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TO IMMEDIATE FCO

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INFO PRIORITY OTHER EC POSTS, WASHINGTON, UKDEL NATO

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MY 2 IPT : THE FRENCH ELECTIONS : THE PROSPECTS

SUMMARY

1. A SHARP SWING TO THE RIGHT: BUT WITH THE EFFECT PARTLY NEUTRALISED BY PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION, ONLY A VERY SLIM RPR/UDF MAJORITY. INTERNAL DIVISIONS A THREAT, ALTHOUGH BARRISTES WILL HESITATE BEFORE BRINGING A NEW GOVERNMENT DOWN. MITTERRAND HAS CONSIDERABLE LATITUDE IN CHOICE OF PRIME MINISTER WITHIN NEW MAJORITY. IT MAY BE WEEKS BEFORE IT IS CLEAR WHETHER NEW GOVERNMENT CAN FUNCTION EFFECTIVELY. WITH EYE ON PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, NEITHER MITTERRAND NOR HIS NEW PRIME MINISTER WILL WANT TO BE BLAMED FOR CREATING A CRISIS, BUT POLITICAL SITUATION LOOKS PRECARIOUS.

DETAIL

2. THE NARROSPIMBNYSOUWLEJDP MAJORITY IN THE NEW ASSEMBLY DOES NOT FULLY REFLECT THE MARKED SWING TO THE RIGHT IN FRANCE. THE VOTE HAS SPLIT APPROXIMATELY 54.5% TO THE RIGHT AND 44.5% TO THE LEFT, WITH THE REMAINING ONE PERCENT FOR THE ECOLOGISTS. HAD THESE ELECTIONS BEEN HELD UNDER THE OLD SYSTEM OF MAJORITY VOTING IN CONSTITUENCIES, RATHER THAN UNDER THE SYSTEM OF PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION (PR) INTRODUCED BY MITTERRAND LAST YEAR, THE RPR AND UDF WOULD HAVE WON A LANDSLIDE MAJORITY. (FOR PURPOSES OF COMPARISON: THE PS SECURED A DECISIVE MAJORITY OVER ALL OTHER PARTIES IN THE ASSEMBLY IN 1981 WITH ONLY 37% OF THE VOTE).

3. THE EFFECT OF PR HAS THUS BEEN TO DENY THE RIGHT A CONVINCING VICTORY, JUST AS MITTERRAND INTENDED. IT HAS NOT, HOWEVER, PREVENTED THE RPR/UDF SECURING AN OVERALL MAJORITY. THE 5 SEAT MARGIN IS SMALL: BUT ON A WIDE RANGE OF ISSUES THE NEW MAJORITY WILL NOT NORMALLY FACE COMBINED OPPOSITION FROM ALL THE OTHER PARTIES IN THE ASSEMBLY. THE FRONT NATIONAL IS LIKELY TO SUPPORT THEM OR TO ABSTAIN ON A NUMBER OF QUESTIONS, AND WILL CERTAINLY NOT WISH TO FIND ITSELF VOTING AGAINST THE NEW GOVERNMENT IN COMPANY WITH THE COMMUNISTS. (ON THOSE ISSUES WHERE THE FN DOES SUPPORT THE GOVERNMENT, THERE WILL BE A COMBINED MAJORITY OF ABOUT 70).

4. IN ADDITION, THE RPR/UDF MAJORITY WILL NOT BE VULNERABLE TO BY-ELECTIONS IN THE WAY IT WOULD BE IN THE UK. IF A DEPUTY BECOMES A MINISTER (WHICH OBLIGES HIM TO GIVE UP HIS SEAT UNDER THE FRENCH SYSTEM), OR IF HE DIES OR RESIGNS, HE IS SIMPLY REPLACED BY THE NEXT ELIGIBLE CANDIDATE FROM HIS PARTY'S DEPARTMENTAL LIST. NOR IS IT A

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|PROBLEM.

PROBLEM TO ENSURE THAT THERE IS ALWAYS A GOVERNMENT MAJORITY ON HAND IN THE PARLIAMENT AS IT WOULD BE FOR A BRITISH GOVERNMENT WITH A SIMILARLY SMALL MAJORITY: IN FRANCE, ONE DEPUTY MAY VOTE ON BEHALF OF ALL THOSE BELONGING TO HIS OWN PARLIAMENTARY GROUP.

5. THE NEW MAJORITY WILL THEREFORE FACE GREATER THREATS FROM INTERNAL DIVISIONS THAN FROM ELECTORAL OR INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS. THE DEGREE OF SOLIDARITY IT DISPLAYS WILL BE CRUCIAL TO ITS SUCCESS. IT MAY BE THAT THE VERY NARROWNESS OF THE MAJORITY WILL PROVE A DISCIPLINE, ANYWAY INITIALLY, AS RPR AND UDF DEPUTIES RECOGNISE THAT THEIR COHESION WILL DETERMINE THEIR SURVIVAL PROSPECTS. THIS COULD LEAD THE NEW GOVERNMENT TO CONCENTRATE ON THOSE ISSUES IN THE COMMON PLATFORM ON WHICH THEY ARE MOST UNITED (EG REMOVING THE FINANCIAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE CONTROLS ON BUSINESS), WHILE GOING SLOWLY ON MORE CONTENTIOUS ELEMENTS OF THEIR PROGRAMME (EG A RETURN TO THE PREVIOUS ELECTORAL SYSTEM, FOR WHICH THE SMALL PARTIES WITHIN THE UDF HAVE LITTLE GENUINE ENTHUSIASM AND WHICH THE FN WOULD OPPOSE). THE STABILITY OF THE NEW MAJORITY IS POTENTIALLY AT RISK FROM THE BARRISTES WITHIN THE UDF (A GROUP OF PERHAPS 15 - 25) WHO FOLLOW BARRE IN OPPOSING COHABITATION. IN THEORY, THEY MIGHT BE ABLE TO BRING THE GOVERNMENT DOWN AT A MOMENT OF BARRE'S CHOOSING. IN PRACTICE THEY MAY BE RELUCTANT TO BE SEEN AS THE WRECKERS OF THEIR OWN SIDE, PARTICULARLY SINCE BARRE'S RELATIVELY POOR SHOWING YESTERDAY WILL DENT HIS CREDIBILITY AND AUTHORITY, ANYWAY IN THE SHORT TERM (INSTEAD OF THE 5 OR 6 SEATS HIS LIST WAS EXPECTED TO WIN IN THE RHONE, HE FINISHED WITH ONLY 3). MITTERRAND'S READINESS TO EXPLOIT ANY DIVISIONS SHOULD ALSO ENCOURAGE THE RIGHT TO TREAD WARILY.

