DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 26.06.2024 | Thierry Pech & Jean-Louis Missika

Macron's tightrope walk over the abyss

As France heads to the polls, a fourth 'cohabitation' seems imminent. What are the implications for the nation's course and the 2027 presidential race?

Since France's Fifth Republic began in 1958, there have been three occasions when the country's president has been from a different political party than the prime minister. It happened twice under the presidency of socialist François Mitterrand (first with conservative Jacques Chirac as prime minister from 1986 to 1988, followed by Edouard Balladur from 1993 to 1995) and later under President Jacques Chirac (with socialist Lionel Jospin as prime minister from 1997 to 2002).

With legislative elections coming up on 30 June and 7 July 2024, we are likely to see a fourth 'cohabitation'. Will it be just like the three before it? Or a kind we have never seen before? And will it jeopardise the chances of the prime minister-to-be in the elections to come, as it did between 1986 and 1988? Those who see it as a possible strategy to keep the far-right National Rally (RN) out of the presidency in 2027 certainly believe so.

What kind of cohabitation will it be?

The first two cohabitations (1986-1988 and 1993-1995) didn't come about by dissolving parliament, but simply through the natural political cycle: the presidential term at the time was seven years and the parliamentary term was five. Both times, the French people awarded a majority of seats to the centre-right opposition parties, mainly the Rally for the Republic (RPR), which later became part of the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP). No crisis. No drama. Just a socialist president respecting the French people's wishes and calling on a conservative coalition to govern their country. And this was made all the easier since the coalition had a clear absolute majority in 1986... and even an overwhelming one in 1993.

The 1997 incarnation looks a little more like what current President

Emmanuel Macron could be facing in 2024, since it was formed after Chirac dissolved the National Assembly, despite not having any obligation to do so. He had a very comfortable majority of 484 seats and wasn't facing a vote of no confidence. Chirac's aim in this 'comfortable dissolution' was to remove members of parliament who supported his party colleague Balladur instead of himself. Dissolving parliament left the political class and commentators in disbelief; no-one could see how this could work, voters even less so.

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This saw Chirac change tack: after campaigning on healing the 'social rift', he sought a new majority to balance the public purse and pursue a policy allowing France to adopt the euro. But the move backfired on Chirac, and all the pollsters (apart from one, BVA) ended up getting it wrong. Instead of handing victory for the right, the French people defied the polls. With a left-wing coalition entering government, Chirac was left politically weaker. But both Prime Minister Jospin and President Chirac played strictly by the institutional rules, cementing a two-way divide for some years to come.

But how would a fourth cohabitation be fundamentally different from 1997? First of all, unlike Chirac, Macron dissolved parliament after a bitter defeat in the European elections — a career low for the incumbent. In 1997, the polls wrongly tipped Chirac and Alain Juppé for victory; today, they are predicting an outright disaster for Macron.

Veiled criticism from outgoing members of the government, who find themselves engaged in sometimes unwinnable battles, risks turning into a war of words, fuelled by anger and bitterness, on the evening of 7 July. But it is not his opponents who will be the hardest on Macron, it's his supporters; there are scores to be settled, leaving the president more alone than ever. If the polls are to be believed, Macron's unilateral decision to call a snap election will be to blame for destroying his parliamentary group and the political party, and the chances of recovering from this will be almost zero.

Implications for the 2027 presidential election

Macron's party's chance of standing for the presidency in 2027 will be

out the window, unlike Mitterrand and Chirac, who were both re-elected president after two and five years of cohabitation respectively. 'Macron the Transformer' will be powered down, entering a long twilight in the form of pre-retirement, snubbed – maybe even despised – by his peers internationally, as his decision has left leaders in Brussels, Washington and Berlin scratching their heads. With no political clout in France, where momentum for the 2027 presidential election will start building up on 8 July, he will be pushed even more to the sidelines.

Finally, and above all, the type of cohabitation that seems inevitable will not be with a governing party in a classic game of alternating between centre-left and centre-right. It will be with a populist and extremist party — one that is itching to rock the boat and whose positions on Ukraine or NATO are very different from those of the centre-left to centre-right parties of the 'Republican arc', breaking with the long traditional doctrine of de Gaulle and Mitterrand. The issue of Russian interference is bound to come up, and skirmishes with the Council of State and the Constitutional Council will only increase, if only to justify their rulings against the National Rally. In Parliament, it will not be the president's party that will be the main opposition for the government in cohabitation, but a left-wing coalition, highly critical of Macronism. This will be a new kind of two-way divide, with at least one side being dominated by an extremist party, marginalising the president even further.

So, it could be a different form of cohabitation emerging from the elections of 30 June and 7 July — one between a tarnished president without political support and a novice political party that seeks to challenge the rule of law and European treaties. A cohabitation that won't resemble any of the three that came before it. France risks sailing into a storm.

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Shrewder minds, though, see this as an ideal opportunity to weaken the National Rally for a good while, since power and reality have always worn down or consumed the popularity of those who occupy it. They point, in particular, to the first cohabitation, which Chirac supporters came out of feeling 'washed out'. Not that this is a foregone conclusion: the cohabitation of 1993-1995 didn't stop the right from winning the presidential election in 1995. And in 1997-2002, Jospin was defeated in the presidential election, but only because of the division on the left weighing more heavily than

the right's exhaustion from holding on to power.

There is nothing to suggest that the National Rally would emerge 'washed out' from a three-year cohabitation, especially since the party is more than aware of the risks. Its leader Jordan Bardella even told the newspaper *Le Parisien* that the party would only enter government if it had an absolute majority, so we can certainly say he is wary of taking power. But then again, we could bet that a would-be prime-minster Bardella would pursue a prudent policy so as not to jeopardise Marine Le Pen's presidential chances in 2027. He has already announced that he will give up a number of policies, such as retirement at age 60.

If elected to the Matignon, there is no doubt he would use the actual hole in the public accounts inherited from his predecessors as an excuse to abandon other promises. And no doubt he would cry foul play and claim he was being prevented from fulfilling the crazy promises he made during the recent campaigns: prevented by the president, by the Constitutional Council, by Europe. Let's not make the mistake of thinking the National Rally would be foolish enough to run at full steam and end up feeling 'washed out' from power.

This article was originally published on La Grande Conversation.



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