

Regional elections in France

A defeat for the camp of the conservative government

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French regional elections held on Sunday represent a clear rejection of the conservative governing parties.

In the first round of voting, the party of the French president, the UMP (Union for a Popular Movement), and the right-wing liberal UDF (Union for the French Democracy) won just 34 percent. The parties that constituted the left-wing alliance voted out of power in 2002—the Socialists (PS), the Communists (PCF), the Greens and Radicals (PRG)—together won around 40 percent of the vote. The extreme-right National Front (FN) won 15 percent, and the alliance of the radical left—Lutte Ouvrière (LO) and Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR)—gained 5 percent.

The second and final round of voting to decide on the composition of regional parliaments takes place this coming Sunday. The only lists of parties to be accepted for the second round are those with at least 10 percent of the vote in the first round. It is now estimated that the conservative right will lose power in a number of regions. Until now, they exercised control in 14 of the total of 22 regions.

The electoral rebuff for the government becomes even clearer when one considers the result for the UMP, which includes amongst its members both French President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin. The UMP was founded two years ago to unite the camp of the conservative right behind Chirac and possesses an absolute majority in the National Assembly. On Sunday, just 23 percent voted for the UMP, with 11 percent casting their vote for the right-wing liberal UDF. The UDF did not join the UMP in 2002 and has only weak representation in the National Assembly. Voter turnout was 61 percent (slightly higher than for the previous regional elections), meaning that just one in seven of the registered electorate voted for the UMP.

The debacle for the government was underscored by the result in the region of Poitou-Charentes, where Raffarin held the post of regional president for no less than 14 years, before becoming French prime minister. The alliance of the left has an advantage of 13 percent in the region and is unlikely to be overtaken in the second round.

The regional elections are regarded as an important test of public opinion. They are the first significant elections to be held since presidential and national parliamentary elections two years ago.

The elections at that time took place against the background of the surprisingly high vote for the extreme right led by Jean-Marie

Le Pen. The leader of the National Front had beaten the Socialist candidate, Lionel Jospin, in the first round of voting and stood alone against President Jacques Chirac in the second round. Jospin's alliance of the left and sections of the radical left then supported Chirac who, they declared, was a guarantor of Republican values. As leader of the Gaullists, Chirac had won just a fifth of the vote in the first round, but now, with new support, he was able to notch up a record vote of more than 80 percent in the second round.

Chirac knew how to exploit this "window of opportunity." He utilised this unexpected boost in his prestige to unite the divided parties of the right behind him, and two months later won national parliamentary elections with his new political formation.

The latest regional election results have now confirmed that the image of a powerful and determined right wing that emerged in 2002 was nothing other than a trick of the senses. The programme of the right wing never enjoyed popular support. Like its predecessors, the government of Raffarin confronted massive resistance, strikes and demonstrations as soon as it began to implement its programme of cutting back the welfare state and privatising public institutions. The latest election result has cut the government down to size.

As has been the case in previous elections it is once again the National Front that has profited from broad disillusionment with the established parties. The current result for the FN of 15 percent is comparable to its result in the regional elections last held in 1998. If one adds the votes won by a split-off from the FN, then the vote for the extreme right totalled 16.5 percent—comparable to the totals of 2002. The FN will have representation in 17 regions in the second round of voting, but its chances of winning control of any particular region are regarded as slim.

The FN was able to win support despite the efforts by the government to undermine its prospects through the partial adoption of FN policies. French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy has been built up as a "law-and-order" man and "national cop." Raffarin, who comes from the countryside, was presented as an alternative to the arrogant upstarts from France's schools for the political elite. Shortly before the elections, Raffarin lowered taxes for restaurant owners, hoping to win—apparently without success—layers who traditionally support the FN.

Even more surprising than the vote for the FN was the support

for the official left parties that suffered such a damaging electoral rebuff two years ago. They won 6 percent more votes than in the regional elections of 1998, and they were just one percentage point short of the total (41 percent) with which they won parliamentary elections in 1997.

