

Split in Front National deepens crisis of extreme right in France

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At the beginning of 1999, the French right-wing extremist organisation Front National split after months of public controversy between its two most important leaders, Chairman Jean-Marie Le Pen and Secretary-General Bruno Mégret. For over a year the two tendencies—Le Pen's wing of the Front National (FN) and the Mégret arm, Mouvement National Républicain (MNR)—have led a separate existence, their relations regulated by the courts. Le Pen was able to keep the party name. The two groups trade insults and try to isolate one another.

Over this period the extreme right has lost an important part of its constituency. Its vote dropped in the June 1999 European elections from 16 percent to below 10 percent, and it has lost seats at the European, regional and local levels. While a good part of the leadership of the FN resigned to follow Mégret, the MNR has also suffered a wave of resignations, which continues to the present. Each tendency wants to avoid being sidelined in French politics and is trying to create a new image for itself.

Although Le Pen's faction was able to save something from the debacle (preserving its claim to the 41 million francs in funding the party has received annually from the French state), it continues to exhibit signs of crisis. According to some estimates, it has lost a third of its members, and it is facing new resignations from among its leading personnel. It has lost influence in the general population—the 5.69 percent it achieved in the June 1999 European election was well below the 8 to 9 percent that pre-election polls had predicted.

The FN's 11th congress, which took place at the end of April in Paris, confirmed this situation. Only a small part of the membership took part in elections to the FN's central committee, and many of its prominent politicians, who had remained loyal during the split, stayed away.

This year's traditional FN May Day march attracted just 3,000, fewer than in the past. The FN's public cries of victory over the MNR indicate that the present party leadership is in a critical position. There are other signs of crisis, including the resignation of the leader of the youth organisation during the party congress.

One of the important policy changes introduced by FN since the split is the acceptance of “multi-culturalism”, or “multi-ethnicity,” meaning the integration of immigrants who have lived in France for a long time. The FN leadership defended this by arguing that the French state must be defended unconditionally against other imperialist states, irrespective of religious or cultural differences.

This shift, carried out at the end of last year, led to a violent conflict with the Catholic wing of the party, which fiercely resists living together with Muslims. The turn was implemented, however, by those around Le Pen and officially concluded at the congress by the election of a “Beur” (someone of Maghrebi descent) to the central committee. To many members, who had previously defined themselves by their anti-Arab racism, this appeared to contradict everything for which the FN had stood.

In another innovation, the FN will no longer demand the repeal of legislation legalising abortion.

Many provincial FN leaders have left the party because they believe Le Pen has lost his orientation. One of them was quoted in the press as saying Le Pen had “gone mad”. In reality, the changes represent a political reorientation: The principal aim of the FN (and its utility for the French bourgeoisie) remains the mobilisation of the petty-bourgeoisie against the working class. Its racism is only a means to this end.

One year after the split Le Pen's leadership, largely unchallenged for 20 years, is more openly questioned than ever before. Some publicly accuse him of making mistakes, others talk of “liquidation” and warn that the 2002 presidential election will be his last. Voices can be heard demanding an end to one-man leadership, and for a more “collegial” party leadership.

The line that Le Pen embodies and has advocated for decades is no longer viable. He was even quoted in the press saying that the political premises for which he has stood for 30 years are not necessarily the right ones.

Mégret's MNR it is not faring any better. It was pushed to the margins in a series of elections, receiving 3.5 percent of the vote in the European elections last June, and even less in local and parliamentary by-elections. After the European elections the party was confronted with enormous financial problems.

The MNR has tried to get closer to traditional right-wing politicians who sympathise with its ideas, which is why Mégret called his tendency Mouvement National Républicain. A section of the MNR's regional delegates have reorganised themselves under the name “Diverse Right” and have tried thereby to cooperate more closely on a regional level with sections of the Gaullist UDF (Union pour la Démocratie Française) and the RPR (Rassemblement pour la République). But they have encountered problems. Mégret was recently forced to expel politicians from his party who had suggested an electoral alliance with the RPF (Rassemblement pour la France) of Charles Pasqua.

In contrast to the FN, the MNR insists on its openly racist principles and recently began an aggressive campaign against giving immigrants the vote—a reaction to the introduction of a law by the Greens which is presently being discussed in parliament. The MNR has adopted Joerg Haider and his Austrian Freedom Party as their model.

Moreover, Mégret has said openly that he is breaking with the “heritage of the French revolution”, from the philosophy of the Enlightenment and the declaration of human rights. In this way he is trying to delineate himself from the FN and win the support of the Catholic right.

The split between Mégret and Le Pen has not been carried through in a completely clear-cut way. Despite being in different organisations, sections of each party's membership cooperate occasionally, as in elections at the universities. There are also tendencies that have remained in the FN, but for a long time shown their preference for the MNR. Others have not yet committed themselves in the conflict. This is the case with the daily *Présent*, a newspaper expressing the opinions of the Catholic elements and the royalists.

