

French presidential debate: Political establishment shifts far to the right

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Late Monday night, some 9.8 million people watched a televised, three-hour debate between the five leading candidates--François Fillon, Emmanuel Macron, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Marine Le Pen and Benoît Hamon--in the French presidential elections.

There is considerable popular interest in--and anxiety about--an election campaign dominated by a series of crises: the collapse of the ruling Socialist Party (PS) under President François Hollande faced with mass anger at his austerity policies, the election of Donald Trump in the United States, and the rise of neo-fascist candidate Le Pen. Over half of voters, according to polls, still do not know who to vote for.

Two years after Hollande admitted that “total” war with Russia was possible, conflicts of an intensity unprecedented since World War II are staggering French and world capitalism. On Saturday, Hollande’s favored candidate, Macron, announced that if elected he would bring back the draft to prepare France for an “era” of major conflicts. The previous week, European banks met with economic advisers of Le Pen, who according to a report by Swiss bank UBS has a 40 percent chance of winning the presidency.

Those tensions found no real reflection in the debate, however, even though it brought together candidates supposedly chosen to represent all the great “sensibilities” of French politics. Despite the inclusion of the neo-fascist National Front (FN), and the possibility that France could in two months have its first fascist government since the Nazi occupation, what prevailed at the debate was an essential unanimity punctuated with minor criticisms and disagreements kept within narrow limits.

Le Monde, which tried to play up the debate’s format as “unprecedented, challenging our institutions’ traditions,” had to admit it was a “calm and straitjacketed” discussion, or even a “confrontation without debate” that resembled an “entertainment show,”

concluding: “All that just for this?”

On the drive toward war, France’s state of emergency and the ties between big business and the current front-runner, Macron, the candidates agreed among themselves to say little or nothing. The stylized verbal jousting between Le Pen, the very right-wing and pro-austerity Fillon, Macron, Socialist Party candidate Hamon and the populist, ex-Left Front leader Mélenchon all unfolded on terrain that would trouble no one--including the banks, the state and intelligence services and the other candidates.

The debate dealt first with social issues (education, health, religion, law and order), then the economy and finally, rather briefly, foreign policy.

Le Pen’s comments on social issues suggested that a FN government would move rapidly toward a policy aimed essentially not merely at outlawing immigration but also the practice of Islam in France. By limiting the number of immigrants each year to France to 10,000 and by outlawing the wearing of the Islamic veil in any public space, the FN would be following the path blazed by Trump, though it would quite likely travel along it at a faster pace.

The criticisms of her policy from other candidates did nothing to warn the electorate about the dangers involved; in fact, all support and helped set up the law-and-order and anti-Muslim policies that Le Pen is seeking to deploy against the population. When Le Pen called to ban the Islamic veil, Mélenchon dismissed it as a bad joke: “You can’t police clothes in the street! Do you also want to prevent people from having green hair or others who wear skirts that are too short or too long? What is this you are doing?”

In fact, a law proposed and supported by Mélenchon’s Left Front, the ban on the burqa in all public spaces prepared in 2009 by right-wing politicians and Stalinist deputy André Gerin, already means that French police can police clothes in the street. The violent arrest of a woman

wearing a burqa and of her husband in the Paris suburb of Trappes in 2013 provoked clashes between police and residents of the town.

At another point, Hamon knocked Macron, an ex-manager at the Rothschild bank, off balance by asking him very timidly about his ties to big business: “The problem is not that rich people finance your campaign. But can you now formally promise that among the people who made major donations [to your campaign], there are not several top management officials or the pharmaceutical, banking and oil industries?”

Faced with a panicked reaction from Macron--who spluttered, “What is this? I don’t check people’s identity. This has no meaning. Privacy is protected by law. I can engage myself to be obligated to no one. ... I am free ... the financing is transparent”--Hamon beat a hasty retreat. No doubt fearing that a concrete critique of a fellow former minister in Hollande’s cabinet could be dangerous for his own campaign, Hamon only pointed out in the end there was a danger Macron could be influenced in state decisions on drug certifications.

What differences emerged most clearly were those on foreign policy, on the euro and particularly on Russia. Fillon repeated some of the pro-Russian positions that provoked media investigations of his finances and that led them to relentlessly pursue him over the now well documented charges that he arranged no-show jobs for his wife, Penelope.

“Because we are Westerners, we think we can do everything, invade Iraq, and determine the political order in an entire part of the world ... [But] We must use the army less than Hollande has done,” Fillon declared. He went on to call France’s war against the Islamic State (IS) militia in Syria a “failure,” explaining, “We should have waged it together with Russia and its partners in the Near East.”

This provoked a counterattack from Hamon, who defended the line of the PS government and of the CIA, declaring: “Wanting to conduct a struggle against IS alongside the Assad regime, that says a lot about the president you want to be.”

Though the election of the FN would signal the likely dissolution of the euro currency and the European Union (EU), Europe was, as *France Inter* put it, “the elephant in the room of the non-debate” of Monday night. Fillon raised the euro in passing, attacking Le Pen as a “serial killer of purchasing power” because she wants to abandon the euro and return to the franc, a national currency that would fall compared to a euro boosted by the strength of

Germany’s exports.

The fact that Europe received such treatment during a presidential debate underscores the ever more striking disorientation and superficiality of official public debate in France. The strength of the European currency was always, to be sure, a weighty argument in favor of the EU among France’s propertied classes. However, it was traditionally acknowledged that European integration was above all a network of institutions aiming, after the horrors of World War II, to make impossible the eruption of a third world war between the major European powers.

Today, the French bourgeoisie is incapable of discussing such subjects before an audience of millions. As Germany and France both rearm and prepare for new wars with unknown enemies, all the organizations set up ostensibly to prevent a new war on the European continent are threatened with collapse.

This debate is a warning to the working class: what is being prepared in this election is an attempt to shift politics in France and internationally far to the right, with devastating consequences for working people.

The extremely narrow character of the differences between Le Pen and the other candidates in the Monday debate shows that a strategy of voting for the “traditional” parties to prevent a Le Pen government from implementing a dictatorial agenda is doomed to failure. The French political system is bankrupt. Whatever differences a President Macron might have with a FN government, they are on second-rank questions of tempo and international orientation.

The only viable response is the construction of an independent movement in the working class fighting against war and attacks on democratic rights.



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