

France: Chirac appoints "free market" conservative as interim prime minister

David Walsh in Paris
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Jacques Chirac, reelected president by a large majority in the May 5 runoff with neo-fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen, announced the appointment of an interim prime minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, to head a government until legislative elections in June. Raffarin officially took over Monday morning from Lionel Jospin, the former Socialist Party prime minister.

Chirac's new prime minister is a relatively little known figure outside political circles. A member of the Liberal Democratic Party and a former commerce minister, Raffarin is considered an advocate of free-market policies. Formerly a marketing director, he is considered to be less confrontational than Nicolas Sarkozy, a leader of the right wing within Chirac's own Gaullist party, who had been pegged as a possible interim prime minister.

During the election campaign Raffarin made an effort to "extend a hand" to students and young people demonstrating against Le Pen and the ultra-right. At a public meeting on May 1 he appeared on a panel that included representatives of the Socialist Party, the Greens and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire.

Chirac is concerned with creating as much unity on the right as possible, in the hope of obtaining a right-wing majority in the National Assembly in next month's legislative vote. In his first statement following his May 5 victory, he reiterated his campaign pledge to make "fighting crime" the first priority of his new presidency. This was a clear signal to his big business backers and the political right that he intends, notwithstanding the support he received from the Socialists, Communists and Greens, to pursue an agenda of intensified attacks on the working class.

Chirac's Rally for the Republic party (RPR) is only one of numerous conservative factions. His team, led by former prime minister Alain Juppé, has been working in advance of the June legislative elections on creating a new umbrella organization for the official right-wing groupings, called the Union for a Presidential Majority (UMP). This has angered some of his conservative rivals, notably François Bayrou, head of the Union for French Democracy (UDF), who has accused Chirac and his camp of trying to destroy his party. One UDF official told *Libération*, "When the RPR invites us to dine, I always get a little nervous. I have the impression that we are the guest and at

the same time the special of the day."

But even as he appeals to the political right, Chirac is leaving the door open for the defection of traditionally left voters, and possible collaboration with Socialist Party leaders. This is indicated by his choice of Raffarin as interim prime minister.

In the second round, Chirac received 82 percent of the national vote, winning 25.3 million votes to 5.5 million for his ultra-right opponent. Chirac's margin of victory May 5 is all the more remarkable—and all the more hollow—when one considers that in the first round of the presidential election on April 21 only 19.88 percent of those who voted cast ballots for him, and only 13.75 percent of all registered voters. These are record-low numbers for an incumbent president in the Fifth Republic, which was established by General Charles De Gaulle in 1958.

While the abstention rate on May 5, 19.06 percent, represented a sharp drop from the first round (28.4 percent)—the result of a massive campaign by the entire political and media establishment, right and left, to get out the vote for Chirac—it remained the third highest abstention for a second round vote in the history of the Fifth Republic. It was only exceeded by the 20.34 percent abstention in the second round in 1995 and the 31.15 percent abstention in 1969. In the aftermath of the general strike of May-June 1968, faced with two rightist candidates in the second round (Georges Pompidou and Alain Poher), large numbers of left-wing and working class voters boycotted the election.

If one adds to the 19 percent of registered voters who abstained the 5 percent of voters who spoiled their ballot or left it blank, nearly a quarter of the French electorate, or 10 million people, refused to cast votes for either Chirac or Le Pen. This is hardly an overwhelming vote of confidence, given the concerted campaign by the political and media establishment to convince the population to go to the polls.

Le Pen lost the election badly, but he retained his bloc of votes from the first round and slightly increased it. The National Front leader received 50,000 more votes than the combined first round total for himself and his former colleague, Bruno Mégret, leader of the Mouvement National Républicain, a neo-fascist split-off from the National Front.

Le Pen did best in the southeast, in Provence-Alpes-Côte

d'Azur, a region that includes Nice, Marseille, Avignon and Toulon. This region surpassed Alsace in the second round as the most fertile soil for Le Pen's appeal: 27.69 percent of the voters in the area cast ballots for the National Front leader. Le Pen lost votes in 29 of France's approximately 85 departments and gained more than 4 percent in 7.

Le Monde pointed out in its analysis of the results that it was in traditionally left-wing areas that Chirac achieved his greatest success. He enjoyed a jump of some 70 percent in certain regions, such as the Hautes-Pyrénées, Ariège and Haute-Garonne in the southwest and the Loire-Atlantique in the northwest.

With the outcome of the second round in little doubt following the defeat of Jospin, the Chirac camp has been maneuvering since April 21 to put itself in the best possible position to win a majority of right-wing deputies in the legislative elections. In one of his last campaign speeches Chirac declared that if the right failed to win a majority in the elections for the National Assembly, "all will have to begin again from the beginning."

This has been interpreted in some quarters, notably in the *New York Times*, as an indication that Chirac might attempt to push through a major overhaul of the constitution. The *Times* quoted a well-known French political scientist who suggested that Chirac would call new elections or organize a referendum on revamping the electoral process if the Socialist Party-led coalition won a majority in the legislative assembly.

Another possibility is the creation of a "national unity" government, or "union sacrée" (a term already used in reference to the anti-Le Pen coalition), including members of both the official right and left parties, whose programs are, in any case, barely distinguishable. Both camps at present publicly reject such an idea, but the prospect of another paralyzing *cohabitation* (between a president and National Assembly of opposed political camps) and pressure from the ruling elite might bring about a change of heart.

In its post-election editorial on France, the *Times* noted, "Regardless of the outcome [of the legislative vote], France's mainstream parties will then have to address voters' grievances, and their alienation from the political process. Asking themselves whether this protracted balloting maze is the best way to elect a government might be a good start."

The *Times'* endorsement of a "reform" of France's election laws is in large part a response to the 10 percent vote obtained in the first round by three avowedly revolutionary socialist parties—Lutte Ouvrière, Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire and Parti des Travailleurs. The newspaper's editors would like to impose on the French something akin to the suffocating two-party system in the US, which effectively excludes any expression of independent working class and socialist politics.

The outcome of next month's legislative election is far from certain, with Le Pen's forces threatening to make things as difficult as possible for the Chirac campaign. Le Pen's advisers

calculate that National Front candidates can make their way through to the second round in 237 out of 577 constituencies (a candidate must receive at least 12.5 percent of the vote to survive to the second round). At least publicly, the National Front strategy is to divide the right-wing vote and deprive Chirac of a majority in the National Assembly.

The Socialist Party (SP) meanwhile finds itself in disarray, without a leader and deeply discredited. A research agency has estimated that based on Jospin's showing April 21, only 134 SP candidates would make it to the second round.

In an effort to preserve its influence and even form the next government, the SP is campaigning for a single left candidate, primarily from its own ranks, in each constituency. The Socialists are currently in negotiation with the Stalinists (Communist Party), the Greens, the Left Radicals and even Jean Pierre Chevènement's Mouvement des citoyens.

The SP officialdom is claiming that the left can resurrect itself only by rallying around the social democrats. According to François Hollande, party chairman and interim leader, "The strength of the SP is the mixture of generations, but also its capacity to cover a political space extending from the center-left to the activist left. It is in the final analysis its sense of synthesis that permits it today to respond more easily than others to the most diverse aspirations of the society."

This double-talk is meant to disguise the fact that for five years an SP government under Jospin, far from responding to the "most diverse aspirations," served the interests of French big business, thereby discouraging and confusing wide layers of the working population, especially the unemployed and marginally employed, to the point that they became vulnerable to Le Pen's demagoguery. Hollande is merely promising more of the same.



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