The various left parties put up candidates in different alliances in separate regions, making it impossible to accurately estimate the fortunes of any one party on a national level. But individual results indicate that, together with the Socialists, the Communists were also able to win considerable numbers of votes. The PCF was able to win more than 10 percent of the vote in the region of Nord-Pas-de-Calais, more than 9 percent in the Auvergne and more than 7 percent in Ile-de-France. In 2002, the party had averaged well under 5 percent.

The increased vote for the official left parties has less to do with any new revival of expectations in them and more to do with the lack of a convincing alternative.

Although opinion polls last year estimated a high potential electorate for the radical left, in the latest elections these parties shrunk back to their usual level in recent years of 5 percent. In 1998, these parties won 4.3 percent of the vote and put up a number of deputies. In 1999, they were able to enter the European parliament with over 5 percent of the vote. In 2002, Arlette Laguiller (LO) and Olivier Besancenot (LCR) then won 10 percent of the vote in the first round of the presidential elections—three times as many as the candidate of the PCF.

The two parties blamed their latest low results on the undemocratic electoral system, which was introduced after the last regional elections and means that smaller parties have less chance of overcoming the 10 percent hurdle necessary to go on to the second round. In fact, the new electoral procedures only partly account for the stagnation in votes for these parties. Of more significance is their own inability to demonstrate any political initiative and provide an orientation to those who have put their trust in them.

The LCR reacted to the considerable level of support for the party in the presidential elections of 2002 by lining itself up in the Republican Front and calling for a vote for Chirac, while the LO remained passive and rejected any independent initiative.

The electoral alliance formed by both organisations for elections this year—the regional elections and then the European elections scheduled for June—is based on the least common denominator and lacks any hint of a broader, more embracing perspective.

Their joint election platform—“profession de foi” (declaration of faith)—is characterised by extreme superficiality and lack of any real content. It contains neither an assessment of the current political situation nor any treatment of the most important political experiences of the past few years. The most important political turning point of the new millennium—the war in Iraq—is not even mentioned. There is not the least attempt to draw out the lessons from the defeat suffered by the parties of the official left, not to speak of any generalisation based on these experiences. One also searches in vain for any serious justification or declaration of aims in connection with their joint electoral initiative.

The document is limited to listing social injustices and makes proposals for a number of “urgent measures,” including a ban on

redundancies in profitable companies, increased social contributions and taxes for the rich, a ban on privatisation and the extension of the public service sector, and the construction of municipal housing, kindergartens and welfare facilities. The question of how such measures are to be realised is left unaddressed. According to the document, participation in elections serves merely as a “political gesture” aimed at encouraging “struggle.”

In effect, such a programme amounts to no more than supporting trade union struggles, which have been taking place regularly in France over past years, but have done nothing to halt continuing social decline. There is no mention in the document of the necessity to break workers from the paralysing influence of the trade union bureaucracy, the Socialists and the Communists in order to build an independent *political* movement.

It is obvious that such a timid and demoralised perspective is incapable of inspiring and attracting broad layers of workers and young people.

In particular, Lutte Ouvrière makes no secret of its conviction that the future looks bleak. In a resolution put forward at a party congress last December to justify the joint course with the LCR, the LO argued: “Let’s not kid ourselves, the electorate is demoralised. This is a product of the social and economic situation as well as the open attacks and the cynical talk of the government of Chirac-Raffarin.”

The resolution reckoned with a possible result for the party on its own of around 3 percent and predicated 20 percent for the NF, if not more. It closed with the words: “Our position is not therefore based on hope of winning deputies; on the contrary, our position is based on preventing a very negative result from being even worse.”

For its part, the LCR regards its electoral alliance with the LO as a temporary emergency measure. Its aim is the construction of a broad “anti-capitalist left” that puts forward a left-reformist programme and embraces sections of the Communist Party and the trade union bureaucracy. On the basis of a similar orientation, a Brazilian party affiliated to the LCR joined the Workers Party of Lula and has in the meantime provided a minister for the Brazilian government—a minister whose work has been effusively praised by representatives of the International Monetary Fund.

The results of the French regional elections reflect—as was the case in the latest Spanish parliamentary elections—a shift to the left in the working class. This move to the left, however, lacks a clear perspective that could assist its development in a politically progressive direction.



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