



| Brief |

Political Upheaval Likely in French Elections

Classification: TLP:CLEAR

Criticality: HIGH

Intelligence Requirements: Government, Cybersecurity, Geopolitical

June 28, 2024

Scope Note

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Brief | Political Upheaval Likely in French Elections

Executive Summary

Following the unexpectedly strong performance of the far-right Rassemblement Nationale (RN) party in European parliamentary elections on June 6–9, French President Emmanuel Macron declared a snap parliamentary election for the end of the month. This decision has thrown France’s political system into chaos, as it is entirely unclear what party or coalition will hold power for the next three years.

Observers were initially taken by surprise when Macron dissolved the Assemblée Nationale, as despite his party’s poor results in the EU parliamentary elections, he was in no way obligated to take such action. Calling for elections immediately after a major defeat certainly appears strange, but there is a political logic. With France divided between the left, center, and right, Macron hopes to rally his centrist coalition with that of the left as a bulwark against the rising influence of the right. Failing that, Macron could still believe he benefits from a strong showing by the RN, in that it would force them to actually take part in governing and thus expose them to the unpopularity of decision-making. In this way, he could place himself in a better situation for the more consequential Presidential elections in 2027.

However, there are major risks associated with this plan. Current polls indicate that not only will RN become the largest parliamentary party, but Macron’s party, which only

recently performed extremely poorly in a nationwide election, will go from the first to the third largest party in parliament. An RN victory would likely be swiftly followed by a reversal of many of Macron's legislative accomplishments in his last term in office, leaving him without accomplishments to campaign on for the presidency.

The political situation in France has been quite tense since the announcement of the elections. Security forces are already on high alert in Paris ahead of the Olympic Games and are now preparing across the country to ensure an orderly vote and aftermath. Confrontations between the far left and far right are possible, particularly if the elections lead to a government headed by the RN.

| Details

Logistics

A new vote to fill the 577 seats in the National Assembly will be held in two rounds of voting—the first on June 30 and the second on July 7.

The French system is a majority vote with runoff only if necessary. Candidates who win a majority of votes in the first round are elected straightaway. If no candidate wins a majority in the first round, all candidates who received at least 12.5 percent of the vote proceed to the second round, where the highest vote total (even below a majority) determines the winner.

France's lower house of parliament is an important legislative body that controls most domestic matters, including approving key pieces of domestic legislation, such as spending bills or changes to the Constitution. It also has the power to force the resignation of the cabinet through a no-confidence vote.

Macron's centrist coalition currently holds only 250 seats in the National Assembly, short of the 289 required for an absolute majority after the 2022 elections. The National Rally Party has 88 seats, while the conservative Republicans control 61. An alliance of far-left, socialist, and Green Party lawmakers holds 149 seats.

In the last two years, Macron has been unable to get a majority to pass his reforms, with the majority of the French public blaming him for society-wide issues around immigration and the high cost of living. He has instead had to make copious use of a parliamentary maneuver involving Article 49.3 of the French Constitution, which allows a minority to adopt a law so long as the President survives a no-confidence vote. This was most famously invoked during the debate over raising the age of retirement, which led to widespread protests in 2023.

Polling

Since calling elections, polls have consistently predicted a victory for the RN, though it is expected to fall short of a majority.¹ Macron's gambit to unite the left and center under his aegis appears to have failed, with his presumed allies defecting in favor of their own interests. A poll released on June 27, 2024, placed the RN in first with 36 percent, the Nouveau Front Populaire at 29 percent, and the Presidential coalition Ensemble at 19.5 percent.²

- The center-right Republican Party has suggested they would form a coalition with the National Rally in the event that they do not win a majority, virtually ensuring that Macron's Ensemble coalition will not be the largest coalition in parliament.
- Furthermore, much of the French political left has also united to form a broad coalition of Greens, Socialists, and Communists, called the Nouvelle Front Populaire. The left has historically been fractured, with the coalition's name serving as a callback to a famous moment of unity with the original "Front Populaire" from 1936. The coalition has largely campaigned on overturning Macron's changes to pension ages, paid for by a reversal of Macron's tax cuts for the wealthy. Both ideas are actually shared by the RN, making it likely that they could be achieved regardless of the final result. Polls suggest the Nouvelle Front Populaire will be the second-largest coalition in parliament.

