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Who will save the French Left?

France's presidential elections in 2022 are heading towards another showdown between Macron and Le Pen. Can a disunited Left offer an alternative?

The 2022 presidential elections in France are drawing near. The vast majority of the population (70 per cent) believe that avoiding a duel between President Macron and Marine le Pen is absolutely necessary. All of the election polls, however, suggest precisely this scenario as the most likely. Currently, apart from these two candidates, only Xavier Bertrand, conservative regional president of the Hauts-de-France region in northern France, could make it into the second round.

In the left-wing camp, only Jean-Luc Mélénchon, chairman of the radical left party La France Insoumise (LFI), has officially declared his candidacy. But neither he nor other left-wing figures seem able to turn things around. Anne Hidalgo, the mayor of Paris, is likely to be put forward by the Socialists (PS), and Yannick Jadot by the Greens. However, none of them has so far received more than 10 per cent in the pre-election polls. Any one of the three would need at least 20 per cent to reach the second round.

As recently as 2012, under President François Hollande, the Left dominated parliament. Nine years later, it seems to have completely disintegrated. How could it have come to this? How much hope is there that the Left will still play a role in the near future?

The Left's slow decline

First, let us look at the breakdown which occurred in 2017. After the lost local elections of 2014, the Socialist Party's core electorate voted partly for the leader of the extreme left, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, and partly for Emmanuel Macron in the presidential elections. Without these votes, Macron would not have been elected. Many saw in him the heir to an antiquated socialism who would now usher in a modernisation.

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Macron in the first round of the presidential election. Things did not go any better in the parliamentary elections that followed: left with only about 30 elected MPs, the Socialist Party was bled dry at the beginning of the current five-year term. Many were already predicting its final demise.

Forty-seven per cent of those who voted for François Hollande in 2012 chose Macron in the first round of the presidential election.

According to the polls, voters of the Socialist Party have failed to return on a permanent basis ever since. Thus, in the 2019 European elections the Greens succeeded in asserting themselves as serious competition on the left – they had already done well in the European elections. However, the local elections in spring 2020 delivered a surprising success to the Socialists. While President Macron's LREM (The Republic on the Move) party suffered a defeat, the Socialists were able to hold their own thanks to their solid anchoring in the cities and municipalities.

As a result, they conquered Nancy and – together with the Green party EELV – Marseille and Bordeaux. In large cities such as Lille, Paris, Brest, and Montpellier, they managed to gain control of the town administration. However, this success cannot hide the fact that they are unable to present a comprehensive, credible and ambitious social project. They also lack a strong central figure – and having one is indispensable for the direct elections to the presidency.

The inner left schism

In a France on the verge of a nervous breakdown, internally torn over issues such as security, secularism, Europe, unemployment and the distribution of wealth, the Left now epitomises the Gaulish village. It is no longer able to provide clear principles that are accepted by the population.

A joint candidacy between the EELV and PS would still be conceivable. Both parties are well aware that they will not win on their own. But closing ranks with LFI is much more difficult. This is primarily due to their leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon. He still harbours a desire for revenge against his former companions in the Socialist Party. There are also great differences in matters of substance, for example when it comes to secularism and the relationship to Islam – a highly explosive topic in France in general. There are also enormous differences on economic issues, where Mélenchon is taking direction from the South American Left. The differences persist on the shape of international relations.

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If the Left were on an equal footing with the right-wing camp, these different currents could complement each other in useful ways. In view of their current situation, however, any separation is destructive. It would be best for everyone involved to take some steps in each others directions. The regional elections scheduled for June suggest, however, that there are still deep rifts to be overcome on the path forward.

Only in a few regions is there any sign of an agreement between the left-wing parties in the first round. On average, each party is hoping to achieve a better result than the other to then be able to impose its own conditions on that other party by pointing out its impending insignificance if they fail to agree.

What is the future of the French Left?

The fact that the Left lost its traditional stronghold of Hauts-de-France in 2015 is forcing them to form an alliance against the Rassemblement National and against Xavier Bertrand, who will be a serious opponent in the 2022 elections. How that will work out remains to be seen. It is likely to carry implications for the future strategy of the left.

Then there is the choice of a candidate. Is a preliminary election necessary? The EELV party is taking this route. For Yannick Jadot, its former top candidate in the European elections, this could mean the end. The French Greens have a tendency to sacrifice their leaders in the name of a collective vision of power that is incompatible with French institutions. However, there are voices already warning against falling into this trap.

Currently, there is little evidence of a comprehensive social vision on the part of the French Left. While the Covid-19 crisis is offering it the opportunity to emphasise social issues and revive Keynesianism, the Left continues to split. It seems as though the Left will have to hit rock bottom before it can be saved. One characteristic of French culture is the idea of a great saviour who emerges, but so far it seems impossible to combine this concept with that of a collective project.



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