The Weekend Essay   Life & Arts

# Macron, Le Pen and France's long battle between order and dissent

Charles de Gaulle said the French were 'ingouvernables'. Do the country's widening divisions prove him right?

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The first French presidential election I ever followed closely took place in 1974, and it was a captivating affair. I remember the television debate between the standard-bearer of the moderate right, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, and the Socialist party candidate, François Mitterrand; Giscard d'Estaing landed a decisive blow on his adversary when he declared: "*Vous n'avez pas . . . le monopole du coeur*" ("You do not have a monopoly on the heart").

The contest ended with a close-run victory for Giscard d'Estaing, and for almost the next five decades, power swung regularly between the two stable blocs, the moderate right and the moderate left; Mitterrand was later elected for two terms.

This solid alternation seems a world away from this year's contest. Today, the main presidential parties of the moderate right and left, the Republicans and the Socialists, who between them furnished the Fifth Republic with most of its presidents, are dead; their candidates Valérie Pécresse and Anne Hidalgo failed to reach the 5 per cent threshold which guarantees public reimbursement of campaign expenses.

The figure of the 2022 vintage whose campaign told you most about contemporary France was arguably neither the frontrunner and incumbent president Emmanuel Macron, nor his far-right challenger Marine Le Pen, but the democratic socialist candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Mélenchon came third in the race, winning 22 per cent of the vote, but he embodies the contradictions of modern French political culture: a former senator turned radical reformer, a 70-year-old veteran who counts the young among his primary constituencies.

Mélenchon's cerebral progressivism reminded me of Mitterrand in the 1970s, but he also symbolises France's hunger for radical social and political reform, as well as the deep popular frustration with the nation's established elites. His campaign also embodied a regular feature of French presidential elections under the Fifth Republic: the figure who unexpectedly bursts on to the scene. In 2002 this was Jean-Marie Le Pen, the founder of the far-right Front National and father of Marine Le Pen; and in 2017, it was Macron, of course, whose En Marche movement was created only a year earlier.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon appears on television after coming third in the first round of voting on April 10 . . . © Bloomberg

. . . watched on a giant screen by a crowd of his supporters in Paris © Bloomberg

The critical realignments that came to light in the 2017 election — the emergence of a new political force around Macron and the disintegration of the traditional ruling parties of the Fifth Republic — have accelerated. France's underlying socio-economic cleavages have all hardened under the Macron presidency: the split between the prosperous big cities (especially Paris) and the struggling small towns; the divisions between urban and rural France; the rifts in the experiences and world views of the young and the old, the bourgeoisie and the working classes, and more generally the optimistic and globalising Europhiles and the more pessimistic, inward-looking nationalists; and above all the dissonances between technocratic parties of government and populists from the left and the right.

Political divisions are normal in modern France: in the 1970s it was standard to refer to the nation as "*coupée en deux*" ("cut in half"). But today's fractures run much deeper.

The one clear message to emerge through the first round was the strengthening of the populist vote compared with 2017: this time, anti-establishment candidates won a thumping majority. Just between them, Mélenchon and Le Pen took 45 per cent of the vote (compared with Macron's 28 per cent), and if we then include the other dissident candidates (Green, nationalists and radical left) the anti-system tally climbs to nearly two-thirds of the electorate (it was just under 50 per cent in 2017).

The most remarkable outcome of the 2022 election was the emergence of three distinct blocs, clustered around the centre, the democratic socialist and anti-capitalist left, and the radical right. Insofar as there is a precedent for such a configuration, it goes back to the early cold war era, when a centrist "Third Force", made up of small conservative, liberal and socialist parties, governed the Fourth Republic in the face of implacable opposition from the Gaullists and Communists. It is not a felicitous precedent, as the regime was plagued by instability and collapsed in 1958, paving the way for the Fifth Republic.

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**What do these patterns tell us** from a broader historical perspective? It might be tempting to connect events in France with the recent global populist surges that found expression in the Brexit movement in Britain and the victories of Donald Trump in the US, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and more recently Viktor Orban in Hungary.

But such international comparisons are only superficially relevant: this continues, in the main, to be a singularly French story. Today's three dominant political blocs have profound historical roots in French political culture.

Graffiti on a Paris statue declares 'Neither Le Pen nor Macron' © AFP via Getty Images

Le Pen's movement, Rassemblement National, is the inheritor of French authoritarian nationalism, which emerged in the later decades of the 19th century under the Third Republic and gave rise to Boulangism (Europe's first modern populist movement), interwar fascism, the collaborationist Vichy regime, the 1950s anti-tax and anti-parliamentarian Poujadist movement and the Algérie Française revolt of the early 1960s, which sought to retain French colonial rule in Algeria.

Mélenchon's La France Insoumise traces its ancestry to the radical republican, democratic socialist and internationalist traditions of the 1789 and 1848 revolutions and the Paris Commune, while Macron's bourgeois liberalism is a throwback to Orléanism, the dominant intellectual force in mid to late 19th-century French politics.

