DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 28.06.2022 | Marco Bitschnau

No, Emmanuel Macron isn't doomed

The French election results have fed a media frenzy about the disintegration of Macron's political project. But the doomsayers are overreacting

In France, the homeland of dramatists Racine and Corneille, a rather crude political melodrama is being played out these days. In the leading role is none other than the 'Jupiterian president' himself: Emmanuel Macron, who has had to face the verdict of the electorate twice within just a few weeks – once as head of state, and then as the central star of his reform movement, which has once again been rebranded (this time as 'Renaissance'). In supporting roles, the usual suspects: a blustering Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a Marine Le Pen who had undergone a self-assessment, plus the usual round of ex-presidents, trendy candidates, and worldwide news coverage from all over the world on the alert for a *surprise française*.

Already during the first act, Macron's re-election in April, the Pyrrhic undertone with which he commented on the success of the old and new president was irritating. Regardless of the fact that the usual prophecies of doom – a Le Pen victory, France's exit from the EU, liberal-democratic agony – had once again been shattered at the ballot boxes, the press was full of a strange, excessive 'another victory like this and we are lost' melancholy. Macron, they said, had only narrowly escaped defeat, Le Pen was the moral winner, and the disintegration of the liberal centre was a *fait accompli* anyway. These amounted to sibylline whispers that had little in common with the realities of the election.

In the opinion business, it is well known that bad news is good news, but this type of reporting was not comprehensible, even taking journalistic exaggeration into account. Certainly, Macron's runoff result (58.5 per cent), was relatively modest compared to the miraculous 67 per cent of five years earlier; but measured against Fifth Republic electoral standards, it was still a veritable landslide and the third-best result since 1958. Mind you, this is also the case compared to other presidential democracies, where such clear results are rare exceptions. In Peru, for example, if Pedro Castillo defeats the dictator's daughter Keiko Fujimori by a margin of a few thousand votes, that's enough to celebrate him as triumphant; in the case of France, however, even a comfortable margin of millions of votes

does not seem convincing enough.

The second act

Finally, last week, this irritating overture was followed by the second act of the National Assembly elections, which are usually seen as a tedious obligatory exercise to confirm the presidential mandate. Here too, Macron, or rather his centrist Ensemble coalition, succeeded in claiming victory. In the end, they garnered a lead of over one hundred and ten seats (245 to 131) over the left-wing ecological electoral alliance NUPES, which includes the Parti socialiste, the ecological EELV and the Mélenchon's La France Insoumise movement. However, Macron is now short of the 44 seats required for an absolute majority, which is generally granted to the incumbent.

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The deputies of the Ensemble centrist alliance will therefore have to rely on cooperation with other parliamentary groups in future. So far, so simple, but this realisation once again gave rise to the well-known discourse of constant concern mixed with the urge to dramatise, and even drifted into the necrological. In the German press, for exmaple, Martina Meister saw the 'early end of an era' in the world, and the veteran opinion writer Hugo Müller-Vogg even demoted Macron to the status of a French lame duck: 'Olaf Scholz must now lead the EU.'

Now it can hardly be denied that the loss of an absolute majority is a setback for the president and is likely to complicate many legislative projects. But wanting to bury him politically seems to constitute sensationalism, especially since the aforementioned majority, while customary, is ultimately more a matter of habit than a law. By no means have all post-war presidents been lucky enough to be able to rely on a tame national assembly throughout their term. In three cases (Mitterrand/Chirac; Mitterand/Balladur; Chirac/Jospin) the president and prime minister even came from rival parties – an arrangement known in France as '*cohabitation*'.

None of this has meant any interruption in the course of state affairs, especially since a tactically adept president can certainly draw his own advantages from a parliamentary opposition serving as a lightning rod. It is well known that Jacques Chirac's having had to govern with the socialist Lionel Jospin for five years during his third *cohabitation* was detrimental only to Jospin.

Chirac, on the other hand, was able to present himself as the victim of an obstructive lower house and throw the unpopular head of government out of the race in the first round of the 2002 presidential election. Unlike 'Le Bulldozer', Macron cannot run again (and will not be embarrassed by a Socialist prime minister), but the same applies to him. Difficult parliamentary relations may therefore jeopardise the implementation of individual agenda items, but not necessarily the big picture as a whole.

The parliamentary arithmetic

In addition, the previous asymmetry of power is continued even without a *majorité absolue*: on the one hand, the parties of the Ensemble are still stronger than the extreme right and left combined and can therefore easily block any opposition proposal; on the other hand, they can put out feelers themselves to bring the more moderate NUPES elements or the conservative Republicans on board, depending on the situation.

Macron has even already met with Le Pen, who has now been chosen leader of her party group – but the public flirtation with the woman who once called him a 'radical EU extremist' should above all serve to discipline other possible cooperation partners. This is true to the motto that the chef can choose his waiter but not vice versa. Although representatives of the parliamentary competition are still reluctant to make an all too open commitment to cooperation, this hesitation seems to be more a matter of theatre than actual resistance.

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Finally, as far as the competitive dimension is concerned, the NUPES alliance, which was acclaimed on the left, was unquestionably successful compared to the disastrous result in 2017, but undermined the public-opinion expectations even more clearly than Ensemble did. The polling institute Ifop had predicted 160 to 190 seats for the alliance two days before the election; their competitor Cluster17 even came up with 170 to 220 (and thus a result within striking distance of the *majorité relative*). In the end these heights were not even remotely reached. The fact that NUPES is not intended to be a long-term project and will not form a joint parliamentary group is also likely to have a dampening effect on the euphoria, as will the fact that two-thirds of all left-wing candidates lost out in the direct second round duels with

Ensemble.

The performance of the Rassemblement National under the youthful Jordan Bardella is also ultimately far less impressive than one might initially think. A phenomenal 89 seats, a tenfold increase over the previous result, a success that 'sends shock waves through the political establishment' and is tantamount to an 'earthquake' – all this sounds like a turning point and, to use the *mot du jour,* a 'Zeitenwende'. However, when viewed soberly, this remains to be seen, since the 89 deputies make up only around one third of the Ensemble contingent, the tenfold increase is based on a conceivably miniscule starting point of nine seats, and moreover it also seems questionable whether such a minority faction, apart from all symbolic aspects, can actually be said to have the quality of a political 'earthquake'. In any case, the seismographs have not yet recorded anything.

A media frenzy

Ultimately, a look at the competition leads us back to the peculiar drama of reporting, for which every scratch on the incumbent is tantamount to an almost fatal wound, and every partial success of his opponents is an Agincourt-level victory. One could almost suspect an anti-Macron agenda, but it is more likely a desire for alarmism, an urge to indulge in the worst scenario imaginable, to which large parts of the reception of politics are falling victim these days.

However, it is obvious that interpreting victories as defeats and conjuring up an end or a downfall at every available opportunity contributes very little to understanding the situation. In the case of the parliamentary elections, the following is relevant: Did Macron win? Yes. Did he win by a wide margin over the competition? Yes. Did he win by a sufficient margin? No. Does he belong politically in a coffin and consigned to oblivion? No. Will he find ways to organise majorities despite everything? As it stands now, one should assume so.



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