

## 9 July 2024

Sunday's surprise result is likely to lead to a period of prolonged political deadlock that in the long term will benefit the far-right. A hung parliament is unlikely to bring about any major change in approach to the Middle East – France will seek to continue to play an influential mediatory role in the region.

Against all expectations, France's left-wing alliance came first in Sunday's parliamentary elections. The strategy of the left and centre's Republican Front of uniting behind one candidate in multicandidate races to prevent splitting votes succeeded.

The New Popular Front (NFP) – a coalition comprising several left-wing parties ranging from the radical left France Unbowed party to the more moderate Socialists and the Ecologists – has won the most seats (182) in the country's lower house, the National Assembly. The NFP is a new grouping – formed days after President Emmanuel Macron called for a snap poll earlier in June. Macron's own Ensemble alliance has won 163 seats, leaving the far-right National Rally party led by Marine Le Pen in third. It, along with its allies, has won 143.

Sunday's results surprised everyone. Pundits forecast a victory for the National Rally party following a strong showing in the first round of voting – held just weeks after the resounding defeat of Macron's party in the European Parliamentary elections. The far-right party's performance is its best to date and represents significant growth in far-right representation in Parliament, but it falls far short of the victory expected.

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## A parliament divided

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The President will wait until after this summer's Paris Olympics to appoint a new prime minister (PM), who is traditionally drawn from the party with the greatest number of seats. This will create a "cohabitation" (a situation in which the president and the PM are from different parties), effectively relieving the President of significant authority.

As no party came close to winning an absolute majority (289 seats), France faces the prospect of a hung parliament. If that were to occur, the power would shift towards Parliament and away from the PM, an outcome which could lead to political paralysis as any legislation the PM seeks to pass is likely to be frustrated by Parliament.

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Parliament, then, is set for a turbulent course. Members<sup>vii</sup> of the NFP joined forces in a bid to prevent far-right success – not because they share policy priorities or perspectives. The centrist Ensemble is refusing to work with the France Unbowed party, and with no cohesion among other parties in the alliance, the NFP is vulnerable to attempts by the centrist party to divide it. Macron's party would then become the first power in Parliament, justifying the nomination of a centrist PM. The first test of Parliament's willingness to work together will come on 10 July, when the process of electing the National Assembly president begins. It may be a protracted affair.

A period of prolonged political deadlock is likely to benefit Le Pen's National Rally, whose public support has grown from 89 seats in 2022 to 143 in 2024. The far-right was out-manoeuvred this time by the NFP and the Ensemble alliance, but it will aim to capitalise upon public dissatisfaction associated with the newly elected Parliament and its inability to pass legislation.

## Impact on MENA

The composition of the new Parliament is unlikely to bring about any major change in France's approach to the Middle East. Foreign policy is the preserve of the President and though Parliament does exercise control over the budget – and may seek to frustrate new policy initiatives – this will have little impact on the overall direction of foreign policy.

France prioritises and promotes "security first" approaches – and bilateral relationships – to enhance trade and defence ties. Consequently, it will continue to prioritise its relations with Lebanon and coordinate with the US on addressing the pressing issue of averting conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. Similarly, Macron's policy towards the GCC countries, which is predicated upon strengthening trade, economic, and diplomatic ties, will persevere.

France sees itself as having an influential mediatory role to play in MENA affairs and will continue to work closely with regional partners, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE. It has a track record – it was the first major Western state to call for a ceasefire in Gaza, voted in favour of the UAE and Brazil's resolutions at the UN, and organised the first international humanitarian conference for Gaza – and will want to build on that. Hung parliament or not, the French President is not about to cede his role as a global leader in pursuit of solving some of the world's knottiest problems.