Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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The heirs of Napoleon and de Gaulle



For over a month, France has been consumed by an acute social and political crisis that President Emmanuel Macron can no longer stem.

Worse, the crisis comes when the country is less than six months away from a presidential election that looks likely to pit Marine Le Pen's far right against Jean-Luc Mélenchon's far left.

What happened to the brilliant centrist project that got Macron elected in 2017? How has the man who shook up French party politics nearly a decade ago found himself so isolated and powerless?

While Macron has certainly made mistakes, his troubled presidency is not the cause of the violent riots that have exploded throughout the country. But it is a symptom of a deeper problem.

Macron's political denouement is not unique. Every French president elected by universal suffrage since 1962 has ended his term rather badly.

Charles de Gaulle resigned in 1969 after losing a referendum on a topic of rather secondary importance.

Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, elected in 1974, was defeated seven years later, undone by economic woes, divisions on the political right, and political scandals.

Giscard's successor, François Mitterrand, did hold power for years, but both his seven-year terms ended in scandal.

Although Jacques Chirac, who followed Mitterrand, was re-elected, he had to cede power to the left between 1997 and 2002.

Nicolas Sarkozy, elected in 2007, was defeated in 2012, undone again by divisions among centrists and conservatives and unfulfilled economic promises. His left-wing successor, François Hollande, served only one term. With approval ratings at a mere 4%, he declined to seek a second one.

Macron wanted to govern alone

When Macron came to power, he wanted to transform the political landscape. He ended the regular alternation between the traditional left and right to govern from the center, and one often hears that he single-handedly destroyed the two-party system that had dominated French political life since de Gaulle created the Fifth Republic in 1958.

In fact, the right was already facing a serious threat from Le Pen's party a decade before Macron's presidency began, and the left was more fragmented than ever.

What Macron does bear blame for is his failure to build something new on the party system's ruins, which owes something to the deeper structure of French political power.

Macron wanted to govern alone, with no intermediary between him and the people.

Since he saw political parties as obstacles to be circumvented, he never tried to build a strong, properly structured political organization around his ideas and policy program.

The "party" that he did create, En Marche (which just so happens to share his initials), never evolved much beyond a campaign organization.

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Macron also underestimated the value of intermediary bodies, be they mayors, departments, or regions.

He wanted top-down reform, on the basis of a simple principle: A president with popular legitimacy can and should exercise power to the fullest. Revealingly, he appointed 176

ministers, out of a total of 767 ministers since 1958, and most of these officials never had direct access to the president, who in fact governed like a monarch.

The key thing to understand about the French political system is that it is a republic that likes to have a king, only to tire of such figures and then try to behead them.

Macron is no exception to this rule. His approach to management has proved catastrophic, and the end of his reign only accentuates this.

The heir of Napoleon and de Gaulle

The primacy of the executive is a feature of French political culture. There have been interludes of parliamentary sovereignty, but they always ended badly. The Third Republic collapsed in 1940, and the Fourth crumbled in 1958, under the weight of the Algerian War.

Macron, in his vision of how power is to be exercised, is the heir of Napoleon and de Gaulle.

The worrying scenario now is that his successor will be, too. Le Pen and Mélenchon are also deeply attached to the idea that the sovereignty of "the people" should not be filtered through any intermediaries.

Although Mélenchon claims that he wants to amend the Constitution and reform French political institutions to establish a Sixth Republic, the way he runs his party suggests that he would exercise power as an authoritarian.

Hailing from the Trotskyite left, his call for social security to be run by its beneficiaries, rather than by civil servants, says a great deal about his Leninist conception of state power.

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Le Pen comes from a political tradition anathema to Mélenchon's, but her exercise of power is unlikely to be any more accommodating.

She, too, controls her party tightly and prioritizes personal allegiance over other considerations.

The tendency to appeal directly to the people is also shared by the French political center. Former Prime Minister Gabriel Attal, now a presidential candidate, proposes holding a referendum every year, which would reinforce the plebiscitary nature of the regime—already one of the French political system's biggest problems.

Europe's shift to post-liberalism

Only two figures seem to want to break from this populist view: Édouard Philippe on the right, and Raphaël Glucksmann on the left.

But though Philippe is a moderate, he carries the baggage of having been Macron's prime minister for three years. Everyone will wonder what he would do differently.



Raphaël Glucksmann will struggle to build an alliance, should he reach the second round

Glucksmann is a relatively new figure in French political life. He is trying to carve out a social-democratic path.

But he will struggle to build an alliance, should he reach the second round, because he has broken with both Mélenchon and Macron's heirs. His path is therefore narrow.

France is a polarized society, like many others. But unlike others, its polarization is dominated by two anti-liberal forces, the National Rally and La France Insoumise.

This is a major political fact that could hasten Europe's shift as a whole to post-liberalism.

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