



The centre holds

Emmanuel Macron successfully overcomes the French far right's most potent campaign

Emmanuel Macron's decisive victory in the French presidential election has elicited a sigh of relief not just in his country, but in others as well. A centrist independent, the 39-year-old will be France's youngest President, a man who not only stopped his country from sliding into the hands of far-right populists but showed the world that the anti-establishment momentum that powered the victories of the Brexit camp in the U.K. and Donald Trump in the U.S. can be broken. From the far-right perspective, France was ripe for their rise to power. There was widespread discontent among voters, particularly among the youth, with the mainstream political elite; the economy has been struggling for years; joblessness is high; there is deepening insecurity among the citizens in general in the wake of multiple terror attacks. Marine Le Pen, Mr. Macron's rival, tried to turn this economic and social insecurity into votes for her virulent brand of politics. She attacked the Paris establishment, the European Union, economic globalisation and France's open border policy, while being seen to be making common cause with Mr. Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin. In the end, she was defeated on a huge margin, polling roughly 34% of the vote compared to Mr. Macron's 66%.

Mr. Macron's victory is remarkable in many ways. It was his first election. His party was founded just last year and, barring a brief stint as Economy Minister in outgoing President François Hollande's Cabinet, he doesn't have any administrative experience. Yet it is a sign of the crisis of mainstream politics that this apparent weakness became his greatest strength in a tumultuous campaign marked by sharp divisions in French society. His "outsider" tag helped him appeal to the anti-establishment segments of voters, while his status quoist proposals, be it economic or labour policy reforms or continuity in foreign policy, made him acceptable to supporters of the traditional parties. But he has only won the battle, the war lies ahead of him. Mr. Macron takes over the reins from Mr. Hollande at an extremely uncertain time. It is still not clear how many seats his political start-up En Marche! may get in next month's parliamentary elections, which are traditionally dominated by the mainstream left and right parties. If he doesn't get a majority, he will have to depend on other parties to push his legislative agenda through the National Assembly. And it can't be overlooked that Ms. Le Pen's National Front has come a long way since 2002 when her father won only 18% of the vote in the presidential run-off. The French far right is no more a fringe party, and commands considerable support among sections of the working class. Mr. Macron has to find a way of tackling this growing unrest among sections that feel marginalised; at the same time, he will have to take tough decisions to fix the economy. Failure is not an option, as the far right still has its powder dry.

Being humane

A law against torture should enable ratification of the Convention barring custodial excesses

Two decades after signing the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, India is yet to ratify it. There can be little justification for such a prolonged delay in passing legislation to give effect to the convention. In recent times there is a fresh note of urgency attached to the need for early ratification, as the country has pending requests for the extradition of its nationals from other countries. For, as pointed out by the Supreme Court, the absence of a stand-alone law prohibiting torture may prevent many countries from agreeing to India's extradition requests. Such a law may be in the national interest, the Chief Justice of India observed during the course of a hearing on a public interest petition seeking the enactment of an anti-torture law in accordance with the country's commitment. The court also noted that India was subjected to close questioning during the Universal Periodic Review of its human rights obligations at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. It cannot be forgotten that an extradition request relating to Purulia arms drop case suspect Kim Davy failed owing to the apprehension that he may be ill-treated in India. In an era of increasing international cooperation on criminal matters, India will be better served if it is seen as adhering to international treaties, especially its obligations under the Convention Against Torture, which it signed in 1997.

There may be some doubt whether India needs a fresh law to prevent and punish torture. Provisions relating to causing hurt or grievous hurt, especially with a view to extracting a confession, criminal intimidation and wrongful confinement already exist in the Indian Penal Code. However, the idea of a stand-alone law ought to be ultimately seen as a more tangible way of expressing commitment to eliminating torture. A concrete step towards enacting a law was made when the Prevention of Torture Bill, 2010, was passed by the Lok Sabha in 2010, but it was referred to a Select Committee in the Rajya Sabha. In its report submitted in the same year, the committee recommended exhaustive amendments to the Bill to make it consistent with the language and intent of the Convention. Thereafter the Bill lapsed. The government now says it has referred the matter to the Law Commission for an authoritative view. Given the pervasive nature of custodial violence and its complex policing requirements, the present legislative and administrative framework is obviously inadequate to prevent torture in a country of India's size. It is imperative that a strong law that criminalises torture, imposes stringent punishment for it and contains liberal provisions for those suffering torture to complain against their perpetrators, prosecute them and be compensated and rehabilitated, is passed at the earliest.

