

# The Socialist Party loses its mandate to govern

by Philip Golub

It is not uncommon in leading Parisian circles these days to compare the tense and increasingly violent political climate in the country to that of the chaotic last years of the Fourth Republic, or even to the period of sectarian violence which followed the liberation in 1945.

Undoubtedly, the left-right political conflict has sharpened to a degree that has surprised most observers, and France is more divided as a nation today than at any time since 1958, when escalating military crises in Algeria brought on endless domestic crises and a political paralysis which forced Charles de Gaulle out of political retirement and into executive power.

Terrorism has evoked images of an "Italianization" of France, repeated purges of the national police and security forces have left persisting bitterness among security forces and have polarized ministers within the government, all of which has led to intensifying interne-cine "police wars"; the French economy is facing its worst crisis in years, and the government is committing very grave errors of management, which, if pursued, may very well lead to economic collapse.

The most remarkable feature of the national crisis afflicting France is that the predicates of the crisis described above, all result, directly or indirectly, from the manifest incompetence of the new Socialist regime to rule in times of world crisis.

Unlike 1958, neither military crisis nor institutional paralysis resulting from British parliamentary forms are attributable causes of the rapid deterioration of political life and executive authority in France. In retrospect, it is a simple matter to locate how the combination of parliamentary paralysis, the collapse of executive authority, and various bloody and useless colonial enterprises of conquest killed the Fourth Republic. Today, the crisis has different institutional dimensions in spite of the fact that the principal actors in the government are all products of the anti-Gaullist Fourth Republic.

Francois Mitterrand was elected 12 months ago with a small though relatively comfortable majority. The presidential election was followed by the June 1981, legislative elections which crushed both the neo-Gaullist Rassemblement pour la Republique (RPR) and the Giscardian coalition, Union Democratique Française (UDF), giving the Socialist Party an absolute majority in

the newly voted National Assembly.

The image of absolute power was intoxicating, particularly to a class of ideologues who still view Marat, Danton, Robespierre, Saint Just, and other "radical" Jacobin leaders of the French Revolution as their spiritual forefathers. The intoxication lasted until this past March, which brought a stinging defeat of the government coalition in local elections. Throughout last summer, the leading representatives of the Socialist Party were, quite literally, calling for "heads to fall." The new president of the National Assembly and close friend of Mitterrand, Louis Mermaz, denied the rights of speech of the opposition in parliament, citing Saint Just to buttress his argument. Mitterrand himself repeatedly warned the country that a "radicalization" of the government would occur were the opposition to oppose him.

It is parenthetically useful to note that the continuing references to the mythology of the French Revolution served in the eyes of the Socialists to legitimize their policies. Yet the new rulers of France truly are heirs to the class of populist demagogues and agents of the House of Orléans which led the Club des Jacobins.

Threats were followed by action: the police were purged without regard to the consequences this would have on the security of the nation; the large banks and industrial enterprises were nationalized so as to concentrate economic power in the hands of the Socialist state; the heads of universities were deposed, etc.

## **Opposition sweeps local elections**

Today, the real power of the Socialists is much less than their legal power, for although they control the state, they do not have unreserved popular support—quite the contrary. The local elections of March 1982 gave the new opposition more than 51 percent of the vote, and they were preceded by four legislative by-elections last January which were swept by the UDF and RPR.

A careful analysis of the presidential and legislative elections of May-June 1981 shows that the local elections results describe social and political trends more faithfully than the usual voting patterns of 1981:

1) All leading political observers, including the Socialists, now concur that the presidential victory of

Mitterrand was solely attributable to a massive and voluntary switch of RPR votes to Mitterrand. At the time of the elections, leading government officials informed *EIR* that over 1 million RPR or RPR-linked right-wing votes were "given" to Mitterrand by the Gaullists in an effort to defeat the incumbent President Giscard at all costs.

