

Mitterrand myth starts to crack

by Laurent Murawiec

"The myth of the political infallibility of François Mitterrand has started to crack," wrote a leading Parisian columnist the day after the second round of parliamentary elections that saw the French President's Socialist Party fail to return a majority of deputies.

Out of 577 deputies, the Socialists and satellite groups returned 276. The opposition coalition of former Premier Jacques Chirac's RPR and former President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's UDF, 271. On the Left, the Communist Party saved its parliamentary skin with 27 seats, and, on the right, Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front won only one seat, despite a credible showing at the polls (the electoral system massively distorts the ratio of votes to seats).

There is a numerical majority of Socialists and Communists in the parliament, but neither party is willing to govern with the other. A minority Socialist government under Prime Minister Michel Rocard has been announced by Mitterrand, who stated on national television on June 14 his intent to make the French political system resemble that of "West Germany, Sweden, or Holland."

After Mitterrand's triumphant reelection on May 8, he and his party expected a clean sweep, giving them a free hand to dominate the National Assembly, and negotiate from a position of strength with demoralized elements of the former majority, eager to stay in the corridors of power. While it was clear that Chirac's RPR would not provide any defector of note, the rest of the center-right coalition that governed from 1986 to 1988 was supposed to be fodder for Mitterrand's heralded "ouverture" (opening). The unexpectedly strong showing of the RPR and UDF has made Mitterrand's game more tortuous.

Right of the Socialist Party and left of the RPR extends a swampy region known in French politics as "le Centre." Its main organization has been for the last 10 years the UDF (Union for French Democracy) founded by ex-President Giscard d'Estaing. The UDF itself is comprised of the Christian-Democratic CDS (Democratic and Social Center), and the Republican Party (PR). The CDS, which numbers among its leaders Trilateral Commission member and former Premier Raymond Barre, announced on June 15 that they would go it alone, outside the UDF, in the parliament, thus taking the first step in allying with the Socialists—in spite of having been elected with right-wing votes. The moving spirit in this break is Barre, whose presidential ambitions were frustrated by Chirac and the RPR.

The other half of the UDF, the Republicans, will mostly stick to the alliance with the RPR, and maintain a strong parliamentary opposition. Their founder, who has long lost the leadership of his creature, Giscard, also nourishes renewed presidential ambitions and designs to lead the center's flirt with Mitterrand.

Intense backroom dealings involving promises of ministerial positions and other spoils are under way. Mitterrand's TV speech offered many lures to his prospective allies—but he must be careful not to go too far too soon, for fear of alienating the Communist Party, whose deputies owe their seats to Socialist votes, but whose own voices will be crucial to allow Rocard to govern. In turn, the CDS cannot be seen embracing the Socialists too soon, lest they suffer in cantonal elections later this year and municipal elections next year.

The crushing electoral humiliation of Jacques Chirac is being compared to his own party's strong showing in the general elections. The RPR is in crisis: The technocratic faction led by former Economics Minister Edouard Balladur, who persuaded Chirac to run a "PR"-style campaign avoiding all serious issues, is slugging it out with Charles Pasqua, the powerful outgoing interior minister, who demands that the party "return to the popular roots of Gaullism." It appears that Pasqua's friends leaked news of the scandal now shattering the Paris Stock Exchange: The chairman of the Exchange and Brokers' Association—a close friend of Balladur—who covered up for six months the loss of hundreds of millions of francs worth of the association's war-chest, dissipated in unlucky speculation, just resigned.

The Socialist Party, though the largest in the country, cannot escape the results of the defeat it suffered by failing to win a majority. The half-dozen would-be presidential contenders of the future are jockeying for more power, now that Mitterrand's regal hold over the party has been weakened. Prime Minister Rocard, charged with carrying out Mitterrand's "opening," has more enemies than the party leadership has members.

France's international role at stake

While the institutional stability which is much of de Gaulle's legacy, is being torn to shreds and replaced by weathervane politicians, it is France's external role as a bulwark against the dictates of the superpowers' condominium that is being subverted and destroyed. Raymond Barre, the man of Lazard Frères, the insurance cartels and the Trilateral, is joining hands with the "Socialists," whose inspiration lies about in the same circles.

What remains to be seen is how those combinations will fare in the rough weather of economic and financial crisis. The high ratio of voters who stayed away from the polls—one-third of the electorate—shows that the disgust for politicians has become a major factor in French politics. Traditionally, when such is the case in French history, it takes little time before riots, mass-strikes and demonstrations erupt.