As Macron's presidency has shown, French political liberalism is markedly different from its Anglo-American variant: it readily embraces centralised power, is suspicious of pluralism, and its philosophical rationalism can be deeply elitist. It is not surprising that the *gilets jaunes* movement emerged in 2018-19 to challenge Macron (they labelled him "the president of the rich"), especially as it too drew on a long French tradition of anti-state protest that has unfolded with quasi-cyclical regularity since the end of the second world war.

The tension between legitimate rule and dissent is still at the heart of French political culture. It represented the two faces of Charles de Gaulle, who disobeyed his superiors in 1940 to launch the French Resistance against the Germans and later helped plot the military coup that brought down the parliamentary Fourth Republic; but he was also a man of order who believed in strong centralised leadership. He designed the Fifth Republic's institutions to restrict the power of political parties, whose activities he thought contrary to the national interest, and subdue the French tendency, inherited from the revolutionary traditions of radical republicanism, to challenge and subvert established authority.

Emmanuel Macron lays a wreath at the foot of a statue of de Gaulle in Paris in 2020 to mark VE Day . . . © AFP via Getty Images

. . . while at a monument in Île-de-Sein, Marine Le Pen commemorates de Gaulle's 'Call of June 18' and the start of the wartime Resistance movement © Alain Robert/SIPA/Shutterstock

The much-criticised presidential regime has shown considerable structural resilience. Successive political movements have been shaped in the image of its Gaullist founder. This remains true in 2022: the three major winners are all leaders of centralised movements, purpose-built to support their candidacies, with broad programmatic visions and little internal democratic accountability. The old French bon mot still applies: humankind can be divided into two groups, leftwing Gaullists and rightwing Gaullists.

However, other enduring features of the Gaullist tradition have proved far less consensual — notably the contempt for civil society and the recourse to illiberal regulation and exceptional measures. Under Macron, this was illustrated by the folding of emergency anti-terrorist regulations into statutory law and a new security law that allows drones to film the population; these and other heavy-handed measures have been criticised by Amnesty International.

French anti-establishment sentiment is fuelled too by another contested feature of Gaullist governance: the penetration of political elites by the technocratic *grandes écoles* — an incremental process that was accelerated in the later 20th century under the presidencies of Mitterrand and Gaullist leader Jacques Chirac. French anti-elitism also fuels the resentment of Paris, one of the classic features of French political culture, and it partly explains the dismal failures of the candidacies of Hidalgo (the current mayor of Paris) and Pécresse (president of the regional council of Île-de-France and graduate of the École nationale d'administration).

Macron, a technocrat who never stood for election before 2017, has come to embody this tradition of Parisian aloofness, despite his symbolic decision to close down the ENA in the aftermath of the *gilets jaunes* protests. Hence the animosity the president often experiences on the campaign trail, especially when he talks down to ordinary voters ("*Vous êtes fou?*" ("Are you crazy?") he retorted to one of his contradictors on the campaign trail this month).

It is also worth remembering that the Fifth Republic was born out of a colonial war in Algeria, and its often unresolved legacies still cast a shadow on French public life. Le Pen's father Jean-Marie began his political career as a Poujadist deputy, fiercely committed to upholding French colonial rule, and later served as an officer in the French parachute regiment during the Algerian war of national liberation.

The conservative nationalist refrain about French "decline", expressed by the candidacy of the far-right conspiracy theorist Eric Zemmour (who believes that French native populations are being "replaced" by immigrants), is a thinly veiled manifestation of postcolonial trauma (Zemmour's parents were Algerian-born Jews who left Algeria in the early 1950s). The racism and discrimination faced by French minorities, and the stigmatisation of French Muslims as imperfect citizens and potential traitors, follow orientalist tropes that were developed during the Algerian war.

A crowd in Toulouse in 2020 protesting at the planned introduction of a 'global security' law to strengthen police powers © NurPhoto via Getty Images

But the French colonial past can also be a source of positivity, as with the Moroccan-born Mélenchon, who grew up in Tangier surrounded by people speaking Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese and French; it was, as he puts it, a "vaccination against intolerance". Away from the howls of the purveyors of cultural hatred, there is a lived, practical French multiculturalism which is quietly emerging, in keeping with Mélenchon's ideal of "*créolisation*". But it will be a long journey, especially as Macron has done little to help it flourish during his first term.

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**The collapse of the moderate right** and consolidation of the radical right can both largely be credited to Macron's political engineering over the past five years. Elected with the promise of heralding a new kind of politics (his campaign book was entitled *Révolution*), Macron can take credit for restoring the domestic and international authority of the French presidency, promoting French economic growth and foreign investment, and reducing unemployment.

