

Increased far-right ranks prepare for French parliament

AFP – Dozens of freshly-elected French far-right lawmakers visited parliament Wednesday, as the left-wing alliance who beat them in the polls scrambled for a viable candidate to lead the government.

A broad coalition of Greens, Socialists, Communists and the hard-left France Unbowed (LFI) won most seats in Sunday's vote, dashing the far right's dreams of an absolute majority.

But Marine Le Pen's anti-immigration National Rally (RN) and allies still made undeniable progress in the National Assembly, growing from 89 seats in 2022 to 143 today.

Le Pen, a three-time presidential candidate re-elected to lead her party in parliament, accompanied RN parliamentarians to inspect their new workplace ahead of next week's opening session.

Victory "has only been postponed," she told reporters as she entered, complaining that what she dubbed "massive withdrawal manoeuvres" had "deprived us of the absolute majority".

Many left-wingers and centrists bowed out of the race ahead of the second round to give the anti-RN vote a better chance.

The party's 28-year-old leader Jordan Bardella urged his lawmakers to be "perfectly beyond reproach" in their posts, after a campaign in which several RN candidates were exposed as ignorant about policy or for former extremist behaviour.

"Your responsibility will be... to emphasise the credibility of our project," said Bardella, himself the leader of a far-right grouping in the European Parliament.

– 'Sincere Socialists' –

Prime Minister Gabriel Attal is to remain in power as Paris makes final preparations for the Olympics starting in just over two weeks, but his centrist group in parliament lost ground and the hunt is on for a figure to replace him.

The left-wing alliance has been discussing its potential candidates, with many adverse to the firebrand leader of the LFI, Jean-Luc Melenchon.

Any candidate could face a confidence vote in the hung parliament.

Melechon, a former presidential candidate, has floated several names from his hard-left party, and the more moderate Socialist leader Olivier Faure has also said he would be "willing" to lead a cabinet.

President Emmanuel Macron, who called the snap vote after the RN crushed his centrist allies in last month's EU Parliament elections, has kept a low profile since Sunday.

Among his camp, Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin, who was re-elected in the election, said he would never back an LFI or Greens member in government.

"I'll never back a bill from that kind of left and I'll immediately object to people or government lineups hailing from that kind of left," he told CNews television.

He said he would prefer "some sincere Socialists... with whom we could work".

– 'Have to talk to people' –

The left-wing alliance holds the largest number of seats in the National Assembly, with 193 of 577, but is well short of the 289-seat threshold for a majority.

The centrists hold 164.

Raphael Glucksmann, founder of progressive leftist movement Place Publique, said "parliamentary democracy" would be the only way forward for the left.

"We don't have a choice, we're going to have to talk to people we've fought against, without abandoning our convictions, and convince them," he told the *Nouvel Obs* magazine.

The results of Sunday's vote came as a relief to many who were worried about the rise of the RN, a party embarrassed during the campaign by the xenophobic attitudes of some of its candidates.

Many have accused right-wing round-the-clock television channels of fuelling the racist views of some voters.

France's media watchdog on Wednesday said it was fining CNews over a journalist who did not challenge a guest who said "immigration kills" during a discussion on the RN last December.

It also fined the broadcaster over not responding to a claim that reports of climate change were "lies".

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