



By: *Ferry Biedermann*

# France's political impasse, no end in sight



Is France headed for a 6th Republic now that the 5th is threatening to become permanently deadlocked between irreconcilable political forces?

We should put nothing past France's current president, Emanuel Macron, sometimes called 'Jupiter' in the media, who is the first since general De Gaulle to have a movement named after him, albeit pejoratively: La Macronie.

Could Macron be aiming for what De Gaulle did when the fractious 4th Republic imploded under the weight of the Algeria crisis in 1958 and completely reform the constitution? Gaullism, after all, went on to exert its influence for half a century and Macron, if nothing else, is dreaming big.

The question might, for now, sound somewhat hyperbolic; the chances of Macron, who is deeply **unpopular**, managing a complete rewriting of the rules, are slight.

The term Macronie, most often used in a derogatory sense to denounce an uncaring, authoritarian and elitist middle, does not have the stature of Gaullism. And indeed, reforming France's pension system, heroic though it might be, doesn't quite measure up to resisting Nazi Germany.

Still, something has to give. And Macron probably has enough hubris to think that he can still make a difference before his term expires in 2027. Apart from the, possibly far-fetched founding of a 6th Republic, he has at least two more shots at leaving a significant political legacy beyond having created the current mess.

## Grand coalition

He could still foster a grand coalition that excludes the far-right and the far-left and that would be unprecedented in the annals of the 5th Republic. Or he could decide to dissolve parliament, for an equally unprecedented second time, when he's allowed to again next summer, and hope for a different outcome.

One thing seems for sure, the current course, of having **appointed** a no-majority Prime Minister, Michel Barnier, who will lean heavily on the far-right Rassemblement National of Marine Le Pen, is not one that is likely to restore stability to the country.

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France has been facing a period of political impasse ever since Macron's centrist party **lost** its majority in parliament in 2022. That situation was exacerbated in the elections this year that delivered three roughly equal blocs, left, centre and far-right.

The main problem with both these recent outcomes is not just the rise of the far-right, or the power of the far-left. It is the deadlock that the country finds itself in, one that was not supposed to happen under 5th Republic rules. These were meant to deliver stable majorities, whether on the side of a president or a Prime Minister.

In the current situation, the president's agenda is largely being obstructed, for example on new end-of-life legislation, or badly compromised, as with a new immigration law that incorporated so many outlandish elements to appease the far-right that it was partly blocked by France's Constitutional Council.

His Prime Ministers since 2022, including now Barnier, have had no parliamentary backing to implement a programme either.

## Classical cohabitation

In effect, France has been ungovernable for two years and the situation is not likely to improve under Barnier.

The Fitch, ratings agency, for one, **said** it doubted that Barnier's appointment would

calm investors' nerves regarding France's precarious finances and noted that the political backdrop remains "highly fragile".

Clearly, this is no way to run a country. In fact, any kind of classical 'cohabitation', meaning having a president from one party rule alongside a Prime Minister with a clear parliamentary majority from another, might be preferable to the current muddle.

Contrary to being a recipe for gridlock, as cohabitation is often described, it has been shown that Prime Ministers with strong backing in parliament have been able to implement large swathes of their policies in defiance of the president on all three previous occasions.



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France's neighbours and allies, and the European Union, might not be overjoyed with the spectre of either a government of the far-right or one that includes the far-left. But it could resolve the political deadlock while offering at least a coherent way forward on the country's other issues.

As things stand, though, cohabitation is not possible: none of the three main blocs in parliament, the left, the far-right or Macron's centrists, command anything like a majority.

Thus, as noted, there would need to be either a stable coalition or new elections for this situation to change.

A grand coalition is highly unlikely with

Barnier or anybody else from the right side of the political spectre as Prime Minister. The Left, which came out as the largest bloc in the recent elections, will just not stand for it.

While the left-wing Nouveau Front Populaire, NFP, and especially the far-left La France Insoumise of Jean-Luc Melenchon, is being criticised for not having been amenable to compromise, Macron's naming of a Prime Minister from a rump right-wing Gaullist party shows that he's not inclined towards coalition building either.

## The electoral system is not geared towards coalitions

The question now will be whether Barnier, or anyone else if he's voted out again, can muddle through long enough to make it to next summer.

It would become constitutionally very awkward, let alone politically and economically hugely damaging, if until then no functioning government can be established or if it is not able to take the necessary steps to right the country's finances and calm its politics. Barnier's warning to the EU that France will have to delay submitting its budget plans could be a grim preview of such a situation.

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The current electoral system is not geared towards coalitions and the 5th Republic rules have no good way of dealing with a hung parliament. But a reform of those rules, for example towards a system of proportional representation, is not on the cards either.

There's one other option, and that's parliament voting to depose Macron, which would lead to new presidential elections. The NFP has mooted such a move but the chances of

success are very low and there's no guarantee that a different president will not be faced with the same parliamentary deadlock.

Macron already reshaped the political landscape once, when he was first elected in 2017 and brought along a large centrist parliamentary majority, thus shattering the decades-old dominance of the left-wing Parti Socialiste and the right-wing inheritors of Gaullism.

Now there are strong political forces of nature that seem to be thundering towards the re-establishment of the old left-right divide. The question is whether Macron has what it takes to secure his centrist legacy one way or another.