Paris: Game, Set and Match

The ease with which Francois Mitterrand was re-elected as president of the 5th Republic, and the consequent formation of the Rocard government, signal a major realignment in French politics.

During his first seven-year term as president, Mitterrand and the Socialist Party have been able to redefine a substantial section of the traditional left electorate into a more centrist position. Although the new centre-left government of Rocard is the end result of this redefinition, it is, in fact, only the conclusion of a strategy which has its origins in the early '70s.

Shortly after the signing, in June 1972, of the Common Programme—a tactical but brittle electoral alliance between the Communist and Socialist Parties—both Communist leader Marchais and Mitterrand privately expressed to their respective constituents their own strategic view of the document.

While acknowledging that it represented the first tentative step back towards government for the Communist Party [PCF] (resulting some nine years later in four minor ministries in the first Socialist government), Marchais urged his party "to safeguard its true position and warned against the reformist social democratic nature of the Socialist Party". Mitterrand, somewhat less ideological but more prophetic, as the recent elections have borne out, assured a meeting of the Socialist International Executive Committee that with the Programme "our basic objective is to build a great Socialist party on the terrain occupied by the Communist Party itself and thus to show that of five million communist voters, three million can be brought to vote socialist".

The success of Mitterrand's strategy and the decline of communist electoral support has been evident in most local and national elections over the past seven years. The first round of the recent presidential elections confirmed this. Against a combined communist vote of 8.9 percent (6.9 percent for the PCF and two percent for the breakaway Renoveurs), Mitterrand received 34.1 percent.

The significance of this electoral shift lies beyond the simple loss of communist support to the socialists. Rather, it marks a subtle but fundamental change in the landscape of French politics, where political positions have traditionally been defined clearly in terms of a strict right/left dichotomy. Any past variation in this scheme has been to diverge further either to the right or left. Mitterrand, however, campaigning on a platform devoid of any reference to socialist aims and stressing the virtues of a "Unified France", has been able to finally break this right/left division and secure under the Prime Ministership of Michel Rocard a left-centre government.

The presence of this new centrist formation seems assured following discussions with moderates in the centre-right which resulted in the guarantee of a number of centrist ministers in the next Rocard government should the socialists be successful in the forthcoming general elections.

Ironically, the move towards the centre has been facilitated by the very nature of the 5th Republic's constitution, originally drawn up specifically to satisfy the demands of de Gaulle. Cohabitation is theoretically possible within the framework of the constitution, but a possibility which was never expected to eventuate. That it has eventuated and been a relatively stable form of government during the past two years, has also helped fracture the traditional left/right opposition.

Not all the centrist moves, however, have come from the left. As far back as his defeat in the presidential elections by Mitterrand in 1981, Giscard d’Estaing has urged the UDF to try to occupy the centre. But, in the event, it has been the Socialists trumping the UDF, and the failure of any communist response which has provided the framework for French politics for at least the next decade.

This is not to ignore the presence and continued support for Le Pen and his National Front on the extreme right. For, while the NF has only emerged electorally since the early '80s, it does represent a consistent rightwing tradition in French society—a tradition which had its clearest expression in the collaborationist Vichy government during World War II, but which can
be traced back as far as the Dreyfus affair late last century.

While the long-term existence of this racist element needs to be recognised, its influence overall will stay small providing it remains isolated and is not permitted to enter into electoral deals with other sections of the right, namely Chirac and his rightwing RPR. At present it appears that, although Le Pen’s politics is able to appeal to a fair proportion of the electorate (14.4 percent in the first round of the presidential elections), its very strength also acts as a sufficient deterrent to any alliance with the more moderate rightwing forces and thereby ensures its own isolation.

Furthermore, the developments proposed for 1992 by the European Commission (under which Western Europe will become more integrated economically with a common financial market and one European domestic market instead of 12 national markets) should reduce some of the economic conditions which provide Le Pen with his present political base. Moreover, there is something contradictory between the racist nationalism of the National Front and the gradual emergence of a sort of European supra-state, of which the 1992 reforms are but a part.

Although still in an embryonic form, a trans-European state will add to the predicament facing what remains of the politics to the left of the Socialist Party. With the PCF and other sections of the left — the Ecologists, for example — there is at least the rhetoric of internationalism. However, the likelihood of any effective substance being given to this internationalism in a way that would make it combative with the development of an integrated capitalist Europe appears quite remote — though this would seem to be the direction left and progressive movements in France and Europe should go.

At a national level, the PCF faces, along with the Italian Communist Party (PCI), the dilemma of being a mass party in a developed capitalist democracy. It does have the distinction of having twice been in government, though both these experiences have done little but underline the difficulties of being the minor partner in a coalition with the Socialists (as in 1981-84), or highlight (as in 1947) the external opposition which can be mounted on the left when part of the conditions for receiving Marshall Plan aid was the expulsion of the communists from the government.

The task facing the French left, and particularly the PCF, is more pressing than at any time since World War II. It has effectively lost the strategic struggle with Mitterrand and the PS now faces a new level of supra-state capitalist development.

The only possible hint of optimism comes from the political space opened up on the left by Mitterrand’s successful centrist move — though it seems doubtful that the PCF, Renovateurs, or the Ecologists, can reoccupy this traditional left space in any convincing manner. Their failure to do so will only magnify the strategic success Mitterrand has achieved since the days of the Common Programme.

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