6. THERE IS NO INDICATION YET WHO MITTERRAND WILL NOMINATE AS THE NEW PRIME MINISTER, EXCEPT THAT IT WILL BE SOMEONE FROM THE NEW MAJORITY. FABIUS HAS WRITTEN TO MITTERRAND SAYING THAT HIS GOVERNMENT IS READY TO RESIGN WHENEVER THE PRESIDENT WISHES. THERE HAVE BEEN HINTS TODAY FROM THE ELYSEE THAT MITTERRAND MAY DECIDE TO MOVE QUICKLY: AN ANNOUNCEMENT MAY COME ON 18 MARCH.

7. IT IS TOO EARLY TO PREDICT WHAT ATTITUDE THE NEW GOVERNMENT WILL TAKE TOWARDS MITTERRAND. MUCH MAY DEPEND ON THE CHARACTER OF THE NEW PRIME MINISTER: CHIRAC WOULD BE MORE COMBATIVE THAN CHABAN DELMAS, GISCARD OR SIMONE VEIL, WHO ARE STILL ALL IN THE RUNNING. A LESSER KNOWN FIGURE FROM THE RPR/UDF CANNOT BE EXCLUDED. WHOEVER IS CHOSEN WILL WANT TO TRY TO PUSH AS MUCH OF THE RPR/UDF PROGRAMME THROUGH AS HE OR SHE CAN, IN ORDER TO SHOW THAT THE NEW GOVERNMENT IS IN CHARGE, AND ENERGETICALLY FULFILLING ITS ELECTION PLEDGES. BUT THE NEW PRIME MINISTER WILL BE CONSTANTLY AWARE OF THE NEED TO SAFEGUARD HIS RATHER FRAGILE MAJORITY AND TO GUARD AGAINST COUNTER-STROKES FROM MITTERRAND.

8. THE GOVERNMENT IS LIKELY TO TRY TO IMPLEMENT MUCH OF ITS PROGRAMME THROUGH PARLIAMENTARY LEGISLATION. THIS CAN BE DELAYED BUT NOT BLOCKED BY THE PRESIDENT. BUT IT MAY ALSO TRY TO PUSH MEASURES THROUGH BY ORDINANCE, SOMETHING PERMITTED UNDER THE CONSTITUTION BUT

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WHICH REQUIRES THE PRESIDENTIAL SIGNATURE. THERE COULD BE SCOPE HERE FOR CLASHES BETWEEN MITTERRAND AND A NEW GOVERNMENT INTENT ON DOING THINGS FOR WHICH MITTERRAND HAS LITTLE ENTHUSIASM.

9. IT MAY WELL BE SOME WEEKS BEFORE WE KNOW WHETHER COHABITATION WILL WORK RELATIVELY SMOOTHLY, WITH DIFFICULTY, OR NOT AT ALL. IT COULD BEGIN WITH PROTESTATIONS OF GOOD FAITH ON BOTH SIDES, BUT DEGENERATE RAPIDLY INTO CONFRONTATION: OR IT COULD LAST FOR MONTHS, OR EVEN IN THEORY FOR TWO YEARS. THE PROSPECTS ARE HIGHLY UNCERTAIN. BUT INITIALLY AT LEAST, NEITHER MITTERRAND NOR THE RIGHT (INCLUDING BARRE) MAY WISH TO BE SEEN AS RESPONSIBLE FOR PLUNGING THE COUNTRY INTO A POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CRISIS WHICH COULD PROVOKE NEW ELECTIONS. THE PRINCIPAL ACTORS MAY WELL WANT TO TAKE EACH OTHERS MEASURE, AND ASSESS THE MOOD OF THE COUNTRY BEFORE CONFRONTING ONE ANOTHER, NOT LEAST BECAUSE EVERY MOVE THEY NOW MAKE WILL HAVE TO BE CALCULATED WITH A VIEW TO ITS EFFECT ON THEIR PRESIDENTIAL PROSPECTS. NEVERTHELESS, THE ELECTIONS HAVE PRODUCED A PRECARIOUS POLITICAL SITUATION, WITH THE PROSPECT OF A WEAK GOVERNMENT, BASED ON A FRAGILE MAJORITY, FACING A WILY PRESIDENT WHOSE OVERRIDING OBJECTIVE WILL BE TO STOP THE LEADERS OF THE GOVERNMENT WINNING PUBLIC FAVOUR AND EMERGING AS CONVINCING CANDIDATES FOR THE PRESIDENCY.

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