

# French government risks falling in no-confidence vote

AFP- France's government on Wednesday faces no-confidence votes that could spell the end of the short-lived administration of Prime Minister Michel Barnier, plunging the country into uncharted waters of political chaos.

The toppling of the Barnier government after just three months in office would present President Emmanuel Macron with the unenviable choice of picking a viable successor.

The National Assembly is due to debate two motions brought by the hard-left and far-right in a standoff with Barnier over next year's budget, which saw the premier force through a social security financing bill without a vote.

The far-right National Rally (RN) of three-time presidential candidate Marine Le Pen is expected to vote for the motion put forwards by the left, giving it enough numbers to pass.

Asked on French television if there was a chance his government could survive Wednesday's vote, Barnier replied: "I want this and it is possible...I think it is possible that there is this reflex of responsibility where – beyond political differences, divergences, the normal contradictions in a democracy – we tell ourselves that there is a higher interest."

But most analysts believe the government is doomed with the far-right teaming up with the left in an unholy alliance.

– 'Political fiction' –

The turmoil follows a snap election called by Macron in the summer which aimed, without success, to halt the march of the far right, and left no party or faction in parliament with a

majority.

Barnier took office with the far right under Le Pen holding a sword of Damocles over his head thanks to its ability to topple the administration at any point of its choosing.

No new elections can be called within a year of the previous legislative polls, narrowing Macron's options.

Some have suggested the president, who is wrapping up a state visit to Saudi Arabia, should resign to break the political impasse.

But Macron rejected those calls, saying such a scenario amounted to "political fiction".

"It's frankly not up to scratch to say these things," Macron told reporters on the sidelines of the Saudi Arabia visit.

"I was elected twice by the French people. I am extremely proud of this and I will honour this trust with all the energy that is mine until the last second to be useful to the country," added Macron, who is due to serve until 2027.

Several prominent opposition figures and even some voices closer to the presidential faction have suggested resignation could be Macron's only viable option.

– 'Uncertainty just before Christmas' –

The head of the Socialist party, Olivier Faure, called on Macron to make his intentions clear should the Barnier government fall.

"Rather than dropping little remarks during a visit to Saudi Arabia, Emmanuel Macron now needs to speak to the French people," Faure told Le Monde daily in remarks published on Wednesday. "How can he leave the French people in this uncertainty just before Christmas?"

Macron, meanwhile, accused Le Pen's RN of "unbearable cynicism" in backing the no confidence motion.

"We must not scare people with these things," he said.

Macron appeared to hold out some hope that the government will survive, saying he could "not believe" that the motion would pass.

Candidates for the hot seat as premier are few and far between, with loyalist Defence Minister Sebastien Lecornu and Macron's centrist ally Francois Bayrou possible contenders.

If the government falls, it would be the first successful no-confidence vote since a defeat for Georges Pompidou's government in 1962, when Charles de Gaulle was president.

The lifespan of Barnier's government would also be the shortest of any administration of France's Fifth Republic, which began in 1958.

Some observers have suggested that Le Pen, 56, is seeking to bring down Macron before his term ends by ousting Barnier.

Le Pen is embroiled in a high-profile embezzlement trial. If found guilty in March, she could be blocked from participating in France's next presidential election.

She has insisted, however, that the standoff is entirely about a budget that she said would make the French poorer.

By following the "catastrophic continuity of Emmanuel Macron", the prime minister "could only fail", she wrote on social media.

AFP