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France's political crisis after a no-confidence vote

President Macron can't govern without a government that has the legislature's support.

GIOVANNI CAPOCCIA - DECEMBER 5, 2024



France's Assemblée Nationale in Paris (cc) [Jarosław Baranowski](#), via Wikimedia Commons.

P rime Minister Michel Barnier formally resigned on Thursday, after the French National Assembly's first successful vote of no confidence since 1962. Although the French president plays a powerful role in the French political system, the prime minister and the cabinet are still subject to the support of the lower Chamber of Representatives, which can withdraw this support with a vote. In all, 331 of the 577 deputies approved the no-confidence measure on Dec. 4, 2024, ending Barnier's government.

This historic moment followed an afternoon of parliamentary speeches by party leaders and came as no surprise after radical right-wing leader Marine Le Pen's demands during budget negotiations forced Barnier to stake his government on the approval of the annual Law on the Financing of Social Security – a key step in the budget approval process.

Barnier's dignified farewell speech made the point that any future government would still face France's pressing budgetary challenges. But the no-confidence vote brought his government – the shortest in the Fifth Republic's history – to an end after just three months.

Barnier will now serve in a caretaker position as President Emmanuel Macron tries to appoint a new prime minister. It won't be easy in such a fragmented and polarized political

landscape, after even a seasoned politician such as Barnier failed. The fallout this week plunges the country into deeper constitutional uncertainty, as new legislative elections cannot be called before next summer.

This impasse raises the specter of a looming constitutional crisis. In a televised speech on Dec. 5, the day following the no-confidence vote, Macron reasserted that he will not resign and blamed the “anti-republican front” for the political instability. But he can’t govern without a government that has parliamentary support. As last night’s drama in the National Assembly shows, that support is very elusive at this moment.

The motivations behind the drama

Parties from the two political extremes – La France Insoumise (LFI) and the Rassemblement National (RN) – played decisive roles. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the leader of the left-wing LFI, continues his push for President Macron’s resignation and an early presidential election. That’s been his strategy after his failed attempt to secure parliamentary support for removing Macron earlier this year.

Le Pen, leader of the radical right-wing RN, recently shifted her approach. Previously content to exploit the Macron government’s weakness to bolster her 2027 presidential ambitions, Le Pen switched tactics amid her escalating legal troubles. Facing trial for misusing millions in European Parliament funds – and a potential immediate five-year ban on running for public office, Le Pen now claims to be the victim of political persecution. Her adversaries have pointed out the irony, given her own past vehement advocacy for harsh penalties against financial misconduct.

Le Pen withdrew her support for Barnier’s government, publicly called for Macron’s resignation, and took a high-risk gamble on a deepening crisis. Her calculation seems clear: A constitutional breakdown might put pressure on judges to delay ruling on her case. If Macron is in fact pushed to resign, the immediacy of a presidential campaign in which Le Pen would be a frontrunner might do even more to induce the judges to hold off imposing immediate ineligibility sanctions.

Macron’s limited options

With the French government in turmoil and in urgent need of a new budget, the ball is back in Macron's court. Unlike the U.S., France won't face the threat of a government shut-down; a special law could roll over the 2024 budget to 2025. However, forming a stable government in the current parliamentary landscape remains a grim prospect.

Macron's potential strategies include: (1) appointing a new center-right prime minister willing to appease the RN by incorporating all its requests in the new budget; (2) installing a center-left prime minister; (3) forming a technocratic government, led by a non-political figure more focused on pragmatic governance than party politics. Few consider the option of appointing a leftist prime minister who would rely mainly on the votes of the left a viable path.

None of these options offers an easy solution. A centrist alliance incorporating the Socialist Party (PS), Les Républicains, and minor parties, appears to be the only option that could command a parliamentary majority, however thin. But that option is far from guaranteed as it relies first and foremost on the Socialist Party switching its alliances.

The Socialists' dilemma and Le Pen's image problem

The Socialist Party faces growing calls to break from its alliance with the radical LFI. The party's good results in the 2024 European elections (13.8%) have fueled demands that it pursue a more independent course. While PS leader Olivier Faure, in interviews to TV and newspapers yesterday, has reaffirmed loyalty to the left-wing coalition, he has distanced his party from calls for Macron's resignation. This could simply be a tactic to appease internal dissent – or mark the beginning of a strategic shift. Yet electoral realities complicate matters, as France's double-ballot majoritarian voting system incentivizes broad alliances. This means a Socialist Party break with the left seems unlikely, unless the crisis worsens.

The one silver lining in this difficult situation for French democracy is that Le Pen's calculated image as a moderate, reliable opposition party that could credibly govern France in the near future has taken a hit. The fall of Barnier exposes her so-called respectability for what it was – a façade designed to serve her personal presidential ambitions. As these ambitions are threatened by a judicial ruling, her strategy of adopting a moderate image was quickly abandoned.

The political conflicts will likely continue

As new legislative elections cannot take place until next summer, the coming months are likely to see intensifying blame games. The parties on the left and right will accuse Macron of creating the crisis by dissolving parliament in July, while centrists will point fingers at Le Pen in particular for plunging the country into constitutional chaos.

This toxic rhetoric risks deepening the crisis at a time when stability is vital for France and the European Union. With the global geopolitical landscape already shaken by Donald Trump's election in November, France's constitutional crisis adds another layer of uncertainty to an increasingly volatile moment for Western democracies.

Giovanni Capoccia (@gcapoccia1 and @gcapoccia.bsky.social) is professor of comparative politics at the University of Oxford. He works on democracy, extremism, and democratic backsliding. He is completing a co-edited special journal issue entitled "Back from the Brink: Countering Illiberalism in Liberal Democracies."

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