

Report from Paris by Jean Baptiste Blondel

Presidential vote: harsh lessons

Chirac could still win on May 8, but he must sail between Scylla and Charybdis—and run on the real issues.

The first round of the French presidential elections April 24 marked a brutal change in the political landscape. The breadth of the “protest” vote toward the left and right extremes, the disappointing results for the Gaullist RPR party, and the weak overall total for the traditional conservative parties, presage big upheavals ahead, whatever the outcome of the second round, which is still uncertain—despite Socialist incumbent François Mitterrand’s lead.

The first observation to be made concerns the famous 14.4% of the vote captured by the extreme-right populist, Jean-Marie Le Pen, and on the other hand, the 8.5% of votes distributed among several ultraleft slates. Arising from protest, despair, or cynicism, these votes are a real “punitive vote,” especially since abstention was very low: 18.6%. This bespeaks a sharp rejection of the big traditional parties, reputed to be moderate, but by their own admission, impotent to deal with the crisis. “I am a disturber of the establishment,” Le Pen asserts.

But it is also a symptom of growing radicalization and potential future troubles. The far right exploits the racial tension arising from unemployment and poverty; the ultra-left propels this tension into a confrontation with the right; and two groups adding up to 6% of the vote demand the end of all French civil and military nuclear programs. For example, one explanation commentators give for Le Pen’s 14.4%, was Mitterrand’s proposal, a few days before the first round, to give

voting rights to immigrants.

The 6.7% garnered by the Communist Party’s candidate, André Lainé, does not indicate radicalization. It’s actually an “establishment” party in rout, whose activist base is getting older and smaller all the time. A large part of its working-class voters have turned toward Jean-Marie Le Pen’s National Front. Yet, counting the Communists, the far left’s vote was as big as the far right’s: 15%.

The second observation concerns disaffection with the RPR party, whose candidate, Premier Jacques Chirac, only got 19.9%—4% below the polls. This score, barely above what he got in 1981, is a bitter blow. But the Gaullists have themselves to blame, for their total failure to introduce serious debate on their positive programs. Chirac did stand up for his conceptions about the crucial strategic role that France will have to play vis-à-vis Europe and the United States in the face of the Reagan-Gorbachov accords, but only in limited circles. Among other things, this entails modernizing France’s tactical nuclear capability and bolstering Franco-German collaboration, as the axis of a “European pillar” of the Atlantic Alliance. Otherwise, Chirac and his agriculture minister aim for a “Marshall Plan” toward the Third World, to save it, build up a basis for development, and set nations back on the path to industrialization.

Chirac and his finance minister also recently proposed interesting reforms for the monetary system, especially

concerning Third World debt. Yet, shying away from polemics, Chirac only vaguely evoked these themes during the first round of the campaign. Whenever the fears of joblessness, terrorism, drugs, and AIDS were raised, he merely flaunted his sun-tanned looks.

The “traditional” conservative parties polled only 36.5% in round one, 6% less than in 1981 and barely 2% above what Mitterrand won alone.

The electorate that *could* vote for Chirac is around 51%, but there are certain obstacles in the way, which Mitterrand will surely exploit. Chirac’s potential election depends on his allying with two groups that detest each other: the liberal UDF party which ran Raymond Barre, and the National Front of Le Pen, which is overtly backed by the Moonies. Some elements of the National Front are threatening to vote for Mitterrand, if Chirac does not satisfy them on the immigration issue, while some centrist layers of the UDF say they will vote for Mitterrand, if Chirac were too soft on Le Pen’s racist ideas.

Short of forcing the debate against the New Yalta and for the Marshall Plan, Chirac will have trouble solving this dilemma. When Barre made his concession speech in Chirac’s favor, he warned: “I count on his defending . . . an open and tolerant society which rejects xenophobia, racism, and all the extremisms.” Chirac fumbled: “May our national identity be upheld and illegal immigration be fought as we have begun to fight it.”

The May 8 final round could be decisive in terms of France’s policy orientations. The potential defeat of the Gaullist party will sink an important point of resistance to the New Yalta. Further, the very idea of a Marshall Plan may be called into question: The forces around Mitterrand give priority to a “Marshall Plan” not toward the South, but toward the East.