A triumph for French liberalism

Emmanuel Macron represents the powerful, liberal electorate that has emerged since the 1990s



EMILE CHABAL

It is tempting to see Emmanuel Macron's victory in the French presidential run-off on Sunday as little more than a coronation. Yes, he won 66% of the vote but he did so with one of the highest rates of abstention in recent history and a record number of spoiled ballots. Even those who voted for him often did so by default in order to prevent the far-right candidate, Marine Le Pen, from winning.

More importantly, say critics, this unusual presidential run-off had two important consequences. First, that Mr. Macron's ideas were never really discussed in depth. Second, that the new President has no proper electorate. Instead, many believe that his supporters are little more than an uncomfortable coalition of ill-matched groups and individuals. They do not share a common vision and they certainly do not agree with each other. When the parliamentary election rolls around in June, they will disperse and Mr. Macron's self-proclaimed "movement" will fall apart.

A clear victory

It is quite possible that the new President will fail to gain a majority of seats in the French Parliament. But are all of these accusations about his campaign true? The evidence suggests otherwise. For a start, Mr. Macron won this election by a huge margin and achieved substantially better results than the polls predicted. Most commentators agreed that, in the circumstances, he would need more than 60% of the vote to appear legitimate. He got over this figure easily.



His success was also geographically diverse. Mr. Macron carried all but two of France's 101 départements (administrative regions) and he did so with remarkable consistency. His scores were strong from French Guiana in Latin America to small hamlets in central France. In the capital city, Paris, more than 90% of voters chose Mr. Macron. By contrast, Ms. Le Pen did well in rural parts of northern and eastern France but she lost in every major city and did worse than expected in traditionally strong Front National areas in the south and south-east.

Finally, Mr. Macron can take pride in the fact that he came ahead of his opponent in every age, sex and socio-professional category, except industrial workers. Despite strong misgivings amongst the youngest voters and the unemployed, a large proportion of whom abstained, spoiled their ballots or voted for Ms. Le Pen, he still came out on top everywhere. For better or for worse, industrial workers are no longer a significant power base in French politics.

In short, Mr. Macron's political strategy worked. With his message of stability, pro-Europeanism and technocratic governance, he attracted a wide range of voters. Not to mention that he did so at a time when left-leaning centrism seemed to be a toxic brand after

François Hollande's unsuccessful presidency. He unexpectedly mobilised Mr. Hollande's former electoral base, achieving some of his best scores in the outgoing President's fiefdoms – and he benefited from massive vote transfers from far left, moderate left and right-wing voters.

After all this, to say that this was a victory by default would be grossly unfair. In the space of a few years, Mr. Macron has gone from a rather bland minister to President of one of Europe's most powerful nations. There is a fair chance that he will also have created a large political movement that will win a hundred or more seats in Parliament. Whatever one thinks of his politics, there is no doubting his achievement.

Revenge of French liberalism

As for Mr. Macron's supporters, are they simply incoherent and opportunistic? There is certainly a strong element of political inexperience amongst his core campaign team, the vast majority of whom are under the age of 40. But this is not the same as saying that they have no ideas and no unified vision. In fact, Mr. Macron's victory is entirely consistent with deeper transformations in French politics.

Several years ago, I argued that French liberalism was a vital – and growing – part of contemporary

French political culture. I suggested that Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande's presidential victories in 2007 and 2012, respectively, drew on particular aspects of France's liberal tradition. And I maintained that an ever-growing number of people identified with liberalism. At the time, this seemed like a rather tendentious claim. But not today.

Historians of France have had much to say about its liberal tradition, which has included such brilliant political and intellectual figures as Benjamin Constant, Alexis de Tocqueville, Raymond Aron and Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. By and large, however, they have recognised that liberalism has not been nearly as successful in France as it has elsewhere in Europe since the 19th century. There has never been a liberal party and few French politicians openly claim to be 'liberal'.

But this has been changing since the 1970s. Over the past four decades, more and more French people have identified with a specifically French brand of liberalism that emphasises reform of the state, a greater openness to non-French ideas, a recognition of the plural character of French society, and market-orientated economic reform. Elements of these liberal ideas were taken up by Mr. Sarkozy and Mr. Hollande, but Mr. Macron has them all.

This means that France's newest President – who, significantly, was born in 1977 – is a perfect embodiment of contemporary French liberalism. So too is his core electorate: young or middle-aged, multicultural, urban, European. Anyone who says that such a constituency is little more than a coalition of convenience has missed the emergence of a powerful, liberal electorate since the 1990s.

It is no coincidence that one of the most important issues for Macron voters was the way France was perceived in the wider world. Mac-

ron supporters, unlike those of Ms. Le Pen, are the sort of outward-looking people who care about what is happening beyond the borders of France.

