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INFO SAVING TO EC POSTS, WASHINGTON, MOSCOW, UKDEL NATO
INFO SAVING TO CONSULS GENERAL IN FRANCE

FRENCH INTERNAL POLITICS: THE PRESIDENTIAL PROSPECTS

SUMMARY

1. MITTERRAND REMAINS MORE POPULAR THAN HIS RIVALS BUT, WITH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS STILL NINE MONTHS AWAY, HE HAS PROBABLY NOT YET DECIDED WHETHER TO STAND FOR A SECOND TERM. ROCARD WOULD BE THE LIKELY SOCIALIST ALTERNATIVE. CHIRAC IS UNPOPULAR BUT HOPES THE ELECTORATE WILL EVENTUALLY REWARD HIM FOR TWO YEARS IN GOVERNMENT. BARRE IS BIDDING HIS TIME BUT WILL BE MORE ACTIVE AFTER THE RENTREE. LE PEN IS DOING WELL AND COMPLICATING THE RIGHT'S CALCULATIONS. BY CONTRAST, THE COMMUNIST CANDIDATE IS DOING BADLY. THE RECE REMAINS OPEN EVEN IF, AT PRESENT, MITTERRAND IS BEST PLACED.

DETAIL

2. PARLIAMENT HAS GONE INTO RECESS AND MOST OF THOSE IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS ARE ABANDONING PARIS FOR THE BEACH. THIS IS THEREFORE A GOOD MOMENT TO TAKE STOCK OF THE FRENCH POLITICAL SCENE. THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS DOMINATE ALL.

MITTERRAND

3. MITTERRAND IS PROFITTING FROM INACTIVITY. HE IS RIDING HIGH IN THE POOLS, POSING AS THE CHAMPION OF NATIONAL UNITY WHO IS ABOVE THE POLITICAL FRAY. ON PRESENT SHOWING HE WOULD BEAT CHIRAC OR BARRE COMFORTABLY IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS. BUT, AS HE IS WELL AWARE, THE ELECTIONS ARE STILL NINE MONTHS AWAY AND MUCH MAY HAPPEN MEANWHILE. (GISCARD HAD A COMFORTABLE LEAD IN THE POLLS NINE MONTHS BEFORE HIS DEFEAT IN 1981.) MOREOVER, AS SOON AS MITTERRAND DECLARES HIMSELF AND ENTERS THE LISTS, HE COULD WELL FORFEIT THE SUPPORT OF THOSE WHO AT PRESENT LOOK TO HIM AS THE 'FATHER-FIGURE'/CONSCIENCE OF FRANCE. IT THEREFORE SEEMS LIKELY THAT MITTERRAND IS GENUINELY UNDECIDED ABOUT WHETHER TO RUN AGAIN. IF HE CAN MAINTAIN HIS CURRENT POPULARITY HE PROBABLY WILL: IF NOT, AND VICTORY IS IN DOUBT, HE MAY CHOOSE TO RETIRE WITH HONOUR.

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4. IF HE OPTS OUT, ROCARD IS THE SOCIALIST PARTY'S (PS) MOST LIKELY CHOICE. HE CLAIMS TO BE CONVINCED THAT MITTERRAND WILL NOT STAND AGAIN, AND IS ALREADY COMPAIGNING HARD. (TO THE IRRITATION OF THE MITTERRANDISTES, HE INSISTS THAT HE WILL RUN EVEN IF THE PRESIDENT STANDS AGAIN, SOMETHING WHICH WOULD SPLIT THE PS AND PREJUDICE THE LEFT'S CHANCES.) IF ROCARD DOES EMERGE AS THE PS CANDIDATE, HE COULD JUST WIN THE ELECTIONS IF THE RIGHT FAILS TO MOBILISE ITS FULL VOTE IN THE SECOND AND DECISIVE ROUND. THE ODDS ARE LONG, BUT ROCARD IS NOT YET TO BE DISCOUNTED.

