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‘The Rassemblement National is benefitting most from this crisis’

Adrienne Woltersdorf on Bayrou’s government collapse, Macron’s next moves and how the Socialists could help bridge France’s political divide

The French government collapsed on Monday after Prime Minister François Bayrou lost a confidence vote. What does this latest fall of a French government mean for the country?

The self-inflicted collapse of Bayrou’s government comes as no surprise. What is surprising, however, is the method. Namely, that Bayrou, at the low point of his ill-fated reign, chose to call a vote of confidence instead of seeking dialogue with the opposition in the months leading up to it. His equally unsuccessful predecessor, Michel Barnier, had already failed over the budget. But these are only symptoms of a disease that has afflicted France’s institutions and politics.

Responsible for this is President Emmanuel Macron. Since he dissolved parliament in 2024 after his party’s poor performance in the European elections and called new elections, three almost equally strong blocs have been represented in parliament. And Macron’s camp is the weakest of them. Nevertheless, he claims governmental power for his camp instead of accepting that he would actually have to let the opposition govern. In order to continue his neoliberal governmental project, he wants to prevent this so-called *cohabitation* at all costs. However, by refusing to play by the basic rules of democracy, Macron has paved the way for permanent crisis. We see the symptoms of this in an endless cycle of new appointments to minority governments, votes of no confidence and a growing pile of unaddressed reforms.

What strategy is Macron pursuing? And why has he ruled out new elections so far?

Once again, the whole country is looking anxiously towards the Élysée

Palace. Nobody really knows exactly what strategy Macron is pursuing. He has never presented a programme for his second term in office, which suggests that he is more concerned with tactics than strategy. The latest polls indicate that new elections would not significantly change the composition of parliament, but that the far-right *Rassemblement National* (RN) could probably make slight gains.

This means that Macron would not be able to create clearer conditions through new elections. Especially since the president has never tackled the reform of the electoral system that has been promised for years. His primary concern will therefore be to keep the executive branch capable of acting, as France urgently needs a budget, which must be decided by the end of the year. Macron has now announced in writing that he intends to appoint a new prime minister in the next few days. He or she would then have to continue in the same vein and organise ad hoc majorities.

What options does Macron have in his search for a candidate to form a new government? Are there any names being mentioned yet?

Theoretically, Macron has four options: he can dissolve the National Assembly and hope that there will be clear majorities after the elections. Macron himself has rejected this option though, citing the difficult reaction of global markets. He could appoint a government of experts, i.e. form a technocratic or budget cabinet that would work through a clearly defined package of austerity measures and reforms. Of course, he could also appoint another prime minister from his centre-right camp. Names such as Minister of the Armed Forces and confidant Sébastien Lecornu or acting Justice Minister Gérald Darmanin are already circulating. However, the opposition has already announced that it intends to respond to such an appointment with an immediate vote of no confidence. Or, and this would probably be the most constructive option, he could offer the job to the Socialists. The *Parti Socialiste* (PS) is demonstratively willing to compromise and sees itself as a mediator between the centrists and the left.

Is it really possible for Macron to entrust a small party with around 12 per cent of the vote with the task of forming a government? What are the PS's positions on the budget and the debt ratio?

It is not unrealistic, and the Socialists could indeed provide a solution. Their coalition with the Greens, Communists and, in 2024, the *Insoumises*, who had joined forces as the *Nouveau Front Populaire*, narrowly won the new elections. Meanwhile, the radical leftists around Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who is highly polarising, are no longer

part of this coalition. This is actually a major advantage for the PS's acceptance among centrists.

For months, the Socialists have been positioning themselves as a bridge between the centre and the left, clearly opposing Barnier and Bayrou's harsh austerity measures. Instead of an annual austerity package worth €44 billion, they are advocating a more balanced and acceptable approach: targeted additional tax revenues, for example by reviving a wealth tax on assets worth €100 million or more, combined with moderate savings. This would reduce the budget deficit more slowly, but in a more socially acceptable manner. Their goal is around five per cent by 2026 and then a gradual reduction to three per cent by 2032.

What does this mean with regard to the 2027 presidential elections? Are we now seeing a new protest movement, and must we prepare ourselves for political instability in France?

If the socialists manage to present themselves as a reliable force capable of governing, they could succeed as a credible centre-left option before 2027 and thus regain ground. At the same time, every new budget dispute increases the risk of protests and social movements. Trade unions, social associations and other organisations are already preparing to resist further possible rounds of austerity measures. France must therefore still prepare for continued political instability, as nerves are on edge.

How are right-wing populists reacting to this complex situation? Will the RN continue to benefit from the fact that the other parties are more and more squandering their trust?

The *Rassemblement National* is, of course, loudly calling for new elections, as forecasts suggest it would emerge stronger with around 33 per cent of the vote. Overall, the RN is benefitting most from the crisis because the loss of confidence in the established parties and politics as a whole is very profound. However, Marine Le Pen has not yet revealed how the RN would solve the country's multiple crises — reducing the budget deficit, for example. The party simply continues to rely on simplistic messages such as savings on migrants and payments to the EU. In the current situation, this is enough to make them appear as shining lights to many voters. As a result, the current crisis is likely to be followed by an even greater crisis in the long term.

This interview was conducted by Philipp Kauppert.



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