Parts of the far left and much of the far right are correct to identify these people as the beneficiaries of globalisation, but the reality is that this group is now at least as influential as other, more traditional, French voting blocs like farmers, elderly conservatives, Catholics, and industrial workers.

This does not, of course, mean that Mr. Macron's presidency will be problem-free. Since the early 19th century, most French liberals have been elitist and highly suspicious of the masses. Whether terrified of revolution in the 1830s or fearful of Communism in the 1950s, they have usually preferred to make compromises with conservatives rather than complete their ambitious plans for administrative and economic reform. At key moments – such as the 1848 Revolution, the Paris Commune of 1871 or the Socialist landslide victory in 1981 – well-meaning liberals have been completely overtaken by events.

Mr. Macron could find himself in the same bind. With the persistent threat of the far right and the real possibility of a left-wing social movement opposed to his economic ideas, he may well be consigned to the same fate as his liberal predecessors: a brilliant mind, with brilliant ideas, but too scared of the mob. Or he could buck the trend and become France's answer to Barack Obama. One thing at least is clear: his failures, as much as his successes, will define a whole generation of French liberals.

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Towards a unique digital South Asian identity

Executed properly, Aadhaar could become a central pillar of India's 'neighbourhood first' policy



ARUN MOHAN SUKUMAR

The enthusiasm with which government agencies and businesses have embraced Aadhaar should prompt India's foreign policy planners to deploy it abroad. Executed properly, Aadhaar could become a central pillar of India's "neighbourhood first" policy, culminating in the creation of a unique digital South Asian identity. A single, region-wide platform to authenticate residents of South Asia could integrate its markets, bring communities closer and allow governments to offer a wider range of governance services. None of this is to ignore the steps that India's Unique Identification Authority must take to secure its own Aadhaar ecosystem. But the demand for identity-driven governance in South Asia is indisputable, and Aadhaar could be Indian foreign policy's biggest asset to promote economic and political convergence in the region.

Already, South Asian economies are in varying stages of conceiving or implementing their own "national identity" schemes. Pakistan has the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA), that

for two decades has collected biometric information. NADRA, however, has seen limited success: at last count, it had issued only 3.8 lakh ID cards to Pakistanis, in comparison to Aadhaar's one billion-plus enrolments. In 2013, NADRA even won an international contract to create Sri Lanka's digital national identity scheme, but that project appears to have stalled. Nepal, meanwhile, intends to roll out biometrics-driven "national ID cards" to its citizens soon. The Election Commission in Bangladesh began issuing such cards last year.

Exporting Aadhaar

South Asian governments, long content to gather data through traditional means such as censuses, are struggling to capture dynamic trends in their population. Current databases shine no light on urban mobility, data consumption patterns, or quality of life, because these are metrics that need integrated data sets and powerful analytical tools. To capture "multi-dimensional" data, India's neighbours have moved towards digital identity schemes. The need for unique IDs is also acute because post-conflict societies in South Asia have not fully rehabilitated excluded minorities or former combatants. In comparison to politically fraught changes – for instance, the 13th Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution for the devol-



ution of powers, or federalist reforms in Nepal – digital identity schemes are easier to implement, can strengthen local governments and support the financial inclusion of marginalised sections.

Beyond collecting biometric data, however, South Asian governments have not been able to create digital ID-enabled applications. This is what Aadhaar has mastered, making it a very valuable foreign policy export. Its open application programming interface (API) layers – known as "India Stack" – set Aadhaar apart from other biometric ID programmes. India Stack APIs, which include the Unified Payment Interface (UPI) and Aadhaar e-KYC, allow applications to be built atop them (for example, the Bharat Interface for Money or BHIM app) and enable identity-driven transactions. Such platforms will be invaluable to an economy working to integrate its

communities. Take the return of military-occupied land in Sri Lanka's Northern Province to the Tamils, an exercise that has become a political and logistical nightmare for Colombo. A digital identity-based scheme will not only authenticate the legitimate recipients of land, but also simplify future transactions for sale, leasing or commercial use. In Bangladesh, digital IDs could track loans made by multiple microfinance institutions to the same borrower and help check rural debt.

Strategic benefits

India too stands to benefit by exporting the Aadhaar architecture. The digital networks for much of South Asia are likely to be supplied by Chinese companies over the next decade. Telecom pipes and towers built by China will carry the Internet to the user, but innovation in Asia's digital economies will happen at the top – the "app layer". Aadhaar-like platforms catalyse innovation by tailoring Big Data for governments and businesses alike. The political and economic leverage India will accrue as a result of enabling such entrepreneurship will surpass fixed investments by China. There is another strategic reason for India to export the Aadhaar platform. Once a critical mass of Aadhaar-enabled applications has been created, interoperability standards for the digital ecosystem will be determined

by the Unique ID programme. App developers, handheld manufacturers, and even Internet Service Providers will have to work around Aadhaar's encryption standards and data protection guidelines. Such a scenario will be India's best response to concerns that China will pump its infrastructure, and – in the words of Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar – "hard wire" the norms of governance in the region.

