

Macron's political gamble

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I recently returned from a wonderful trip to Botswana to yet more political turmoil in Europe. I recall, two weeks prior, as we left London, the UK was still in shock at its prime minister Rishi Sunak's decision to call snap elections for July 4. As my wife and I landed in Johannesburg on our way to Kasane, another big election shock grabbed the newspaper headlines: The significant loss of parliamentary majority of South Africa's ruling party for the past 30 years, the African National Congress (ANC).

Whilst 2024 was touted as the election year for the sheer number of countries such as South Africa holding important elections, little did I expect France to throw its hat in the ring! French President Emmanuel Macron's decision to dissolve parliament and hold snap elections (just weeks before the start of the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris no less) seems strange and rushed at first glance but there may be a method to the madness. Will it backfire?

For context, Macron called the parliamentary elections after Marine Le Pen's far-right party (Rassemblement National or RN) recently defeated Macron's centrist party (Renaissance) at the European parliamentary elections, winning more than double the votes. This continues a worrying trend we have seen of late with far-right political parties in Germany and Italy also registering increased shares of the European parliamentary vote.

Macron's troubles started much further back than this though. His popularity plunged as the protests of the so-called "Gilets Jaunes" (Yellow Jackets) movement sprouted at the end of 2018 following the rise in energy prices which had a disproportionately punitive effect on the working and middle classes living in rural areas of the country. In 2022, Macron then lost his parliamentary majority and his popularity sunk to new lows as he was forced to rule by decree to push through unpopular measures such as pensions reform. So, with his popularity so low and the parliamentary elections not due until 2027, why call snap elections now?

It seems Macron, seeing the increase in popularity of RN, may be banking on its poor ability to govern the country should they win a majority in parliament. That is quite a gamble to take. With three years until the presidential elections, should RN take over the country's governance, the risk is that they perform well. This risk should not be understated. Jordan Bardella, the leader of the RN party and Marine Le Pen's

protégé, connects well with young voters, making regular appearances on social media. He also rates well amongst older and well-educated voters – no wonder in France he is called Marine Le Pen's "Marketing Product". But whilst Bardella is undeniably a good orator, the question is whether he can also walk the walk. At 28 years old, he does not have much of a professional CV having neither gone to university, nor held a job outside of the RN party. Importantly, he has no experience in governing, which one would think should caution French voters when electing their prime minister.

More likely, though, Macron would have hoped for the leftwing parties and his centrist party to unite against the far right. But this seems to have backfired. Indeed, these snap elections have spurred left-wing parties into action as they announced late last week a deal to run as an alliance (Le Nouveau Front Populaire). In many constituencies, Macron's candidates now probably won't make it to the second round of voting. Ultimately this should lead to an even more fractious parliament given coalitions rarely run smoothly. Indeed, France's four left-wing parties have historically rarely seen eye to eye and so expecting this new alliance to run smoothly in practice warrants some level of skepticism. Not least because the leader of the far-left party (La France Insoumise or LFI), Jean-Luc Mélançon, a polarising and deeply controversial figure in French politics, has hinted he would like to be the alliance's candidate for prime minister. In any case, whilst extreme right and left candidates will undoubtedly win more seats, they should not win enough to secure a majority in parliament which is likely to lead to a very messy three years of governing a country that likes to voice its discontent...

One thing is for certain, 2024 is shaping up to be a bigger year of flux than many thought in terms of political change. In the case of France, the president has made a huge gamble which he may come to regret. Macron may have envisaged two outcomes; one where he allows the far-right party to rule until the next presidential elections in the hope they are exposed for their inability to govern. Another where the left-wing parties and his centrist party unite against the far-right. However, given the recent announcement of the left-wing alliance, the most likely outcome as things stand is a frustrating governing stalemate. As always, uncertainties abound, but one worrying legacy of Macron's second term could potentially be to have allowed the far-right into power. History will tell us soon enough.

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