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Emmanuel Macron's Neoliberal Blitzkrieg



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The gambit is a well-known opening move in the chess game. The player makes a sacrifice, typically a pawn, for the sake of a compensating advantage. Emmanuel Macron metaphorically did that in the first six months of his presidency. In the run-up to the presidential election, the political neophyte introduced himself as neither left-wing nor right-wing, but rather as left-wing *and* right-wing. It was a bold attempt to supersede the deeply entrenched left-right divide in French politics, and to take from both camps “what works best.” In so doing, Macron was able, for a short period of time, to defy political gravity and position himself as an ideal centrist candidate.

What's more, the 39-year old candidate was untested politically, a young bright figure with a liberal profile and background. In this respect, Macron likes to remind everyone that he was once the editorial assistant to renowned French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. Indeed, Macron is keen to be seen as the first "intellectual president" since François Mitterrand.

If Macron was a breath of fresh air in the run-up to the election, his political honeymoon with the voters did not last long. His first actions in power have marked the end of an original realignment of French politics. His economic policy blatantly leans to the right and is of a neoliberal nature. Both sides say so. *Les Républicains*, the party launched by former president Nicolas Sarkozy, has been remarkably silent since the start of the Macron presidency. They are unable to mount any significant challenge because, as some Republicans privately argue, Macron has stolen most of their policies. In short, they have virtually nothing to oppose and nowhere to go.

For political observers of French politics, Macron's shift to the right was no major surprise. Backed by a strong 60-seat majority in the National Assembly, Macron had made no secret that, should he be elected, he would dramatically reshape France's labour market. While running for president, Macron said that France needed "a shock of trust, a real acceleration." He has all the constitutional power to pass any legislation he wishes to put forward. From a constitutional point of view, the French president, even called a "republican Monarch," is the most powerful of any Western democracy (including the U.S).

The reform of the French Labour Code (*Code du Travail*) was hastily passed in September. Macron's reform goes much further than the El Khomri voted by the Socialist government in 2016. While the French labour market had been traditionally protective of workers' rights, the new law has dramatically shifted the power into the employers' and business' hands.

The French president chose a rather controversial way to push through the labour reform: he asked the deputies of his party, *La République En Marche*, which controls the National Assembly, to give the government the right to pass rulings, instead of letting the parliament debate and vote legislation. Macron wanted to reform the Labour Code quickly and decisively. Given the depth and importance of the reforms, his critics have argued that Macron showed contempt for parliamentary representation on this occasion.

Macron promised that the reforms would bring more freedom and more equality of opportunity for employees and job seekers. The issue is that a majority of workers saw

these measures as market deregulation, rather than market modernization. Some of the more controversial measures include: the role of industrial tribunals being largely reduced; the number of working days paid after a lay-off being cut down; and the issues that were previously set by the law, such as contract details, being now negotiable within the company. Negotiations with employers would also be possible without the presence of a union.

And yet, Macron implemented this flagship reform without encountering any significant opposition: The *Front National* has been mute following Marine Le Pen's disastrous second round of the presidential election. The Republicans have been in crisis since François Fillon's abysmal result in the first round of the same election. The Socialists are leaderless, have no program, are losing members and officials in droves, and are still wondering whether they should oppose Macron's policy. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the self-appointed main opponent to Macron, has indeed been a more robust opponent. A former socialist official. Mélenchon created a new movement called *La France Insoumise* (Unbowed France). The leftist Mélenchon has given up on the notions of socialism or the left. In true populist fashion, his aim is to "federate the people" against an "oligarchy" in order to recapture a "lost [political and economic] sovereignty." Mélenchon has called Macron's labour law reforms a "social coup d'état" and organized several street protests against the law, which failed to mobilise. Furthermore, Mélenchon's tactical disagreements with the unions further demoralized protesters. The left was easily defeated and Macron won the first round of his battle after a successful *Blitzkrieg*.

Macron is also pushing through severe public service cuts, such as 150,000 government-subsidized fixed-term contract jobs in schools. Macron's economic agenda is increasingly regarded as a Thatcherite-style attack on social rights in France. This is his political gambit: he has no major opponent to his right and to his center-left. He therefore remains convinced that he occupies a central and pivotal position in a fast-changing political landscape. On this count, he seems to be right. Despite a temporary slump in popularity following the passing his labour law reforms, he largely dominates French politics.

The labour law reform may be largely responsible for breaking the spell with the public, at least with moderate center-left voters. But there is more to it than economics. After all, there may still be significant cross-party support for his neoliberal agenda. People are also taken aback by Macron's oratory style and his obvious "class contempt." He, above all, seems to display no empathy for the worst-off. His comments on his political opponents often sound patronizing, if not scornful. In early September, days before a union-

led [protest](#) against his overhaul of labour laws, the French president said in a speech that he would not back down “to slackers, cynics, and extremists.”

Critics have called him a “powdered marquis, a megalomaniac with royal pretensions, a rich man’s president or a communicator without a cause.” Macron could not care less. He has retreated into the Élysée Palace, and tightened presidential communication. Unlike Sarkozy and Hollande, who commented on day-to-day affairs, Macron stands back and intervenes little. He thinks that power is best exercised when wrapped in a cloud of mystery. Aloof and haughty, Macron has labelled his presidency “Jupetarian”—a formal and strong presidency with all the pomp of the 5th Republic à la de Gaulle or Mitterrand.

Macron has not been particularly liberal from a political or cultural viewpoint. The government’s treatment of migrants and refugees is as harsh and heavy-handed as the previous government. So far, he has stayed away from the main controversies on national identity, which inevitably revolve around Muslims. Racial tensions run high in France, and the country could do with a more inclusive and multicultural approach to the question of citizenship. On Europe, he has sought to position himself as the leader who can fix the European Union’s political and economic crisis, but he gave few details on how he is going to do so.

Macron is no doubt the new strong man of French politics. His embrace of the political center ground, followed by a shift to the neoliberal right, has disarmed the center-left and the conservative right. However, the young president should bear in mind that his position of strength derives not so much of his actions, but rather of the weakness of his opponents.