The same concerns of surveillance and privacy that animate the Aadhaar debate in India would no doubt be reflected in South Asian societies. Perhaps more sharply, given the propensity of some governments in the neighbourhood to target minority communities. They can learn from India's mistakes. South Asian countries that have not digitised their public databases fully can create secure ones to link to unique ID programmes. A national ID programme would also be a trigger for them to enact strong data protection laws.

Aadhaar is a constitutional technology that can build whole new information and communication technology ecosystems. New Delhi should appreciate its foreign policy value and integrate the project into its neighbourhood agenda.

Arun Mohan Sukumar heads the Cyber Initiative at the Observer Research Foundation. Madhulika Srikanth contributed with research inputs to this piece

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Reassuring victory

The victory of Emmanuel Macron in the French presidential election comes as a relief as he is a centrist and a pro-EU leader ("Macron to be France's youngest President", May 8). This, to some extent, will arrest the wave of chauvinism and protectionism now sweeping Europe and the United States especially after Britain's 'yes' to Brexit. His being elected despite his age shows that voters are more interested in ideas and opportunities for change.

JYOTI, Rohtak, Haryana

■ After Brexit and Donald Trump's victory as the U.S. President, it was feared that France would embrace an isolationist policy. Fortunately, voters in France have reposed their faith in centrist politics and were not swayed by Marine

Le Pen's isolationist policy and extreme nationalism to the exclusion of other nations in Europe. The real challenge for the new President would be to build his party and go further, which will hold the key to reforms. In Mr. Macron's ascent, one is reminded of the AAP that has since failed to live up to the high expectations of people.

D.B.N. MURTHY, Bengaluru

A NEET 'dress code'

Reports of candidates being forced to remove ornaments and in some cases, their inner wear and other apparel as these were in violation of the "dress code for NEET exam", are absurd ("Dress code a tougher test for NEET aspirants", May 8). It is understandable if there are strict regulations relating to a candidate's conduct in the examination hall such as discussing

answers or using mobile gadgets. Objecting to the wearing of certain types of clothing is a violation of the fundamental rights of a citizen. The authorities who were conducting the examination must be asked for an explanation. I am sure that the affected students can file a case for harassment and the mental agony caused.

AJAY ASHOK, New Delhi

■ Despite no 'stake' in the NEET examinations, I am fully aware of the various conditions laid down for candidates appearing for it. Is it not necessary for candidates and their parents to devote time to read the instructions carefully before setting out for the test centres?

There are umpteen reports across the media of parents and candidates complaining of the checks. The

"difficulties" they have undergone show a lack of respect for the rules and regulations. The media has also highlighted how candidates were frisked which resulted in some of them suffering psychological trauma. Rather than reporting on how it died down once the test began, it was disturbing to find some reporters egging on candidates to say that they were distressed. As far as the issue of "difficult questions" was concerned, our system requires our students to learn by rote. Very rarely are school students made to think. Students who follow the State syllabus often prepare themselves only for the board examinations. In many instances, once the examinations are over, their so-called knowledge too evaporates.

SUBBIAH N., Chennai

Drifting away?

Reports of the huge gathering at the funeral of a militant in south Kashmir and of militants offering a 'gun salute' must make us ponder ("Militants offer 'gun salute' at comrade's funeral in Valley", May 8). This singular incident unmistakably confirms that a large segment of the population in Kashmir has

undergone an ideological change and will no longer toe the Centre's line. How are we going to win back their hearts? It is most unfortunate that the gun culture has made its way into Kashmiri hearts. India's task is clearly cut out.

V. LAKSHMANAN, Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

"A small town of no significance" – a Sunday Magazine story (May 7, 2017) – wrongly said Gorakhnath was from the *Gorkha dynasty*. Actually, Gorakhnath was the *rajguru of the Gorkha dynasty*.

A Business page story headlined "MRF top layer rejig" significantly (May 6, 2017), erroneously said "Sudarshan Venu and Lakshmi Venu, siblings of industrialists Venu Srinivasan and Mallika Srinivasan, are active in family enterprises." Actually, they are the children of Venu Srinivasan and Mallika Srinivasan.

A front-page report, "Space bonding hits a new high" (May 6, 2017), erroneously referred to Ashraf Ghani as the *Prime Minister of Afghanistan*. He is actually the *President*.

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturji Buildings, 859 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No personal visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers' Editor are on www.thehindu.com