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Pleasure in destruction

From promising reformer to controversial leader — Macron's bold reforms and crazy manoeuvres paved the way for the resurgence of the French far right

On Sunday, the French far right secured a historic win in the first round of the snap elections called by President Emmanuel Macron. The *Rassemblement National* garnered 33 per cent of the vote, with the new left-wing coalition, the New Popular Front, coming in second with 28 per cent. Macron's own centrist party trailed in third place with around 20 per cent of the vote. As Clea Caulcutt reports: 'For the 46-year-old leader of France, Sunday's first-round parliamentary election was a humiliation every bit as personal as his stunning rise to the presidency as a fresh-faced outsider seven years ago.' But how has it come to this?

Just two weeks before the European elections, Macron issued an urgent warning in Dresden about right-wing extremism and rallied people round to defend democracy: right-wing extremism 'is a reality. So let's wake up.' Then, on the evening of the elections, he dissolved the National Assembly, announced parliamentary elections and thus overnight gifted right-wing extremists a credible route to power. Another two weeks later, Macron warned people that France's united left was a hotbed of immorality and anti-Semitism. Such impulsiveness has put off even some of his own supporters. What was the President up to? Why has he plunged his country unnecessarily into such a crisis?

To understand Macron, we need to understand 'Macronism'. What does he stand for? 'For all the time we've been trying to define Macronism, now we know: it's nothing', is how influential columnist Thomas Legran summed it up in *Libération*. Legran may be right as far as the consistency and coherence of Macronism are concerned. Macron has made no attempt to formulate theoretical foundations and his movement *La République en marche*, renamed *Renaissance*, rapidly gave up trying to fulfil the ideological function of a political party. It emerged out of nowhere in 2017 and according to some observers, it's already starting to fall apart.

Changing France's political landscape

Perhaps we can get a handle on Macron's reckless, even crazy manoeuvres by recalling that he has shattered the post-war political system in only five years. Previously, two parties had alternated in governing France, dominating French politics. The Socialists on the centre-left and the Republicans on the centre-right. Both were rapidly dispatched by Macron's movement and today exist only on the margins. Macron's *tour de force* was to combine centre-left and centre-right in a single party, hitherto unprecedented in a Western democracy.

Even before his first election, the following graffiti could be seen in Paris: 'Macron 2017 — Le Pen 2022'. Some on the left probably had a premonition that Macron's policies would exacerbate France's social divide and thus pave the way for *Rassemblement National*. In 2017, Macronism was still considered a left-liberal experiment. Former Socialist Macron promised more democratic institutions, praised France's cultural and religious diversity and talked a lot about preserving the French cultural values of freedom, equality and fraternity.

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His first term was characterised by market reforms aimed at turning France into a 'start-up nation'. People were soon calling him the 'president of the rich', with his faith in trickle-down economics, tax credits for competitiveness and employment, the abolition of the solidarity tax on wealth and the introduction of a flat tax on dividends. Macron's raptures over unleashing 'dynamic enterprise' were conspicuously intermixed with scorn for the 'lazy' and for workers demanding secure jobs and decent pensions.

While Macron was praised in Germany as a visionary European, he adapted the French social model to globalisation in the same spirit. He wants a strong state in order to put it at the service of a 'healthy economy'. He has weaponised laws step by step using emergency measures, toughened up criminal law, and has had his police beat up demonstrating *Gilets Jaunes* with batons to cow them. By governing through decrees and ordinances, sidestepping parliament and resorting to private consultancy firms such as McKinsey or specially convened councils, such as the Defence Council, he is laying the foundations for an authoritarian regime. Macron's neoliberalism, combined with his blatant authoritarianism, quickly formed a whole.

In France, Macronism has been synonymous with illiberalism for quite some time. After systematically destroying the left and right of the Republican government, Macron 'posed as the last bulwark against the extreme right', wrote anthropologist and sociologist Jean-François Bayart in *Le Monde* recently. He compared Macron to the German Chancellor Heinrich Brüning, whose administration hollowed out democratic institutions from 1930 to 1932 and created the coercive instruments that the Nazis merely had to pick up and make their own. Like Brüning, Bayart darkly suggests, Macron's predictable political demise has paved the way to the *Elysée Palace* for Marine Le Pen.

Shaking up the system

'Maximising the possible' is how David Amiel and Ismaël Emelien, two close Macron advisors, described Macronism in 2019 in their manifesto entitled 'Progress doesn't fall from the sky'. A strong dose of disruption was key. Macron, who wanted to establish a broad middle ground and tear down the outdated boundaries between left and right, always intended to shake up the 'system'.

Macron's coup initially left three blocs of similar electoral strength in the French political landscape. A liberal-conservative bloc with Macron; an extreme right-wing bloc with Marine Le Pen; and a left-wing bloc dominated by populist Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Even before his re-election in 2022, however, Macron had anchored himself firmly on the centre-right. Since then, he has taken up extreme right issues and policies, most recently a new immigration law, which he was able to pass with the votes of *Rassemblement National*. In this way, he had won over many conservative Republicans. A side effect of Macron's turn to the right, however, was the increasing normalisation of Marine Le Pen's party in voters' eyes.

Whatever Macron said about a 'start-up nation', he dived into the culture wars early on, probably to distract attention from popular resistance to his social policies. With campaigns on gender theory, banning new gender-inclusive spellings and mockery of so-called 'wokeism', according to Bayart, he legitimised the 'fantasies of the new Right' concerning identity and the nation.

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Naturally, Macron is not the sole cause of right-wing extremism's success. But he and his ministers have danced to Le Pen's tune, for example, by making fun of 'Islamo-leftists' and social security claimants, and even accusing the

that many, especially in neighbouring European countries, thought they saw.

Rassemblement leadership of being 'too soft on Islam'. They are thus responsible for taking over radical narratives, spreading them and bringing them into the mainstream.

In parliament, Macron's movement has failed to maintain a firewall against the right. At the 2020 municipal elections, the Macronists largely backed right-leaning mayoral candidates. *Rassemblement National* representatives were thus able to boost their influence fairly effortlessly. Anyone whose eyes were open could see that Macron's policies over the years, despite his rhetoric, have never been the 'firewall against populism' that many, especially in neighbouring European countries, thought they saw.

By calling a new election, Macron made it clear that he was no longer worried about a *Rassemblement National* government. Since dissolving parliament, he has repeatedly stated that these elections will bring 'clarity'. He would have no problem cohabiting with *Rassemblement National*. He and *Renaissance* have already taken many of their ideas on board, particularly in the areas of authority, security, and combating immigration and terrorism.

What is likely to be remembered about Macronism is its appetite for destruction.

He may have imagined that the chaos that he has unleashed would split the remainder of the right and that Republicans who reject an alliance with *Rassemblement National* would cleave to him. He has also calculated that those on the left opposed to teaming up with the controversial *La France Insoumise* would do the same. The right has indeed split, but no one is jumping ship to a rudderless Macronism. As for the left, they have united, as they have so many times before, standing shoulder to shoulder against the far-right threat.

Macron's election campaign, in which he attacked the left at every opportunity, basically seemed to be saying 'rather *Rassemblement National* than the left-wing New Popular Front'. This sentiment is reminiscent of the 1930s, when France's ruling classes gravitated towards Hitler rather than Léon Blum.

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the SS, he remarked about the dissolution: 'I've been preparing this for weeks and I'm delighted. I pulled the pin and lobbed my grenade right in the middle of them. Now we'll see how they get out of it...' Right now, it looks like Macron's strategy will backfire.



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.