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France

# French presidential elections: should Philippe Poutou stand down?

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**These are just a few personal words on a political situation in France that is simultaneously full of danger and hope, and extremely complex.**

Let's first look at things through a very, very narrow prism, since this is the way they've been posed to us on social media. Shouldn't the NPA withdraw its presidential candidate, Philippe Poutou? Shouldn't the NPA call for a vote for Jean-Luc Mélenchon? Wouldn't this give Mélenchon a better chance of getting through the first round and beating Le Pen in the second, and therefore of repealing the labour reform, increasing the minimum wage and striking a blow against EU austerity ?

For many leftists looking at the political situation in France from afar, through media and polls, the answer seems clear. With the four leading candidates so close to one another, Poutou's two or 2.5% could make all the difference. Poutou has run a strong campaign; he effectively confronted Fillon and Le Pen in the big TV debate and the NPA have had the media impact they sought; so that's enough now, Poutou should withdraw his candidacy and call for a Mélenchon vote, while continuing to voice his criticisms. Not doing so would be sectarian, we are told.

This line of reasoning does not withstand closer scrutiny

In fact, things aren't so straightforward after all. Not from a human angle, not from a practical angle, and not from the angle of purely electoral calculations. What's more, it ignores the key political problem: in both social-movement and political terms, leader maximo Jean-Luc Mélenchon's French national-populist project is an obstacle to the unity of the Left against the Right and far-Right. But let's not get ahead of ourselves; let's start by looking at some concrete matters.

From a strictly human point of view, with just a few days before the vote and without something major in return, it would be impossible to snap one's fingers and stop thousands of supporters who have been actively campaigning for their ideas and vision of society. These activists have made big sacrifices (especially just to collect the signatures required to run in the first place) and are seeing the benefits in terms of media coverage, public support, attendance at campaign rallies and increased membership.

From a practical point of view, the ballots have been printed and nothing can prevent voters who wish to do so from voting for Philippe Poutou. Furthermore, if the NPA were to publicly declare that they are withdrawing their candidate in favour of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, they wouldn't be certain that their campaign expenses would be refunded (each candidate can spend up to 800,000 euros and receive a refund upon submission of receipts). Who would take such a risk? Quite clearly, it's not the backseat drivers who will be paying the bills!

The math is all wrong

Lastly, from the point of view of purely electoral calculations, the math is all wrong. There is a large mass of undecided voters. What's more, the support for Philippe Poutou (and, to a lesser extent, Lutte Ouvrière candidate Nathalie Arthaud) reflects a current of radicalism that is very much present within French society. To put things simply, this current of radicalism does not in any way at all identify with the French flag, the national anthem, the July 14th military parade and Mélenchon's unsavoury statements around a whole range of topics – posted workers, recourse to nuclear weapons, support for Russian bombs in Syria, and “the honour of the Republic's police uniforms,” just to name a few.

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It's probable that there are more Poutou and Arthaud supporters than the polls have been suggesting. Many of them have opted to vote Mélenchon for "strategic" reasons and in spite of their often serious doubts. But what about those who haven't made this decision in spite of all the recent pressure to do so? Were Poutou to withdraw, what would these voters do? Well, most would vote for Nathalie Arthaud or just stay home on election day. They simply don't like Mélenchon's program or style, not to mention that of his supporters. For such voters, Philippe Poutou is the strategic choice – because he represents their ideas. And they're right: why should they commit hara-kiri in the first round of the elections? And, by the by, how on earth is a working-class candidate who took down Le Pen and Fillon in front of six million people in the TV debate not "strategic"?

Yes, unity is the key question!

Let's now look at the broader questions. The unity of the "people of the Left" against the Right and far-Right after the elections will be the central question, whatever the outcome. This will obviously be the case if centre-Right candidate Emmanuel Macron or hard-Right candidate François Fillon defeats Le Pen in the second round. Both candidates will launch very aggressive austerity attacks against labour, young people and people of foreign origin. But it would also be the central question if, by some miracle, Mélenchon were to be elected president. Under a Mélenchon presidency, meaningful left-wing measures would only be implemented if, first, legislative elections held one month after the presidential elections were to produce a left-wing majority government; and, second, the broadest and most united labour and social-movement resistance were built in response to the inevitable domestic and international counter-offensive. None of this can be magically pulled out of a hat.

This would be true even in an ideal situation, but in fact the French Left is deeply divided, if not in ruins. The Left Front (FG) of the Communist Party (PCF), the Left Party (PG) and Ensemble has collapsed. On the one hand, the PCF sought to pursue at all costs its old reformist strategy of allying with the Socialists (PS), because its elected officials depended on this alliance for their survival. On the other hand, Mélenchon drew inspiration from Podemos in Spain and created a movement to support his presidential aspirations – which only individuals could join, forced to accept the rules laid down by Mélenchon and his loyalists. This movement (France Insoumise, or France Unbowed), presents itself as a left-populist alternative to political parties organized around a charismatic leader for the Nation. The third component of the Left Front, Ensemble, found itself trapped in between, with no option but to support Mélenchon. The PCF ended up doing the same, although it took its leader Pierre Laurent a couple of attempts before securing a majority for this position.

