

France: Government parties routed in regional elections

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The government of Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin and President Jacques Chirac suffered a devastating defeat in the second round of regional elections held on Sunday, March 28. From the total of 22 French regions, the ruling parties UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) and UDF (Union for the French Democracy) were only able to retain control in Alsace. Before the elections, these parties controlled a total of 14 regions.

The election result continues a trend that became evident during the recent Spanish parliamentary elections: working people used their vote to teach a lesson to their right-wing government, indicating a readiness to resist widespread cutbacks.

The result of the second round was even clearer than the result of the first round held on March 21. The alliance of the left—Socialist Party (PS), Communist Party (PCF), Greens and Radicals (PRG)—increased their share of the vote by 6 percent and won a total of 50 percent of the vote. For the first time in 15 years, the left parties were able to equal the total of 1988 when Socialist Party leader François Mitterrand was confirmed in his post as French president.

The ruling parties won just 37 percent of the vote, with the right-wing liberal UDF led by François Bayrou gaining 13 percent. The conservative UMP performed surprisingly badly in Poitou-Charentes—the traditional base of Prime Minister Raffarin, who headed the regional government there for 14 years—winning just 36 percent and losing the region to the left.

The extreme-right National Front (NF), which ran candidates in a total of 17 regions for the second round, gained around 13 percent of the vote. Other parties were excluded from the second round after failing to overcome the 10 percent hurdle in the first round.

The parliamentary left also were able to gain

considerable ground in local district elections (*élections cantonales*). They won 51 percent against a total of 43 percent for the UMP and UDF, winning a majority from the right wing in seven local authorities. In these elections, the NF dropped from its 12 percent share of the vote in the first round to 5 percent.

In particular, the left parties were able to benefit from the relatively high level of voter turnout. Sixty-five percent of the electorate voted, compared to just 58 percent in the regional elections of 1998. The figure of 65 percent included many young and first-time voters, many of whom used these latest elections to cast their votes against Raffarin and Chirac.

The decisive issues in the election were undoubtedly the social questions. This was confirmed by the unexpected defeat of the government minister for social affairs, François Fillon, in his constituency. In fact, the entire election result represented a clear rejection of the social policies of the Raffarin government.

Successive government efforts to cut pensions, attack welfare and social benefits, demolish health insurance, deregulate the school system and undermine democratic rights through the beefing up of the state and police apparatus have precipitated a series of massive strikes and demonstrations, beginning last year. Now, widespread public discontent with the government has been expressed in an election. It makes clear that the population lacks any form of representation in the National Assembly, where the UMP controls the majority.

Prime Minister Raffarin and other members of the government reacted with consternation to the results, and in their first statements after the vote emphasised that the government had “understood” the message sent by voters. Raffarin promised to lay more weight on social fairness in the future, but also stressed that he

was “convinced that the French do not want a return to a standstill.” “The reforms have to continue,” he emphasised.

François Fillon commented that the result represented a “transformation of the result of April 21.” He was referring to presidential elections in 2002, when Socialist Party candidate Lionel Jospin suffered a surprising defeat.

In an opinion poll published by Sofres, 59 percent of those questioned said they would welcome the resignation of Raffarin, with only 29 percent indicating they were in favour of him remaining in office. It is anticipated that a number of ministers who have sought to obtain an additional post—as is often the case in France—and have been punished by the electorate will be forced to resign.

President Chirac confronts a dilemma, however, should he decide to part company with his prime minister. The most likely successor to Raffarin is reckoned to be Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, who enjoys support from right-wing circles for his strict law-and-order policies. Sarkozy is also regarded to favour his own chances to emerge as a rival for the French presidency, something that Chirac has up to now sought to prevent.

The election result has plunged Chirac and his UMP into crisis. The president initially founded the UMP during the presidential elections of 2002 to assemble the diverse forces of the right wing behind him. Originally, the grouping was named “Union for a Presidential Majority,” then the name was changed to “Union for a People’s Movement,” but now the organisation threatens to break apart. Under conditions where 65 percent of voters turned out, the UMP was incapable of winning more than a sixth of the electorate.

The election result represents a referendum against the policies of the government rather than any expression of revived trust in the parties of the official left, which suffered their own devastating defeat in presidential and parliamentary elections two years ago. The official left has no practicable alternative to offer.

The first secretary of the Socialist Party, François Hollande, expressed his surprise at the result and declared he was “impressed.” “The left,” he said, “must be clear about the extent of trust it is being given here,” and he went on to warn that his party, the PS,

would inherit “more responsibilities than rights.”

The left parties are as equally keen as the right wing to impose the so-called reforms—nothing less than a euphemism for the dismantling of the welfare state and social rights. According to Ségolène Royal (former minister for social affairs and partner of the party chairman), who won power in Raffarin’s former base of Poitou-Charentes, “The French want reforms, but they must be fair.”



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