DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 10.06.2024 | Adrienne Woltersdorf

Kamikaze Macron

With his call for new elections, the French president may have set the stage for a far-right government

The clocks have been ticking differently in France since the European elections; More than a third of French voters have voted in favour of a far-right party. President Emmanuel Macron, whose centrist *Renaissance* party and its allies suffered a heavy, even devastating defeat with 14.5 per cent, promptly dissolved parliament. Less than an hour after the polls closed on Sunday, Macron announced new elections, scheduled for 30 June — and the second round for 7 July. 'The rise of the nationalists, the demagogues, is a danger for France', declared the president in his dramatically staged televised speech. Now he, of all people, could be the one to open the doors to power for them.

There is no time to search for meaning — to answer the question of whether the president is crazy, a gambler, a brilliant strategist? For there are now 19 days left to fight the wave of right-wing extremism, an endeavour for which the democratic parties believed they had time until the next presidential election in 2027. Whatever Macron has in mind, he is asking French democracy to take a risk without a safety net. Before him, President Jacques Chirac dissolved parliament in a similar kamikaze move in 1997. Back then, things went wrong for the Gaullist: He had to live in *Cohabitation* with a socialist government under Lionel Jospin.

The constitution allows a French president to undermine the prime minister and his government in a variety of ways.

On election night, Macron had hardly let anyone in on his decision. Not even his dynamic Prime Minister Gabriel Attal, whom he had hounded into the increasingly shrill election campaign shortly beforehand. His ministers and MPs were given a strict briefing on Monday. Under no circumstances should they say that the president was planning to break up the *Rassemblement National* (RN) in a new *Cohabitation*. He has no intention of parading Marine Le Pen's party at the pinnacle of power, of bleeding it dry.

The constitution allows a French president to undermine the prime minister and his government in a variety of ways. This makes Macron the sole fighter against the right-wing extremists, confident of victory. The general who destroys 'the legions of evil'. 'But that's not how it works in real life', commented a talk show guest and supporter of the *Les Republicains* party, which Macron has been repeatedly courting in recent weeks. But his idea of a coalition between *Renaissance* and *Republicain* to strengthen his ranks already failed on the Monday after the election. The arch-conservative Republicans simply do not want to work with him.

Macron could also be wrong about the French left. His coup on Sunday evening had the side effect, probably not coincidentally, of spoiling the Socialists' election party. Their candidate, Raphaël Glucksmann, achieved a very good result of 14.2 per cent, catapulting the hitherto hapless Socialists into third place behind the RN and *Renaissance*. While Glucksmann was still confidently and in election campaign mode ranting against a new collaboration with the left-wing populist *La France Insoumise* on TV on election night, Macron had already reshuffled the cards with his announcement.

Formation of a 'popular front'

A fragmented left wouldn't thwart his plans. But even here, not everything in life always goes according to plan. The series of surprises that Paris has been watching with wide eyes and nerves on edge since Sunday continued on Monday. Late in the evening, the representatives of all left-wing parties – i.e. the Socialists, *La France Insoumise*, the Communists, the Greens and a few others – announced that they wanted to form a '*front populaire*', a 'popular front'. This would also mean running with just one candidate in each constituency.

It must have taken a lot of strength for the parties, who have spent the last few months campaigning in merciless competition and mutual insults, to let reason prevail. The *front populaire*, a term used by *Insoumise* MP François Ruffin on social media on election night to call for a left-wing alliance, is catching on. The miracle happened: In just a few hours, the ideological rifts and ruins of the failed previous alliance, the Nupes, had apparently been successfully swept together and a new start had been agreed.

Macron may have set the stage for the election of a far-right government.

The clocks are ticking and the political cards are being reshuffled within hours. Cameras follow every car journey of the leading politicians and decision-makers. This includes Marion Maréchal's visit to her aunt, Le Pen. The niece is

What follows is an election campaign forged out of panic and determination.

a newly elected MEP for the far-right anti-European party *Reconquête* and is now effectively making the case in the media for an alliance between the two far-right parties as well as courting the right-wing populists of the *Republicains*.

With France's two-round electoral system, the two most successful candidates in a constituency go on to the run-off. According to the results of Sunday's European elections, the *Rassemblement*, and even more so the united far-right, would certainly succeed in reaching the second round in almost every constituency. The only way to counter this is for an alliance of left-wing parties, or better still a union of democratic parties, a repeatedly invoked 'republican front', to stand together to block the extreme right. However, the dynamics in the more than 570 constituencies in France are diverse and could still offer countless surprises.

Just days after celebrating the 80th anniversary of D-Day and the successful fight against fascism, President Macron may have set the stage for the election of a far-right government. What follows is an election campaign forged out of panic and determination.



Adrienne Woltersdorf
Paris

Adrienne Woltersdorf heads the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung office in Paris. She was head of the FES Communications Unit and the Office for Regional Cooperation in Asia, based in Singapore, as well as the FES office in Afghanistan. She previously reported for the *Tageszeitung* newspaper in Berlin and Washington, as well as leading *Deutsche Welle*'s China programme.