Political uncertainty consumes France as country prepares for run-off vote

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Paris (DNA) - As many candidates for the French National Assembly scramble to thwart a right-wing election victory, global governance researchers have released a new report detailing how the core issues plaguing France have been decades in the making.

The surprise snap elections, called by President Macron after his centrist Renaissance party was crushed by Marine Le Pen's far-right anti-immigration and eurosceptic party Rassemblement National (RN) in the European Parliament elections in May, have sent ripples of concern throughout Europe.

Macron's controversial decision to dissolve the National Assembly, France's lower house, betting that citizens would reject the prospect of a far-right government at home, backfired after RN captured 34 per cent of the vote during first round on June 30. A win by RN on July 7 would hand power to a far-right-wing party for the first time since Nazi Germany occupied France during the Second World War.

Now, with all efforts focused on creating a "Republican Front" to prevent Le Pen's handpicked 28-year-old Jordan Bardella from becoming prime minister, researchers behind a new Berggruen Governance Index (BGI) report say that France's current turmoil can be traced to unresolved issues bubbling beneath the surface.

In fact, the report says that despite recent missteps, Macron and France's woes began long before the latest ballots were cast.

According to their report titled "*When the Center Cannot Hold: Governance Performance and Political Backlash in France"*, the researchers say the initial election outcome reflects an "alarming trend" of right-wing assurgency seen across Europe.

"France's swing to the right reflects many characteristics of similar developments in other European countries, but also stems from some national particularities that reach back decades," write the researchers from the Luskin School of Public Affairs at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), the Los Angeles-based Berggruen Institute and the Hertie School, a university in Berlin, Germany.

Indeed, France's current predicament is certainly not evident when looking at BGI's 2024 global assessment, which shows that France has "extremely high living standards by both global and European standards." But its high ranking has helped mask deeply rooted social challenges that are feeding resentment and being expressed at the polls.

Economics, inequality, and migration

The researchers say that although France is very well positioned in terms of the quality of its democracy, government, and quality of life, a closer look reveals how the country's "sluggish economic performance, persistent inequalities, and tensions around migration" have fuelled the right-wing's assent. Should Marine Le Pen's party prevail on Sunday and potentially take the presidency in 2027, the report says France's governance rating would be threatened.

Although the report draws comparisons to similar developments seen in other European countries, it shows that some of France's challenges are not new. Researchers point to how regional issues stemming from centralisation, ranging from extensive financial insecurity, the dominant political and economic power of Paris, and a struggle to achieve social upward mobility have led to increased right-wing support especially among 18-25-year-old youth.

The report refers to France's longstanding tradition of protest to make a connection to the current political crisis. Looking to recent events, such as the year-long "yellow vest" movement in 2018-2019, which was sparked by the EU's increased carbon price and led to widespread opposition to inequality, and the protests that grew out of Macron's pension reforms, the French have never been shy to revolt against government action. However, the legislative elections show that the public's calls for change remain unanswered.

A regional and economic focus must take shape

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Beyond the second-round results, and the potential political fallout, there remains an Olympic-sized effort required to heal the problems that ill France. The report says that stemming the far-right tide is dependent on the French government taking seriously economic and social issues that drive regional inequalities. The report suggests that improving rural infrastructure and increasing regional decision-making autonomy are important steps needed to close the inequality gap.

When it comes to migrant communities, many of which are impoverished and cut-off from mainstream French society, not to mention the target of right-wing vitriol, the report states that more must be done to foster social integration and boost employment.

Forty years of industrial decline has shed over two-million jobs in concentrated regions, which has led to an economic spiral that has exasperated France's wealth gap, the researchers say. According to the report, in 2021 10 per cent of households in France held 47 per cent of all wealth. And despite a strong welfare state, the poverty rate stubbornly remained at 13.3 per cent.

Even if Sunday's vote does not result in a RN win, but rather a hung parliament, as many analysts are predicting, France will find itself mired in political deadlock. If that becomes the case, the ramifications threaten to spread beyond France's borders, potentially affecting Ukraine's efforts to counter Russia's invasion and upend decisions at the EU level.

But BGI's researchers point to longer-term concerns for France if action is not taken to address underlying inequalities.

They warn that if the growing equality gap is not properly addressed, France faces a vicious cycle of an emboldened far right that feeds on economic insecurity and social resentment but lacks the ability to solve them.

On July 7, the voters get to decide.

The report in full will be published online at https://governance.luskin.ucla.edu/publications-2/.

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