was to obtain a parliamentary majority, something that had seemed impossible given that his political party had only begun life as a movement a year earlier and had never previously contested an election. This enabled him to reduce his dependence on other political parties. He was able to evict MoDem, the centrist party whose support helped him get elected, from the government once they became implicated in an expenses scandal.

On the international scene, he showed his determination to stand up to Donald Trump, first through a well-documented vice-like handshake and then by tweeting 'making the planet great again' when Trump threatened to withdraw from the Paris climate agreement. However, Macron has since toned down the hostility and received Trump on a state visit, realising he needs to keep the US on side. He's also received Vladimir Putin at Versailles, talking up their shared interests in defeating terrorism while also firing warning shots on Russia's human rights record.

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the election campaign, coming in the wake of the scandal that destroyed François Fillon, and was part of the deal he struck with MoDem. However, his own government has not been immune to corruption scandals, and these have weakened his standing. He's also obtained the approval of parliament to railroad labour reforms through by governmental decree.

Macron's approval rating has dropped dramatically from 57 per cent after his election to just 37 per cent at the end of August. Why?

His initial popularity levels were never sustainable and were an indication of people's faith in a blank canvas onto which they projected their own hopes. As they've got to know him better, he's had more opportunity to disappoint. The aforementioned scandals in his government, the very public resignation of his military chief over a dispute about military spending, and his aloof relationship with the press have all tarnished his image. His unique selling point – his ability to straddle the political right and left – is also potentially his greatest weakness, as every policy risks offending one side or the other.

During his election campaign, Macron promised to make French politics more representative by offering more posts to women and those from outside the traditional political establishment. Has he succeeded?

A qualified yes. His government comprises 50 per cent women and numerous people drawn in from outside party politics. Nearly half of his party's deputies are also women, and much more diverse than their predecessors. However, the key figures in French politics are still nearly all men. Men dominate most of the top roles in government, all the top advisory roles in the Elysée (the presidential palace), and many of the top roles in parliament. It's not enough for women to be present, they also need to be empowered, else his efforts smack of tokenism and window-dressing. He's also reneged on his promise to have a full women's ministry, and the reduced version is headed by a woman with very dubious feminist credentials. The new parliamentarians also come overwhelmingly from more privileged backgrounds. So he's made some inroads, but still has a long way to go.

Pre-election, Macron made much of his own status as a political outsider. Yet in office, he's been accused of being elitist, even authoritarian. What kind of president does he actually want to be?

He clearly wants to be top dog, and has definitely displayed some

authoritarian tendencies. He's undermined his prime minister, for example by delivering a 'state of the union' address – unprecedented in France – the day before his Prime Minister was due to outline government policy. He's surrounded himself with loyalists and relative neophytes who are not in a position to challenge his authority. He holds the media at arm's length and has expressed his desire for parliament to become a technocratic body charged with revising governmental legislation, rather than its current more representative function. But all of this comes at a price, because a centralisation of power means that the buck stops with him. If something goes wrong, he cannot easily deflect the blame onto someone else.

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Perhaps Macron's biggest test is yet to come, when he tries to push through reforms to France's labour laws in the autumn. How do you rate his chances?

Politically, he should have no difficulty whatsoever in getting his reforms through. He already has the approval of parliament to enable him to push the reforms through by decree; even if he did not, he has a loyal parliamentary majority willing to do his bidding. The much bigger battle he faces is on the streets, where the French will undoubtedly mobilise in a bid to disrupt his plans. Such tactics have forced many a president to back down, given the ability of street protest to grind France to a halt. But he's already anticipated this and I expect he'll hold his nerve, perhaps making a few small concessions to get the country moving again but standing his ground on the core principles of his proposals. He is still early into his presidency, and the reforms will take some time to bear fruit, so his chance is now or never. Given his predilection for displays of strength and authority, I think he will force it through, Thatcher-style.

How might the French socialists use discontent against reforms to regain the political ground they lost in June's parliamentary elections?

Those elections represented the nadir of the Socialists' fortunes, and now they either recover or die. Many on the left are growing increasingly discontent with Macron's neoliberal policies, but the Socialists need greater unity before they can hope to make an electoral

recovery. At the moment they are splintering off in all directions, still reeling from the scale of their defeat. There is the potential for them to regain a proper foothold in French politics, but the recovery is going to be slow and painful. The key question is whether they can resolve their internal divisions and consolidate their ideology before their electors (currently siphoned off to the centre and the far-left) abandon them permanently.

One of Macron's most contentious policies to date is his decision to cut housing subsidies for students and the poor, whilst introducing tax reforms that will primarily benefit the rich. Is he making a political and economic mistake?

He's already been criticised for leaning more to the right than the left, and knows that he needs to balance this out with some more left-leaning policies. Politically, it makes sense because the left is already in disarray, and his current policies are aimed at dividing and conquering the right. In the short term, then, he can get away with it, but in the longer term he needs to display better social credentials if he is to retain the support of the centre-left and distinguish himself from the mainstream right.

Macron has signalled he is ready to work more closely with Germany in areas such as defence and the Eurozone. Might we see a rekindling of the French-German alliance that was previously central to the EU?

Yes. Macron and Merkel are on the same page politically and both have a strong interest in protecting the EU from various threats. In the context of a volatile American president, a threatening Russian president, an ongoing migrant crisis, and imminent Brexit, France and Germany need each other more than ever. Macron is vocally pro-EU and has every interest in working closely with Germany.



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