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[hXXps://www.rfi\[.\]fr/en/france/20240617-france-begins-accelerated-election-campaign-after-macron-poll-gamble-national-rally](https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20240617-france-begins-accelerated-election-campaign-after-macron-poll-gamble-national-rally)

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[hXXps://www.francebleu\[.\]fr/infos/politique/legislatives-le-rassemblement-national-confirme-son-avance-devant-la-gauche-et-le-camp-presidentiel-4582776](https://www.francebleu.fr/infos/politique/legislatives-le-rassemblement-national-confirme-son-avance-devant-la-gauche-et-le-camp-presidentiel-4582776)

- While Macron may have initially believed he could stage a remarkable political turnaround between the EU elections and the snap elections that would see him emerge with a parliamentary majority, at this point, polling suggests he will instead preside with the support of a much-diminished parliamentary coalition.

Political Calculus

Macron had access to polls showing he was not popular even before dissolving the Assembly, which begs the question of why he would call an election when he is not obliged to, especially given it risks the seats of every member of his party. A poor result for Macron, as currently seems very likely, will destroy his power in the Assembly and likely hand it over for the next three years to his primary political rivals. However, his calculus may have suggested that an election could be better than the status quo.

- The current makeup of parliament has left Macron unable to pass significant legislation without using Article 49.3. He has thus suffered from a dual issue where he has few legislative projects to celebrate, and those projects he has shepherded through are unpopular partially because of the manner in which they were adopted. He may feel that there is nothing to gain from continuing to bleed popularity in this situation.
- The current make-up of France's parliaments means France is unlikely to pass a 2025 budget by the end of 2024, which would likely have resulted in a no-confidence vote in Macron's government and necessitated calling new elections anyway.³ With elections forced on them, Macron's party may have performed even worse.
- It is likely that Macron hoped to catch his political opponents by surprise by calling for snap elections, as fielding hundreds of candidates to run in nationwide elections on short notice could be quite difficult. To the extent this was part of his plan, it has not succeeded.
- Macron himself is not at risk of losing power, and he has already said he will not resign regardless of the election outcome.

To form an absolute majority, the RN would need to win an additional 200 seats. Current polls suggest Macron's Ensemble coalition will lose 100 seats, though those margins

³ [hXXps://x\[.\]com/ojblanchard1/status/1799904348379455981](https://x[.]com/ojblanchard1/status/1799904348379455981)

could be even larger given the mechanics of France's voting system. Because strong candidates win their seats during the first round on June 30, with more contested seats moving to the second round, many members of the third-placed party are eliminated in the first round. Even those who make it to the second round can find themselves triangulated between two other candidates—a situation which often leads to a third-placed candidate bleeding support to the two primary contenders. As the Ensemble coalition is polling third nationally, there could be an embarrassingly low number of pro-Macron candidates during the second round. However, Macron may even benefit if his party loses badly.

- France is due to hold presidential elections in 2027. If polling holds, that will come after two and a half years of parliamentary control by the RN, during which time Macron, as President, will maintain his ability to mobilize against the parliament. This could set up the RN and Marine Le Pen to fail, as voters would have had several years to envision what a potential President Le Pen administration would look like. Forcing the RN into government could expose its ineffectiveness as a governing party, leading future voters to conclude they are incapable of leading France. One way to make this perception available to Macron is to task them with negotiations with the EU, a supranational organization to which the RN is mostly opposed. Making the RN propose a budget could also be used as a political weapon, as such a project would require either clearly committing to positions that are thought to be unpopular or moderating those positions and thus appearing to go back on their platform.

Given the polling situation and the political calculus, it appears that Macron has chosen to run the risk of having a RN Prime Minister in 2024, in the hopes that it will dissuade voters from choosing a Marine Le Pen Presidency in 2027.

Economics

Since Macron announced the snap elections, the EU has admonished France for excessive spending, and its stock market has lost its spot as Europe's most valuable. Investors are dumping French stocks and bonds out of concern that either the RN or the Nouvelle Front Populaire will force France into unfunded spending decisions.

- France's budget deficit was 5.5 percent of GDP in 2023, and debt is expected to reach 114 percent by 2025, both well above EU limits that incur fines.⁴
- Macron is currently taking the blame from voters for perceived poor economic performance. France has struggled with cost-of-living issues and sluggish GDP growth, which have reduced the popularity of his party. By reducing his mandate, Macron may be able to lay the blame for future poor performance at the feet of his opponents.
- This, however, is a gamble, as it requires that voters blame the governing party in parliament for poor performance while not blaming the President for the same.
- It is also possible that once in office, the National Front will avoid falling into Macron's trap and govern in a manner that international investors favor. Were this to occur, it would become the opposite type of political football, with Macron and the RN arguing over the share of credit for positive economic news.