In the meantime, there's no question that Mélenchon's project has been remarkably successful. His campaign has created genuine momentum and tremendous hope. The France Insoumise mass campaign rallies are an illustration of this. There can be no denying the candidate's many qualities. For one, he is an excellent speaker. For another, France Insoumise has run an excellent, engaging campaign. Still, this success is in part the consequence of a very specific context. With Le Pen and Fillon mired in scandal, on the one hand, and the void created by the defeat of the party apparatus in the PS primaries, on the other, Mélenchon was able to rise in the polls like balloon carried up by a blast of hot air. Good for him! But it would be a serious error to conclude that the momentum behind France Insoumise can continue to grow in a linear fashion and obviate the need for strategic thinking around what alliances could act as a springboard for left-wing unity, and around the platform that is necessary for this unity.

Social-movement illusion, political illusion

First of all, it would be a serious error because the coming confrontation with the Right and far-Right will ultimately play out in the streets. It can only be won if all sectors of the exploited and oppressed are united, whether they have legal papers or not. So not only "my fellow French citizens". Mélenchon's uber-secularist and flag-waving rhetoric about the "one and indivisible" Nation ("I want to give France back to the French"!) enables him to secure broad electoral support. But it raises a real problem when it comes to achieving unity in social struggles. Internationalism is

not an optional perk; it's a vital pre-condition for any real left-wing political action plan.

Secondly, it's illusory for political reasons. Mélenchon swallowed up the Left Front. In order to launch France Insoumise, he even put the Left Party on ice, although this is the party that he himself created! His conduct has created and continues to create huge divisions and a great deal of resentment. This is a very concrete issue. France Insoumise has already announced that it will run its own candidates against PCF incumbents in the legislative elections – even though the PCF is supporting the Mélenchon presidential campaign! France Insoumise's aims are actually pretty transparent: in the footsteps of former president François Mitterrand, and in the guise of “moving beyond political parties”, they want to destroy the PCF. It's no secret that many Communists can't stand Mélenchon. So much for “unity”!

But the key political question concerns the approach to take toward the PS rank and file. 1.2 million voters selected Benoît Hamon in the PS primaries. This signalled a shift to the left and a slap in the face for the authoritarian social-liberalism of outgoing prime minister Manuel Valls and president Hollande. The social-democratic apparatus responded by sabotaging Hamon's candidacy and even by openly supporting Macron. Hamon sought to accommodate PS party bosses and plummeted to eight percent in the polls. And what did Mélenchon have to say? Well, basically that it served Hamon right and that it was proof that he, Mélenchon, should continue his solo effort. Alas, things aren't so simple. While it might be possible for Mélenchon to get into the second round without the support of PS voters looking for an alternative, it is totally excluded that he can win in the second round against Macron, or probably even against Fillon, without them.

Mélenchon holds the key

If Mélenchon wants to win, he has to change tack. He has to take an initiative aimed at uniting the “people of the Left”. He has to propose a common governmental program to potential partners based on a handful of key measures that tackle the urgent social and environmental issues of the day; along with an agreement for the June legislative elections and a mobilization strategy for the post-election period. There isn't a single insurmountable obstacle on this path. For one thing, France Insoumise, Hamon and the PCF all claim to provide an alternative to social-liberalism while eschewing the far-Left's anti-capitalism. What's more, Mélenchon is in the driver's seat and therefore in a position to dictate the main features of any agreement resulting from his own initiative.

Such an initiative would give Mélenchon a far better chance of reaching the second round. It is also his only chance at winning a second round run-off against Macron or Fillon, should things turn out that way (we shouldn't accept the hackneyed idea that Le Pen will necessarily make it through to the second round; she has yet to recover from Poutou's withering remark about “working-class immunity” in the TV debate!). Mélenchon holds the key to victory.

He holds the key but refuses to turn it. And each passing day of course makes it increasingly improbable that he ever will. As I write these lines, there is good reason to fear that the possibility of preventing right-wing victory in the second round of the French presidential elections is evaporating before our eyes. Is this because Philippe Poutou hasn't withdrawn his candidacy? No, it's because Mélenchon is clinging to his strategy in order to become the caudillo of a national-populist Left force in which dissenting voices will be weak and fragmented.

That's the real debate, the crucial strategic debate for the Left. Those pointing fingers at Poutou are dodging it, consciously or not.

Translation from French: Nathan Rao