The Socialist Party's vote totals on the first round of the presidential elections on May 10 indicated a very slight progression of the party, but nothing more. The addition of Socialist, Communist, left-radical, and extreme-left-wing votes of the first round did not give Mitterrand the result he achieved on the second round.

2) The RPR, which calculated that while defeating Giscard it would be able to maintain a major presence in parliament, then collapsed. However, the demoralization of the traditional electorate of the ex-majority led to extraordinarily high rates of abstention of both UDF and RPR voters during the June legislative elections. Hence the overwhelming Socialist victory (the elections are not proportional votes where representation is proportionate to vote totals, but rather give a marked legislative surplus to the leading party. Thus the Socialists have over 50 percent of all seats in Parliament with only 30 percent of the vote).

The recent cantonal elections made obvious that those who had switched their vote on May 10 and then in June, switched back to the former Giscardian-majority in spite of the opposition's lack of cohesion and political program. The government, which has shown itself incapable of dealing simultaneously with labor, industry, police, and peasants, found itself nationally discredited. Since March, the government's real power has no relation to its legal power.

### **Mitterrand's incompetence to rule**

One of the elder statesmen of the opposition and the founder with de Gaulle of the constitution of the Fifth Republic, Michel Debré, noted as much in an article in the Paris daily *Le Figaro*. Debré pointed out the distinction between "legality" and "historical legitimacy," the latter being a reference to de Gaulle's notion of the state as representing a nation-state rather than a collection of different interests. Declaring the Socialist government illegitimate, Debré characterized its incompetence to rule.

Since March the government has in its own way proven Debré's thesis: ministers have fought each other in the public arena over security policy, and while the Justice Minister, for example, frees arrested terrorists, the Interior Minister calls on police to "shoot to kill." Mass demonstrations of disgruntled citizens have been occurring: two months ago, the peasants' association demonstrated with over 80,000 people in Paris; two weeks ago 180,000 gathered in the Paris region alone to

protest government projects to close down private schools. A mass demonstration will occur May 15 of the French right-to-life organization against the government's family policy.

Prime Minister Mauroy has seen in this ebullition of opposition activity a threat of great significance and two weeks ago warned of a "general effort to destabilize the government." This counterattack does not diminish the sense that a crisis is looming. The violence of Socialist language and threats over the summer opened the way for equally violent retaliatory efforts. If the Socialist-Communist coalition loses the municipal elections upcoming in 1982, the door will be open for a general questioning of the "legitimacy" of the government. Even the *éminence grise* of the French left and mentor of Mitterrand, Pierre Mendes-France, has indicated his preoccupation over the incompetence of France's present leadership. Under such circumstances early general legislative elections would probably become necessary.

Circles in Paris are, however, speculating about another possibility, that of early presidential elections caused by an early demise or resignation of the President. Rumors abound about the president's state of health, since Mitterrand has shown signs of weakness recently. Whatever the truth of these insinuations, large parts of the opposition are calculating this as a factor.

Some hardliners in the RPR have spoken of a "looming civil war" (Charles Pasqua, chief of the RPR's senate group), others of civil conflict. Within the Socialist Party itself there is such confusion and factional strife, including among ministers, that one gets the sense of a scramble for power.

### **Prospects for economic instability**

Ultimately the Socialists will be confronted with the harsh effects of the international economic crisis which they so long denied for partisan reasons when Giscard was in power. France's economy is extremely fragile and a major shock would throw it on its knees faster than that of Germany or other Western nations. To fulfill his promises Mitterrand has more than tripled the indebtedness of the state, and doubled external lending within a near-zero-growth context. The French economy's expansion is below 0.2 percent this year! Either a vast austerity will follow with inevitable social repercussions or France will experience a hyperinflation which will destroy the franc.

One year has largely sufficed to take away virtual power from the hands of those who have all power. Their mastery of reality and events in the world is almost nil. What will then emerge?

Only one thing is certain: the difficulties now afflicting the Mitterrand regime are only the first act of a broadening domestic struggle for power.