The most obvious parallel would be Georgia Meloni in Italy, who is often compared to Le Pen due to political similarities.⁵ Meloni has managed to avoid clashes with the EU over issues like support for Ukraine while continuing through with policies that are popular, like limiting immigration.

- Italy was the other major EU economy sanctioned by the EU for spending unaffordably in mid-June 2024, and Meloni critics argue that her surprisingly high level of support will tumble when it emerges that she cannot afford the things she promised.

On the other hand, Macron likely believes that it will turn out more like the United Kingdom (UK), where the negative impacts of the 2016 Brexit decision have weighed heavily on the electorate. The UK Conservative Party is expected to perform poorly during the UK elections on July 4 for this reason. Le Pen was a supporter of Brexit and, in the past, called for France to engage in "Frexit." The UK traditionally had Europe's largest stock market but lost its status post-Brexit, only to reclaim it after Macron called surprise elections in June 2024.

⁴ [hXXps://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20240619-france-targeted-in-eu-crackdown-on-excessive-spending](https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20240619-france-targeted-in-eu-crackdown-on-excessive-spending)

⁵ [hXXps://www.ft.com/content/21d1e0a4-ba03-4080-b9d7-8f12435cbdde](https://www.ft.com/content/21d1e0a4-ba03-4080-b9d7-8f12435cbdde)

- In the brief election manifesto RN assembled for the campaign, they promised to cut taxes on electricity, gas, and oil without corresponding moves to increase government revenues. This suggests the French deficit is likely to worsen if they implement their proposals.
- The Nouvelle Front Populaire, who are polling to finish second, are campaigning to roll back Macron's pension reform, bringing the legal age of retirement back down from 64, reintroducing a wealth tax to massively reinvest in public services, and increasing the minimum wage. These all involve additional spending, which they plan to cover via increased taxes on wealth.
- Together, these decisions will likely drastically reduce foreign investment in France, worsen debt levels, and increase inflation in the coming years.

| Cyber Campaigns

With Macron calling surprise elections with less than a month of campaigning, the time for adversaries to implement cyber campaigns is short. However, there have been reports related to the threat of Russian campaigns to influence the election.

- A report by the French IT firm Sesame IT detailed Russian cyber operations in which Russian "troll farms" are using AI to write comments supporting the far right, which can be spread around the internet in order to affect public opinion.

This follows the same pattern as occurred in advance of the European parliamentary elections. Russian cyber influence has been in operation across Europe for months and years.

- In February 2024, officials from Viginum, a French anti-disinformation agency, announced that they had uncovered a large-scale Russian effort aimed at manipulating public opinion in Western Europe. The influence operation has been code-named "Portal Kombat" and allegedly consists of 193 seemingly independent websites that are covertly run by a single unnamed Russian organization. According to Viginum, this network routinely spreads deceptive or false pro-Kremlin news stories, particularly concerning the ongoing war in Ukraine. In addition, French authorities claim that the operators of Portal Kombat are gearing up to launch a wide-ranging disinformation campaign in the runup to the

EU parliamentary elections.⁶ In both cases, the main objective is to promote right-wing politicians sympathetic to the Russian government, undermine prospective MEPs who might favor stronger sanctions, and generally erode public support for continuing military and financial assistance to Ukraine.

EU security officials identified two Russian influence operations that specifically targeted the parliamentary elections.

- The first, code named “Doppelganger”, has been active since at least May 2022. It seeks to spread disinformation through fake news stories planted on legitimate-looking media sites. The fabricated information is then further disseminated and amplified via social media accounts on several platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. The threat actors running this operation utilize advanced obfuscation techniques, including manipulating social media thumbnails and employing strategic first and second-stage website redirects to evade detection.⁷
- On May 5, 2017, Russian hackers tried to sway the French presidential election by publishing several gigabytes of data stolen from Emmanuel Macron’s campaign team. This leak occurred two days prior to the first round of voting and just hours before the electoral silence period. It primarily consisted of real emails between members of the campaign team mixed with forgeries. However, the lack of bombshell revelations coupled with the low quality of the fake documents greatly lessened the impact of this meddling attempt. In addition, frequent warnings in the months prior by the National Commission for the Control of the Electoral Campaign for the Presidential Election (CNCCEP) and National Cybersecurity Agency (ANSSI) arguably increased public awareness of and resistance to such influence operations. Thus, in contrast to the United States the previous year, the attempted interference in France’s presidential elections in 2017 is widely regarded as a failure.⁸

