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Rien ne va plus

Almost two months after the parliamentary elections, nothing works in French politics anymore. Ways out of the crisis are being desperately sought

A joke has been going around in France: Emmanuel Macron, France's president, is said to have embraced the sports stars at the Olympic Games in Paris for such a long time so that he would not have to govern again. The joyfully elegant Olympic choreography and the French athletes' top performances contrast strangely with a political leadership that is stubbornly and reflexively becoming ever more entangled in its own contradictions. The image that France is currently presenting of itself could hardly be more confusing. Around two weeks after the 'Olympic truce' ordered by Macron and almost two months after the early parliamentary elections, the fate of the country remains unclear. The president is in no hurry to appoint a prime minister, nor is he prepared to appoint Luci Castets, the candidate put forward by the left-wing opposition, as head of government. So just what is this all about?

Parisian feuilletonists, rarely at a loss for intellectual sense, are losing their bearings. Is the country now in a crisis of politics or a crisis of institutions? Some are looking for answers in the new literary publications of the autumn, in which novelists such as Aurélien Bellanger attempt, not for the first time, to pin down the man at the head of state, at least in literary - or more banal: psychological - terms. In *Les Derniers jours du Parti socialiste* ('The Last Days of the Socialist Party', September 2024), Bellanger calls the barely fictionalised president the 'prince of indecision' and a 'trickster of himself'.

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But first back to the facts: Macron had, without ever providing a plausible explanation, reinterpreted the European elections as a kind of referendum on his government. Even before the final result was announced, he ordered new elections to the French parliament - with the shortest period of time permitted by the constitution. As is well known, this turned out disastrously for Macron. The nation held its

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breath for weeks as it looked as though the far-right around Marine Le Pen could win an absolute majority in the National Assembly for the first time. Only France's majority voting system and the disciplined and tireless campaigning of the ad hoc left-wing alliance *Nouveau Front Populaire* caused Le Pen's narrow failure. The voters rewarded the heroism of the left-wing Front and made the alliance - consisting of the Socialists, *La France insoumise* (the '*indomitable*'), the Greens and the Communists - the strongest parliamentary group, followed by Macron's *ensemble alliance* and finally, as the third camp, that of the far-right extremists.

Since then: *Rien ne va plus* - nothing works anymore in French politics. The dramatically shrunken Macron camp is endeavouring to whitewash the situation. 'Nobody has won the election', they repeat time and time again and even more shrilly declare that the greatest threat to French politics is posed by the left-wing populist *La France insoumise*, the 'unbending' around Jean-Luc Mélenchon. And this is where things start to get crazy. Mélenchon's egocentric political style is a horror to many. But to portray his party, which is committed to fair democracy and the rule of law, as a greater danger than the far-right, fascist, racist and anti-Semitic *Rassemblement* is almost incomprehensible. Macron had already made massive attempts to divide the left-wing alliance during the election campaign, threatening to seek the co-operation of the *Parti Socialiste*. He rejects any dialogue with *La France insoumise*, as well as any government in which the 'unbending' are involved. And this week he refused to appoint Lucy Castets, the candidate of the still united left-wing alliance, as Prime Minister.

A broken social contract

Is he allowed to do that? It seems that only constitutional lawyers can bring order to the chaos he has created. Their answer is yes and no. According to the constitution, there is no deadline by which the French president must appoint a new government. The previous government under Gabriel Attal, which was voted out of office, is currently governing as a caretaker government. A circumstance that could lead to a constitutional crisis in a few weeks - or not. Macron has been talking to party leaders and group chairmen behind closed doors for a week. He clearly only sees his future in an alliance between right-wing Republicans and the *Parti Socialiste*. A formation that would have just the right

number of MPs to achieve an absolute majority in parliament - under his political leadership, of course. However, the Socialists have always rejected this and remain loyal to the left-wing alliance. The result is an almost irresolvable stalemate.

This is the part of the crisis that can be interpreted politically: a president and his parliamentary group that do not accept that they were voted out of office in two elections and three rounds of voting. The left is furiously accusing Macron of rejecting democracy. For its part, however, it cannot convincingly explain why it still strictly insists on wanting to implement its programme exclusively as the governing parliamentary group with Castets at the helm - albeit and only with a relative majority in parliament. This is where the crisis of the institutions in which France's Fifth Republic finds itself begins. Some constitutionalists doubt that the president (in his role as guarantor of institutional stability) should presume to judge the future prospects of a future government. Macron's justification for not appointing Castets is based on the fact that this government does not have a solid majority and could be toppled almost immediately with motions of censure. But in doing so, he is also denying parliamentarism the chance to prove itself. It is as if he sees himself as a judge and a party at the same time.

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Nathalie Tehio, chairwoman of the French League for Human Rights, is therefore not holding back with her criticism. 'Macron is behaving as if there had been no elections and no clear will of the voters.' He should actually behave like a statesman and appoint the candidate of the majority faction - everything else would then be a matter for the 'parliamentary game'. In her opinion, however, Macron wants to continue to hold all the power in his hands and does not shy away from reading the 1958 constitution in an increasingly authoritarian way. 'It is simply no longer legitimate to pretend that nothing has happened,' rages Tehio. Democracy is the separation of powers and the rule of law. 'Today, we have arrived in a system that no longer conforms to the idea we had of democracy. The social contract is broken.'

Ways out of France's crisis are being desperately sought. No wonder the pressure on the Socialists in parliament and within the party is increasing daily. Would it not be better for them to give in and leave the left-wing

alliance in order to end the unworthy stalemate and govern together with the Macron camp? Some voices in the party that are not without influence are calling on party leader Olivier Faure to leave the *Nouveau Front Populaire*. He recently reiterated his solidarity with the left-wing alliance. The Socialists have some tricky days ahead of them. Regardless of how they position themselves in the end, it will have serious consequences for the left and for France.



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