

Report from Paris by Laurent Rosenfeld

Mitterrand's unpopularity confirmed

The first round of the county elections also undermined Le Pen's fascist National Front, and creamed the Greens.

The first round of the French "cantonales" (county) elections on Sunday, March 10, confirmed the collapse of the present governing coalition: The Socialist Party and the Movement of Left Radicals (MRG) polled together only slightly more than a quarter of the votes (26.35%). In June 1981, in the aftermath of Mitterrand's presidential victory, these two parties had won 37.51% of the votes in the first round of the national elections and a comfortable absolute majority in the National Assembly (similarly to what happens in a U.S. presidential election, the two-round polling system in France tends to favor the winner, so that 37% of the votes may be sufficient to obtain more than 50% of the seats). Compared to the results four years ago, the March 10 elections show how the policy followed in the last four years by the Socialist government induced a sharp fall of popularity for Mitterrand's allies.

The picture looks even dimmer for the "left wing" if the results of the Communist Party (PCF), which supported Mitterrand's candidacy but since left the coalition, are added. The PCF fell from 22.46% of the votes in the last similar elections of 1979 to 12.51% this time. Together, the parties which made Mitterrand's victory thus fall from about 53% four years ago to 37.86%, or slightly less than 40% with the addition of miscellaneous political formations in between the left and the right, but believed to be rather on the left side.

At the same time, the right-wing

opposition managed to poll almost half the votes (49.05%), without counting Jean-Marie Le Pen's extreme right-wing fascist and racist Front National (which received 8.5% of the votes, down 3 points compared to the last European elections of June 1984). This means that, contrary to the propaganda campaign run by the left, the right-wing opposition might well be able to rule after next year's parliamentary elections without having to rely on the support of Le Pen's movement. Thus, Le Pen would likely fail to perform his spoiler's game or to impose some of his views in exchange of his support in the house.

This is what the leaders of the traditional right wing parties have understood: After having been very cautious on the issue throughout the campaign, they sacrificed a few county seats, and perhaps the majority in one or two departments, by openly stating their refusal to ally with the National Front for the second round on March 17.

The opposition managed to defuse most of the dangers of the National Front time bomb that the left-wing government was hoping to set off on them. Knowing that it will lose the next general elections, the government is planning to change the polling system, going towards a parliamentary representation that is more (or completely) proportional to the votes. This would make a majority impossible in the parliament and leave much more maneuvering room to President Mitterrand (the next presidential election

is two years off in 1988); at the same time, this modification of the polling system was aimed at allowing the Socialists to say that the right wing could rule only with the alliance of the National Front, a party many moderate right-wing voters would refuse to support. The breadth of the opposition's votes now allows its leaders to reject clearly this argument, since they have already showed this week their refusal to ally with Le Pen and they are likely to obtain a majority in parliament without having to rely on Le Pen's deputies.

The elections brought two other interesting results. First, the French Greenies, who oppose nuclear energy and nuclear weapons alike, got only 0.7% of the votes nationally, and are thus relegated to the rank of an insignificant force. At the same time, the only French party which wholeheartedly supports Reagan's SDI program, a development program for the third world and a change in economic policy away from the International Monetary Fund, Jacques Cheminade's Parti Ouvrier Europeen, emerged as an increasingly important force. Although financial reasons forced the POE to run in only 50 counties and prevented it from running a big campaign where it had candidates—the POE thus had to limit itself to national issues in an election where local questions are very important—the POE more than doubled its score from its previous campaign in the 1984 European elections, from 0.4% to more than 1%—more than the Greenies. Although still low, the result is encouraging for a young party which had no local personality and little financial means. Jacques Cheminade, the POE secretary-general, stressed on the day after the elections that these votes represent a support for ideas, disregarding local political maneuvers.