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⁶ [hXXps://www.economist\[.\]com/europe/2024/02/12/france-uncovers-a-vast-russian-disinformation-campaign-in-europe](https://www.economist.com/europe/2024/02/12/france-uncovers-a-vast-russian-disinformation-campaign-in-europe)

⁷ [hXXps://www.disinfo\[.\]eu/doppelganger-operation/](https://www.disinfo[.]eu/doppelganger-operation/)

⁸ [hXXps://www.csis\[.\]org/analysis/successfully-countering-russian-electoral-interference](https://www.csis[.]org/analysis/successfully-countering-russian-electoral-interference)

Physical Security

Background

Overall, France has experienced significant political unrest and polarization in recent years.

- During the first half of 2023, the country witnessed at least 14 rounds of nationwide strikes and protests against President Emmanuel Macron's centerpiece domestic reform, which raised the retirement age from 62 to 64 years.⁹
- Large-scale demonstrations brought between 500K and 1.3 million people out onto the streets from January to June 2023 and turned violent in mid-March.¹⁰

Although the last round of nationwide strikes and demonstrations occurred on June 6, 2023, France experienced a fresh round of violence after police officers shot and killed a 17-year-old delivery driver during a traffic stop in a Paris suburb on June 27.¹¹ This incident, culturally similar to the George Floyd protests in the United States, sparked several nights of riots, which resulted in widespread looting, 1,000 damaged buildings, and over 5,000 burned vehicles.¹²

Lastly, in early January 2024, farmers in the south of France began a series of demonstrations and road blockades to protest against environmental regulations and cuts to agricultural subsidies. These actions gradually spread to the rest of the country, culminating in a "siege" of Paris, with farmers blocking major motorways leading into the capital between January 29 and February 1, 2024.^{13 14}

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[hXXps://www.lemonde\[.\]fr/politique/live/2023/01/10/reforme-des-retraites-en-direct-le-gouvernement-propose-de-decaler-l-age-legal-de-depart-a-64-ans-en-2030_6157310_823448.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/live/2023/01/10/reforme-des-retraites-en-direct-le-gouvernement-propose-de-decaler-l-age-legal-de-depart-a-64-ans-en-2030_6157310_823448.html)

¹⁰

[hXXps://www.lemonde\[.\]fr/politique/live/2023/03/16/reforme-des-retraites-en-direct-elisabeth-borne-s-exprime-a-la-tribune-de-l-assemblee-nationale-sous-les-huees-de-l-opposition_6165692_823448.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/live/2023/03/16/reforme-des-retraites-en-direct-elisabeth-borne-s-exprime-a-la-tribune-de-l-assemblee-nationale-sous-les-huees-de-l-opposition_6165692_823448.html)

¹¹ [hXXps://www.theguardian\[.\]com/world/2023/jul/04/first-edition-france-unrest-police-nahel-merzouk](https://www.theguardian[.]com/world/2023/jul/04/first-edition-france-unrest-police-nahel-merzouk)

¹²

[hXXps://www.leparisien\[.\]fr/faits-divers/interpellations-voitures-brulees-batiments-degrades-les-emeutes-en-chief-fres-nuit-par-nuit-03-07-2023-S7M7QZT5TBC63IC6AAC7XTBETQ.php](https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/interpellations-voitures-brulees-batiments-degrades-les-emeutes-en-chief-fres-nuit-par-nuit-03-07-2023-S7M7QZT5TBC63IC6AAC7XTBETQ.php)

¹³

[hXXps://www.theguardian\[.\]com/world/2024/jan/29/french-farmers-drive-tractors-towards-paris-in-blockade-threat](https://www.theguardian[.]com/world/2024/jan/29/french-farmers-drive-tractors-towards-paris-in-blockade-threat)

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[hXXps://www.rfi\[.\]fr/en/france/20240213-leading-french-farmers-union-warns-motorway-blockades-could-resume](https://www.rfi[.]fr/en/france/20240213-leading-french-farmers-union-warns-motorway-blockades-could-resume)