Many of the present conflicts have developed because Le Pen has ruled

out any electoral alliance with the MNR. Under present conditions, the split remains unbridgeable.

Certain analysts, discussing the FN crisis, have spoken of a breakdown in its “drive” or “dynamic”. But the crisis that has shaken the extreme right in France can be traced to changes in the political situation and in the behaviour of significant layers of right-wing voters.

If the results of the elections that took place immediately after the split—such as the European elections—are analysed, it is clear that a good part of the potential extreme right vote shifted over to Pasqua and de Villiers and their “sovereignist” and anti-European RPF. The losses suffered by Le Pen and Mégret are matched almost exactly by the gains of Pasqua and de Villiers, both in the former industrial areas, such as the northern region of Pas de Calais, and in southeastern France, where losses in the cities of Provence-Côte d'Azur predominate.

A somewhat smaller section was very probably absorbed by the “hunters’ party” (CPNT—Chasse, Pêche, Nature, Tradition). This organisation was created briefly before the European election. It counterposes the countryside to the city, and its rhetoric runs along clearly reactionary lines.

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Lacking any orientation, a section of the extreme right-wing electorate abstained, so as not to have to decide between the two tendencies. Some observers believe that this type of abstention can be observed particularly strongly in the so-called “workers’ vote” for Le Pen. This mainly comprises younger workers—part-time employees with a low level of education who say they are “neither on the right nor left”. These voters were particularly attracted to Le Pen from 1995 onwards. The strong gains for the FN in the elections between 1995 and 1997 coincided with general opposition to the right-wing Juppé government.

A section of the FN’s voters were disappointed with its local government policies and turned away from the party. In Toulon, where the FN had controlled the town council for five years, the 20.7 percent vote for the RPF of Pasqua and de Villiers exceeded the combined votes of the FN (10.7 percent) and the MNR (6.8 percent). After the FN had been elected on an anti-corruption platform, the municipality was quickly immersed in scandal once again, and the mayor, Le Chevalier, resigned from the FN shortly before the elections.

In the *Vaucluse département* (region), whose second largest city, Orange, was also controlled by the FN, the extreme right lost 2 percent of their vote. In the *Bouches-du-Rhône département*, where the FN controlled two cities, Vitrolles and Marignane, the FN and MNR together only polled 15 percent.

It must also be assumed that Socialist Party Prime Minister Lionel Jospin was temporarily able to kindle the impression among some disadvantaged layers of workers that his government would actually undertake some measures against “social exclusion”, and thus win back protest voters for the “plural left” (the term used for his coalition with the Communist Party and the Greens). Casting a vote for this government did not signify any great reorientation, since it also contains chauvinist currents, such as Jean Pierre Chevènement and his Citizens Movement (MDC), as well as the French Communist Party (PCF), with its anti-Maastricht attitude.

Above all, the extreme right lost influence in the few industrialised cities of southern France where its strongholds had been since the early 1980s. The present beneficiaries are Pasqua and de Villiers, i.e., politicians who, to a certain degree, are close to the traditional right wing. The extreme right also lost influence in the former industrial centres.

As far as the rivalry between Le Pen and Mégret is concerned, Le Pen did better in France’s northern and eastern cities—which have suffered from industrial decline—while Mégret obtained better results in Provence-Côte d'Azur as well as in Paris’s 16th *arrondissement* (district), the

wealthiest quarter of the city.

Over the past 10 years, Mégret and many FN leaders have been active in local and regional politics, bringing the FN into government in the cities of Toulon and Orange. The petty-bourgeois dignitaries upon whom they rested came into conflict with Le Pen, whose politics were more directed towards impoverished layers found in the centres of social tension. This laid bare the contradictions within France’s extreme right.

One of these contradictions consists of the fact that the FN had always relied upon diverse layers of the electorate. On the one side were people who stood on the extreme right politically, and on the other were politically disoriented voters who usually opposed the established parties (both the traditional right wing and the Socialist Party and the Stalinists), rather than voting for a concrete programme. Such a constituency is extremely unstable and can quickly turn against the party for which it just voted.

In the absence of a serious political alternative in the working class, Le Pen was previously able to combine these different sections of voters for his own ends. However, when the layers of the population from which they originated are torn apart and drift in different directions, a party that bases itself upon them is thrown into a serious crisis.

The crisis of the FN does not mean an end to the extreme right, as some commentators say. Their loss of influence in the elections is a serious symptom. However, it does not mean that parties not fundamentally based upon parliament, but rather on the mobilisation against the working class of layers of the petty-bourgeoisie and the lumpen proletariat, will disappear. The split within the FN neither eliminates the danger posed by right-wing extremist parties for the working class, nor does it provide a “breathing space”, as is thoughtlessly said by some commentators.



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