

Chirac's Landslide, Or Premature Burial?

by Christine Bierre

As was to be expected, the second round of the French National Assembly elections, on June 16, confirmed the landslide victory of President Jacques Chirac's UMP party coalition in the first round a week earlier. The results of the two rounds of the Presidential elections in March, followed by these legislative contests in June, are so paradoxical that it cries out for some clinical analysis of what French citizens are thinking.

The elections took place over several months in which the French economy—recently hyped as “the strongest in Europe”—was “going south,” especially with unemployment rising. Now, just as President Chirac is forming his government, the U.S. dollar has gone into a sharp fall, and with it, the U.S. economy heads into a “second dip” after the plunge of 2000-01. This crisis will put into question whether Chirac can carry out his extremely contradictory electoral program, which called for both large tax reductions, and big increases in spending on security and social infrastructure.

‘Abstention’ Did Extremely Well

With 358 seats out of 577 total, Chirac's coalition has the absolute majority in the new National Assembly. The Socialists, whose chairman, then-Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, lost the Presidential race, also suffered major legislative losses, going from 248 seats to 140. Altogether the conservative parties, including the centrist UDF, have a total of 399 seats, while the Socialists and other left parties have 175.

Among the major vote-getters, so to speak, was “abstention,” which hit a record high of over 39% of the eligible voters.

A close analysis of these results indicates a severe “Cartesian” problem in the population: that is, when a deductive system hits its limits, people who believe in it go into a fit of rage. This happened during the first of the two rounds of the Presidential elections, when the electorate sent Prime Minister Jospin into oblivion, gave President Chirac a cold shoulder, and qualified the anti-immigration, extreme rightist candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen for the second round of the Presidential polling.

But, what if the citizens who have just lashed out at the leaders of the system which has failed them, are themselves unable to create or to choose leaders of a higher quality, beset

as they are by fears, slanders against serious leadership, and lack of intellectual courage? Then, the voters fall back on the rules of the very game they had just rejected.

Thus, in the June elections, the French decided to vote for the same forces they had just repudiated in March. In even higher proportion than in the first Presidential round, voters stayed away from the polls in disgust.

Those who decided to cast ballots did so pragmatically: They voted against any more “cohabitation” at the government's top, with a conservative President and a Socialist Prime Minister. They gave Chirac whatever he needs to carry out his policies, without thinking about whether his policies could be carried out in the midst of economic breakdown. They drastically reduced the votes of the smaller, more radical parties, including the Communists and Greens. Big losers were the extreme left movements, brought down to less than 3%, after reaching 10% in the Presidentials; and Le Pen, whose candidates dropped to 11%, from his high of 17% in the Presidentials.

The candidates run by Jacques Cheminade's Solidarity and Progress party were also pushed down to 0.3% as part of this “normalization.” Cheminade had been wildly slandered during the Presidential race by rightist candidates who ran solely to stop him from getting the required public backing of 500 elected officials, to qualify for the Presidential ballot. Cheminade, the leading associate of Lyndon LaRouche in France, was the only Presidential candidate who told the truth about the global financial-economic crisis.

Raffarin Government Looks Different

One reason for the landslide of Chirac's UMP, was the composition of the carefully chosen new government of Prime Minister Claude Raffarin. Chirac avoided the old “right-wing” look of his 1986 or 1993 governments, which were strongly marked by “law and order” profiles of the likes of Charles Pasqua—really an organized crime figure himself—or by financiers, such as Edouard Balladur.

The new government sports less mediocre personalities, such as Research Minister Claudie Haigneret, the first Frenchwoman to go into space, who brings special qualifications to her office; Luc Ferry, the Education Minister, a philosopher who became well known for his attacks on the Malthusian ideology of the Green Party; Jean François Mattei, the Health Minister, a doctor who recently organized opposition to a Supreme Court decision which upheld the “right” of handicapped children to sue for malpractice the physicians who had kept them alive at birth; and Roselyne Bachelot, the Environment Minister, who defends nuclear power and announced the government's decision to continue France's long-term, highly successful reliance on nuclear technology.

Despite improvements in the government he has assembled, however, the economic crisis will demand qualities of statesmanship which have not yet been seen in Jacques Chirac.