Recent Incidents

In general, the grievances that animated these waves of protests in 2023 and 2024 have not been fully resolved and have likely impacted voter preferences. Since Macron announced the elections, there have been election-related protests, with the largest against the policies of the RN. A candidate for the far-right RN party was confronted on the campaign trail by suspected far-left protesters in an incident initially reported as an attack that required hospitalization. It has since been reported that the confrontation led to the candidate suffering a stroke, but the initial reports of a violent attack against a candidate are difficult to dislodge due to the true rise in attacks against political figures in recent years.¹⁵

More recently, security experts have warned of the increased danger of “lone actor” attacks inspired by the Israel-Hamas war. The warning was initially tied to the Olympics scheduled to take place in Paris from July 26–August 11, but the threat also exists for these legislative elections taking place shortly beforehand.

In France, there have been two such incidents since the start of the Israel-Hamas War. On October 13, a teacher was killed in a knife attack in the city of Arras.¹⁶ Then on December 2, one person was killed and two others injured during a knife and hammer attack in central Paris.¹⁷

- In both cases, police have classified the incidents as “acts of terrorism” and believe that they are related, at least in part, to events in the Middle East.
- Finally, in a separate case, a 16-year-old student was stabbed to death in the small town of Crépol on November 18, 2023. Although a motive for this crime has not yet been established, far-right groups blamed Muslim immigrants for the killing and engaged in two nights of rioting in the neighboring community of Romans-sur-Isère on November 25 and 26, 2023.¹⁸

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[hXXps://www.reuters.com/world/europe/far-right-candidate-assaulted-during-french-election-campaign-2024-06-21/](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/far-right-candidate-assaulted-during-french-election-campaign-2024-06-21/)

¹⁶ [hXXps://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/13/europe/arras-france-school-knife-attack-intl/index.html](https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/13/europe/arras-france-school-knife-attack-intl/index.html)

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[hXXps://www.lemonde.fr/societe/live/2023/12/03/en-direct-attentat-a-paris-le-point-sur-les-dernieres-informations_6203619_3224.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/live/2023/12/03/en-direct-attentat-a-paris-le-point-sur-les-dernieres-informations_6203619_3224.html)

¹⁸ [hXXps://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67548173](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67548173)

Overall, the protests and their aftermath are indicative of a broader, more long-term issue: namely, the breakdown of trust between the government and large segments of French society. An attack by a lone actor during the election campaign would likely exacerbate these longstanding tensions, which have an increased risk of prompting even more violence in response, no matter how law enforcement responds.

Conclusion

France is likely to emerge from the latest elections even more polarized, in worse shape economically, and less capable of enacting reforms domestically and internationally. President Emmanuel Macron is likely hoping the blame for such political paralysis is aimed at his political opponents, led by Marine Le Pen. The main risk, however, is that Macron leaves France weakened and incapable of governing if a crisis occurs, with a debt crisis looking the most likely, and given France's outsized role in the EU, they are similarly incapable of helping the EU deal with its growing list of problems.

| Appendix A: Traffic Light Protocol for Information Dissemination

	Red	Amber
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:RED when information cannot be effectively acted upon by additional parties and could lead to impacts on a party's privacy, reputation, or operations if misused.	Sources may use TLP:AMBER when information requires support to be effectively acted upon but carries risks to privacy, reputation, or operations if shared outside of the organizations involved.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may NOT share TLP:RED with any parties outside of the specific exchange, meeting, or conversation in which it is originally disclosed.	Recipients may ONLY share TLP:AMBER information with members of their own organization and its clients, but only on a need-to-know basis to protect their organization and its clients and prevent further harm. Note that TLP:AMBER+STRICT restricts sharing to the organization only.
	Green	Clear
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:GREEN when information is useful for the awareness of all participating organizations, as well as with peers within the broader community or sector.	Sources may use TLP:CLEAR when information carries minimal or no risk of misuse in accordance with applicable rules and procedures for public release.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may share TLP:GREEN information with peers and partner organizations within their sector or community but not via publicly accessible channels.	Recipients may share TLP:CLEAR information without restriction, subject to copyright controls.

| Appendix B: ZeroFox Intelligence Probability Scale

All ZeroFox intelligence products leverage probabilistic assessment language in analytic judgments. Qualitative statements used in these judgments refer to associated probability ranges, which state the likelihood of occurrence of an event or development. Ranges are used to avoid a false impression of accuracy. This scale is a standard that aligns with how readers should interpret such terms.

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Roughly Even Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%