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## Macron's Denial of Democracy



Street protests in Paris.

After imposing an unpopular pension reform, Emmanuel Macron is in serious trouble. Governments make occasional faux-pas and get into trouble. But this time round, the French president has put himself in a very bad situation. The nation is deeply scarred, and the wounds will not heal easily.

Why should raising the retirement age from 62 to 64 be a national drama when, in most European countries, people retire at a later age? The standard Anglo-American view is the French should 'get with the realities of our economic world'. But the French sometimes get it right, and they probably are right about opposing Macron's pension reform.

**The reform**

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Various economists have shown that the system with a retirement age at 62 remains viable. Some in France ask a different question: why would a government set the retirement age at 64 when many French workers are forced to quit before they are 60? Indeed, France has one of the highest inactivity rates for those over 55 years old.

The idea of retirement as a real ‘third age’ is deeply ingrained across social classes and generations, irrespective of people’s political leanings. The French received wisdom is that for pension age to be a real ‘third age’, workers should retire when they are still in good health to at least enjoy a decade of meaningful activities. Surveys have shown that retirement tends to lead to better health, less depression, and a decrease in healthcare consumption.

Yet, the rise of retirement age does not fully explain the ire of French workers. The reform is seen as deeply unfair: it will hit women and precarious workers who have started working at an early age as well as lower-middle income workers. It is true that the changes were part of Macron’s manifesto for re-election to a second term in office, but the proposal has failed to get a majority in the National Assembly, let alone among the public at large. There is therefore more to it. The government’s authoritarian handling of the debates in and out of parliament has been perceived as an attack on the core of political representation in France: national sovereignty.

### **A ‘denial of democracy’**

Since the French revolution, the ‘general will’, a central tenet of popular sovereignty, has been exercised by the representatives of the nation. It is this very national sovereignty that the government, under Macron’s instructions, has deliberately ignored and even trampled on. Firstly, it is a personal failure for Macron. The president first tried to overhaul France’s pension system in 2019. This was met by widespread opposition. He may have forced the passing of the law today, but his political power is greatly diminished, and his image as a ‘liberal moderniser’ is in tatters.

Secondly, the method which has led to the adoption of the reform is controversial. Trade unions, all united against the reform, were ostensibly ignored by the government. Élisabeth Borne, the prime minister, avoided negotiating with them when the protests started gaining momentum. Debates in parliament were kept to a bare minimum using various constitutional provisions. No more than fifty days were allotted to discussing a complex dossier in the lower house. Consequently, thousands of amendments to the law that were tabled by opposition groups were overlooked.

In the end, Macron's party – which has no absolute majority in the chamber – could not pass the bill. The Republicans, who are broadly in favour of the reform, refused to rescue Macron's minority government. Amid scenes of anger in the National Assembly, the prime minister invoked article 49.3 of the constitution to pass the legislation without a vote.

To use this article is for any government a sign of weakness. Clause 3 is the most anti-parliamentarian provision that one can imagine: it allows the government to impose the adoption of a bill without a vote. The opposition may oppose the manoeuvre by voting for a motion of no confidence under clause 2 of article 49. Article 49.3 shifts all power to the executive which is no longer subordinated to the vote of the parliament to pass legislation. The use of 49.3 has enraged the public because the government lacked a majority in the chamber to approve the law. Given the sensitivity of the matter, this was considered by constitutional experts as a 'denial of democracy'.

A small centrist opposition group submitted a cross-party motion of no confidence which was voted by all party groups bar Macron's group and a majority of Republican deputies. Some Republican deputies broke ranks and voted with the other opposition parties. The motion fell short of the required 287-vote majority by a whisker, with the final tally being only nine votes short of censuring the government. Emmanuel Macron's grip on power now hangs by a thread.

### **The prospect of a far-right victory**

What happens next? Macron has been severely weakened by this episode. His personal ratings are at their lowest since the yellow vests protests. Calling new elections is therefore seen as unlikely. Borne may be replaced as prime minister to give Macron new momentum. Trade unionists and NGO representatives have urged Macron to make an 'appeasement gesture' by withdrawing the controversial bill. They otherwise fear that violence might spread.

Strikes and demonstrations against the bill show no sign of easing. Spontaneous street protests have brought about violence and destruction in various city centres. The French police – whose institutionalised brutality is well-documented – arrested a total of 169 people nationwide the weekend following the adoption of the law via article 49.3. The main oil refinery has shut down, and Paris rubbish collectors are on strike. The French capital looks like London during the 1979 Winter of Discontent.

Is this a new yellow vests movement in the making? The two movements are of a different nature. The yellow vests originated from various segments of the population: working-

class and lower middle-class, left-wing but also conservative and leaning to the far-right, anti-vax and believers in conspiracy theories. It was an anti-party and anti-union movement which dismissed political representation. The movement against the pension bill is more conventionally left-wing in as much as it largely regroups unionised workers who are supported by the population.

Had the unions and demonstrators defeated Macron's bill, this may have boosted the political fortunes of a left in steep decline. However, the passing of the law may further increase popular anger and resentment. These feelings tend to feed violence and individualism. A recent opinion poll showed that should there be early elections, only the far-right Rassemblement National would make electoral gains. Macron's party but also the NUPES (united left) would, conversely, lose votes. Many French people will think that they have been disregarded and lied to. This is exactly what exacerbates an anti-elite discourse which always strengthens the populist far right.

President Macron's aloofness and his authoritarian handling of the situation as well as prime minister Borne's brittle technocracy have left France on the brink. This time round, it is Macron, not the yellow vests, who is showing contempt for political representation. Throughout the debates on pension reform, he has indeed openly disregarded the unions, demonstrators and opposition deputies. Marine Le Pen, a very discrete opponent to the bill, seems happy to just add fuel to the flames by noting that the French 'have been swindled' by Macron's reform.

The likely consequences are troubling. Macron was elected in 2017 and re-elected in 2022 by posing as a 'bulwark' against fascism. Since Macron's first election, Le Pen's party has gone from strength to strength. The incumbent president has done nothing to revive an unhealthy democracy or dispel the French elites' aversion for pluralism and a buoyant civil society. Under the Macron presidency, mainstream political parties have experienced a rapid decline and the far right has dangerously progressed. It is striking the number of French academic colleagues, journalists and politicians who now state they are resigned to a Le Pen victory in 2027.

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