However the president rapidly abandoned his progressive reform agenda, notably on the environment, gender equality, democratic governance and inner-city regeneration. He anchored his economic policies on the right, placing former Républicain stalwart Bruno Le Maire in the key ministry of economic affairs and finance. Macron and Le Maire proceeded to steer the French economy along a neoliberal path, cutting taxes for employers, reforming the labour code to make it easier to lay off workers and slashing the wealth tax.

Macron meets construction workers in northern France this month . . . © EPA-EFE

. . . and Le Pen campaigns at a factory near Paris © Alain Robert/SIPA/Shutterstock

In Macron's France, according to a 2021 report from the Institut des Politiques Publiques, the standard of living of the poorest 5 per cent has fallen. The results of the 2022 first-round election largely confirm Macron's status as "the president of the rich": affluent voters (those earning more than €3,500 per month) flocked to the president (39 per cent), while those on low incomes (€1,000 or less) voted overwhelmingly for Mélenchon (33 per cent) and Le Pen (32 per cent).

This conservative realignment of the Macron presidency is even more apparent in his policies towards France's Muslim minorities. Seconded by the hardline Gérald Darmanin at the interior ministry (another recruit from the Républicains), Macron often deployed aggressive rhetoric against French Muslims. He gave an interview about Islam to the far-right magazine Valeurs Actuelles in 2019, and borrowed many standard Islamophobic tropes, notably by using the catch-all expression "*islamisme*" to blur the lines between religious faith and terrorism. A Muslim woman candidate was banned from standing for Macron's party in the 2021 local elections because she was pictured on a campaign poster in a hijab.

Under the pretext of protecting French *laïcité* (secularism), the president also passed a controversial law against "separatism", criticised for being aimed at Islamic communities. As also noted by Amnesty International, this illiberal legislation has increased the public stigmatisation of Muslims and the capacity of the French state to regulate their beliefs and behaviour, as well as their religious and cultural associations.

The night of his election in May 2017, Macron vowed to do everything to stop the French from voting for extreme parties. He has done the exact opposite. His economic policies have aggravated the split between the haves and have-nots and reinforced Le Pen's stranglehold on the working-class vote.

At the same time, his aggressive brand of *laïcité* has helped legitimise the far-right Zemmourist narrative about French Islam as a subversive force that is out to destroy France's traditional culture and way of life. Le Pen did the rest by rebranding her party, focusing on material rather than cultural issues in her 2022 campaign, softening her personal image and abandoning some of her more outlandish policies (such as leaving the European Union).

Le Pen, who has softened her personal image since her 2017 campaign, meets locals at a market near Marseille this month © Reuters

She is now the second most popular political figure in France. Yet there is no evidence that she has moderated her fundamental views. Her speeches invariably associate immigrants with economic damage, criminality and antisocial behaviour; this message is quietly repeated every weekend by Rassemblement National activists when they hand out leaflets at local fairs and street markets.

Le Pen has weaponised secularism into an instrument for attacking Muslims and already won the argument: for years now, polls show that French voters are concerned about "Islamism" (an entity that is never clearly defined, even by the pollsters). A 2019 survey found that 61 per cent of the French believed that the Islamic faith was "incompatible with the values of French society". The discriminatory and xenophobic principle of "national preference" (relabelled "national priority"), which seeks to exclude access to jobs, housing and welfare services to non-French natives, is still at the heart of Le Pen's presidential programme, and she has vowed to implement it even if it means amending the French constitution and taking on French and European judicial institutions.

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**We can expect plenty more turbulence** in the years to come (in his darker moments, de Gaulle used to say that the French were "*ingouvernables*"). Five-year terms for presidents, reduced from seven years from the 2002 election onwards, have exacerbated the volatility of the Fifth Republic, making the executive more exposed and more brittle: neither Nicolas Sarkozy nor François Hollande served a second term, and Macron's first term has been sticky at best.

A man in a 'gilet jaune' jacket shows his dissatisfaction with President Macron in Denain, northern France, this month © AFP via Getty Images

If re-elected, Macron will rule over a country more divided, and more polarised, than five years ago; this will probably, and perversely, reinforce the Elysée's bunker mentality and unleash fresh waves of protest (notably with respect to Macron's controversial plans to raise the retirement age). A French president also needs a parliamentary majority to govern, and the upcoming June legislative elections will not be as plain sailing as in 2017, especially given the failure of the president's party to entrench itself locally and the depressed vote of the moderate right and left.

Mélenchon is already positioning himself as a prime minister, hoping to secure a parliamentary majority around his programme. This is possible — almost anything is possible these days — but not likely. One thing is for sure: the French cycle of legitimation and contestation is set to continue, as its people battle with the twin passions of their historical political culture: order and equality.

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Correction*: The presidential term was reduced to five years from the 2002 election, not the 2007 election as originally stated.*
*The standard of living of France's poorest 5 per cent has fallen, according to an IPP report, not their purchasing power as originally stated.*

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