IPS

INTERVIEWS 09.07.2024

‘The firewall of the Republican Front has held firm’

Adrienne Woltersdorf from Paris on the difficult government formation in France, voter frustration and conflicts within the left-wing alliance

The anticipated success of the radical right-wing *Rassemblement National* (RN) has failed to materialise, as the party is only the third strongest force in the French parliament. What is the general mood in France?

Since yesterday evening, it has to be said: there are two Frances. There is relief in the Democratic camp. The firewall of the Republican Front, as it calls itself, has held firm and prevented the worst from happening. On Sunday morning, everyone was still assuming that the RN would win the election and that it would win a relative majority. In the evening, everything suddenly changed. Nevertheless, many French people voted in favour of the *Rassemblement National* — around 10.6 million voters in the first round. The disappointment among them is great. The RN and its allied parties also achieved the highest approval rating in the second round of voting with 37 per cent, but only received 21 per cent of the seats in parliament. The French majority voting system distorts the balance of power here. As candidates from the democratic camp withdrew in favour of more suitable rivals, Marine Le Pen’s party ultimately only came third in parliament.

Does this conceal the shift to the right in the country?

Yes, definitely. With proportional representation, the *Rassemblement National* would have won the most seats. This two-tier electoral system in France is geared towards stability and prevents extremes from coming to power. However, it has also been causing enormous frustration among the electorate for many years, especially for RN supporters.

And also among Democrats because, in order to prevent worse, they

are expected to vote for candidates who do not truly represent their views — election after election. This is a fundamental problem of French democracy and will certainly lead to a broad debate again. But hardly any other project has been announced as often as the necessary constitutional change towards proportional representation. And no project has been forgotten so often.

Coalitions are rather unusual in France and forming a government will be difficult. Is France threatened with gridlock?

French parliamentarianism makes coalitions difficult. With three more or less equally sized blocs, i.e. left, centre and far right, France is facing a difficult time. The *Rassemblement* will be able to prevent or at least influence many legislative projects. And there are major ideological divides in the centre-left camp. The big question is: how can a future government function efficiently under these circumstances? The president could have used the opportunity to form coalitions after his re-election in 2022 and the loss of his absolute majority in parliament. But he insists on governing with his own programme. One wonders whether he even has the talent for political negotiation and compromise. We have yet to see it.

Sections of his party alliance *Ensemble* have already ruled out working with Jean-Luc Mélenchon, whose *La France Insoumise* (LFI) emerged as the strongest force from the *Nouveau Front populaire* (NFP) in the elections. How will the two blocs be able to work together?

Both Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the Macron camp let it be known shortly after the polls closed that they would not be forming a coalition. In fact, the NFP said that they would now only want to govern according to their own programme. At the moment, this suggests that the toxic relationship that exists between the Macron and Mélenchon camps will continue. It is certainly also a kind of strategy to gain time for reflection and tactics. In any case, a joint government is currently inconceivable.

So far, the NFP, the ad hoc left-wing alliance of Socialists, Communists, Greens and LFI, has remained united. The question is, however, how long this will last. Ideological differences between the left-wing parties are clear and a good tradition. The previous left-wing alliance, NUPES, has already broken up in the past.

What are the fault lines within the *Nouveau Front populaire*?

La France Insoumise, for example, pursues a course that is critical of Israel, critical of Europe and critical of NATO, which is not compatible with the positions of the *Parti Socialiste* (PS). Above all,

Mélenchon's strong criticism of Israel and his pro-Palestinian stance have polarised the party to such an extent that an open break has occurred. Many voters therefore switched from Mélenchon's LFI to the PS in the EU parliamentary elections. Mélenchon had to abandon these positions for the NFP election programme. Nevertheless, mistrust prevails, especially as Mélenchon has not exactly stood out in the past for his ability to work in a team.

What does the result mean for Europe?

Macron will be able to continue his pro-European policies, as he remains the president with great power. The losses of his party *Ensemble* – it is now only the second strongest force in parliament – may weaken him, but it will not change his European policy or his stance on NATO and Ukraine. He will continue to represent this in the Council of Europe.

For the EU and also for Germany, this means that France will remain a stable partner for the time being. It is not to be expected that massive disruptive manoeuvres will emanate from the left on the European level, even if they do not agree with Macron on some points, such as the no to the debt brake and the no to free trade agreements. The majority on the left of the centre are also interested in stable relations with international partners, even if this does not necessarily apply to LFI. However, Israel and the Gaza issue could become a stumbling block. This will certainly be closely monitored.

But Macron will no longer be allowed to run in 2027, and his party alliance has been severely humiliated. The United Left is the strongest force and Le Pen has already announced that she, too, is looking to the future. Will the cards be reshuffled for the presidential elections?

Yes and no. There will be local elections in France in 2026, which will give us a taste of how strong the RN will be at grassroots level. It's worrying that there don't seem to be any suitable candidates in the Macron camp to succeed him and that we first have to see who can set the tone for the left-wing alliance. Presidential elections play by different rules in France. But the RN has a very good chance of gaining power for good — if Macron and Parisian politics simply continue to govern as before. The Democrats must not disappoint now. Expectations fuelled by the NRP must be addressed. This will not be easy. For example, when it comes to reversing the social hardships that Macron has imposed on France, such as an increase in the minimum wage, price caps on food and other measures. The social and economic situation of many French voters must be improved — otherwise, it will be impossible to lure the generally frustrated voters

to the polls again in 2027 with the threat of doom. We must not rest on Sunday's success for a second.

This interview was conducted by Alexander Isele and Konstantin Hadzi-Vukovic.



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