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France Sets the Clock Back to 2024

At the resumption of political activity after the summer, France's Prime Minister François Bayrou unexpectedly announced that he would use his constitutional prerogative (Article 49, paragraph 1) to ask for a parliamentary vote of confidence on September 8, before the start of budget debates, which will likely last the entire fall. Bayrou, usually a more discreet media presence than other French political leaders, appeared on national TV and radio to stress the gravity of the country's budgetary situation. Presenting his draft budget (44 billion euros in spending cuts and tax increases), he forcefully argued that if France's fiscal situation is not urgently redressed, the country could plunge into financial chaos. Also, on September 10, several civil society opposition groups have called for a general mobilization against the government, which at that stage is likely to have formally resigned and only be in office as a caretaker until a successor is appointed. Given the situation, Bayrou urged all political parties to set aside their differences and acknowledge the seriousness of the crisis before negotiating solutions.

It quickly became clear, however, that Bayrou will not survive the vote. Parties ranging from the Socialists (PS) to the far-right *Rassemblement National* (RN) reacted with skepticism and opposed what they saw as a request for a blank check from the government. Since his appointment last year, Bayrou has relied on a fragile majority consisting of 166 MPs from the centrist parties supporting Macron, 47 from the Gaullist right *Les Républicains* (LR), and a few smaller groups. Politically, his position also depended on the PS's tacit non-opposition, but its leaders have now clearly stated that the party will not support the government in the confidence vote.

In this context, all parties have begun positioning themselves for the possible scenarios following Bayrou's fall. Seeking to reassert itself as a party of government and distance itself from its electoral alliances with the radical *La France Insoumise*, the PS presented an alternative budget. Bayrou publicly dismissed the proposal as inadequate. It focuses on taxing high incomes and wealth, but only envisages about half the financial sacrifices of the government's plan. This would delay meeting the EU's 3% deficit target until 2032 – three years later than Bayrou's proposal. This dynamic is already becoming a self-fulfilling

prophecy: since Bayrou's fall is now almost inevitable, even parts of LR are growing restless – despite the fact that government participation has certainly boosted the national visibility and political stature of its leader, Interior Minister and presidential hopeful Bruno Retailleau.

Indeed, Bayrou himself probably does not believe his government will survive the September 8 vote. Many see his move as an attempt to avoid the fate of his predecessor Michel Barnier, whose government, also based on a precarious parliamentary majority, collapsed after its budget was rejected one year ago. An earlier exit, framed as a gesture of political self-sacrifice for the good of the country, could give Bayrou more political capital to spend in the run-up to the next presidential election, which promises to be highly uncertain. However, his attempt to appeal directly to the public “above the parties” seems to have failed: according to a recent poll, 63% of respondents oppose giving confidence to his government.

The main decision now facing the French president – who has repeatedly declared that he will not leave office early – is whether to attempt to construct a new governing formula within the current parliament or to call new elections just fourteen months after the last dissolution. Neither option is attractive, and both would effectively reset French politics to 2024. Refusing dissolution would bring the political landscape back to September 2024, at the end of the caretaker Attal government. In the current parliament, appointing a prime minister from the central bloc, such as Defense Minister Sébastien Lecornu (already a contender one year ago) or Justice Minister Gérald Darmanin, would run into the same problems as Bayrou's government. And since the rupture with the PS has now become explicit, the only way such a government could survive, at least at the start, would be through the tacit non-opposition of the RN – the strategy tried by Michel Barnier, which did not prevent his fall after only three months.

RN president Jordan Bardella has made it clear that he will not accept appointment as prime minister unless he commands a clear parliamentary majority. Excluding the option of a technocratic government – never tried under the Fifth Republic – the only other path open to Macron would be to appoint a Socialist. Indeed, PS First Secretary Olivier Faure has openly advocated this, arguing that he or another left-wing leader would be prepared to seek a coalition agreement with other parties. Macron might indeed attempt this route, but a Socialist-led government would be unlikely to last long. As Retailleau has made clear, LR would not support such a government, even though its votes would be numerically essential. Even support from the centrist bloc could not be taken for granted, since the PS would have just toppled a centrist government.

A new dissolution of parliament would reset the clock not to September but to June 2024. Recent polls put the RN at 31–33%, roughly the same as one year ago, while the centrist bloc has fallen from nearly 22% to around 14–15%. LR would take about 13%, while a united left (likely, given the electoral system's penalties for division) would gain about 25%. Last year, a “Front républicain” – various forms of alliances and mutual support among the other parties – blocked Le Pen's and Bardella's party from winning a majority that had seemed all

but assured after the first round. A repeat of that strategy would likely reproduce today's three-bloc parliament. But now, 53% of voters – including 57% of LR supporters and nearly one third of centrists – oppose a renewed *Front républicain*. Even if parties agree to ally, vote transfers between their candidates are likely to be weaker than in 2024. This worsens the situation for both the centrists and LR, since their predicted scores put many of their candidates at serious risk of failing to pass the threshold (12.5% of registered voters, i.e., about 17% of actual votes in most districts) required to enter the second round.

Under these conditions, an RN victory in terms of seats – and not just, as in 2024, in terms of votes – seems unavoidable. The question is whether enough local alliances and last-minute mobilization could prevent the RN and its allies from securing an outright majority in the National Assembly. With a clear plurality of seats, Bardella and Le Pen would probably not be able to refuse to form a government without paying a political price. That scenario would leave some space for the other parties to reorganize ahead of the presidential election while opposing a numerically weak RN government. Macron, despite being politically weakened by having only two years left in his mandate, would be more likely to retain control of the “reserved domain” of the presidency, including key issues such as rearmament, Ukraine, and the EU. By contrast, a solid RN majority would enable a new RN prime minister to pressure the president on these dossiers, with major implications for France's position in Europe and internationally.

By dissolving parliament in June 2024, Macron reclaimed the French president's traditional role as *maître des horloges*, master of the political calendar. But circumstances have sharply limited his options. We shall see whether the *maître des horloges* regains the upper hand – the odds do not seem to be in his favor.

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