CHIRAC

5. CHIRAC IS UNPOPULAR: THE MAJORITY IS PRONE TO PERIODIC BOUTS OF DEBILITATING INFIGHTING, AND THE ECONOMIC NEWS IS BAD. CHIRAC AFFECTS UNCONCERN AND PROJECTS HIMSELF AS THE MAN WHO IS COURAGEOUSLY TACKLING THE COUNTRY'S PROBLEMS CONFIDENT THAT THE VOTERS WILL REWARD HIM IN JUE COURSE. A FURTHER WORRY FOR CHIRAC IS THE ANIMOSITY BETWEEN HIS SUPPORTERS AND BARRE'S. THERE IS A REAL RISK THAT IF CHIRAC BEATS BARRE IN THE FIRST ROUND OF THE ELECTIONS, BARRE'S SUPPORTERS MAY ABSTAIN RATHER THAN RALLY TO HIM IN THE SECOND ROUND, SO GIVING VICTORY TO THE LEFT. (BARRE FACES THE SAME THREAT WITH REGARD TO CHIRAC'S SUPPORTERS IF HE, RATHER THAN CHIRAC, EMERGES AS THE RIGHT'S CANDIDATE AFTER THE FIRST ROUND.)

BARRE

6. BARRE'S POPULARITY IS JUST BEHIND CHIRAC'S ALTHOUGH THE POLLS SUGGEST THAT IF HE BEATS HIM IN THE FIRST ROUND, HE HAS A BETTER CHANCE THAN CHIRAC OF DEFEATING THE LEFT'S CANDIDATE IN THE SECOND. (THE MITTERRANDISTES CERTAINLY FEAR BARRE MORE.) BARRE PLANS TO ADOPT A HIGHER PROFILE AFTER THE RENTREE WHEN HE WILL BE CRITICAL OF THE GOVERNMENT'S ECONOMIC POLICIES. HE WILL PRESENT HIMSELF AS THE MAN BEST QUALIFIED TO LEAD FRANCE AT A TIME WHEN THE ELECTORATE IS WORRIED ABOUT THE PROSPECT OF NATIONAL DECLINE. LEOTARD'S RECENT QUARREL WITH CHIRAC (MANNING'S LETTER TO KIDD, WED, OF 11 JUNE) WAS A BONUS FOR BARRE ON WHICH HE WILL WISH TO CAPITALISE IN THE MONTHS AHEAD.

LE PEN

7. LE PEN HAS BEEN DOING STRIKINGLY WELL IN RECENT MONTHS. 13-14 PER CENT OF VOTERS SAY THEY WILL SUPPORT HIM IN THE FIRST ROUND OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS. HIS CANDIDACY HAS BECOME A MAJOR EMBARRASSMENT TO THE ORTHODOX RIGHT WHO CANNOT DECIDE WHETHER TO CONFRONT OR IGNORE HIM. HIS DISRUPTIVE IMPACT COMPLICATES RPR AND UDF CALCULATIONS AND POSES A THREAT TO THE RIGHT'S PRESIDENTIAL PROSPECTS.

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8. THE COMMUNIST PARTY'S (PCF) FORTUNES ARE, BY CONTRAST, SO DISMAL THAT MARCHAIS HAS LEFT IT TO LAJOINIE TO CARRY THE PCF'S COLOURS NEXT YEAR AND SO TAKE THE BLAME FOR WHAT IS LIKELY TO BE A POOR PERFORMANCE. SOME THINK LAJOINIE WILL DO WELL TO GET 8 PER CENT. HIS TASK IS THE HARDER IN THAT HE IS SEEN AS MARCHAIS' POODLE, AND IS OBLIGED TO ARGUE FOR POLICIES WHICH HAVE LITTLE APPEAL TO RANK AND FILE PCF VOTERS (NOTABLY THE LINE THAT THERE IS NOTHING TO CHOOSE BETWEEN THE SOCIALISTS AND THE RIGHT). THE POSSIBILITY THAT THE DISSIDENT JUQUIN WILL ALSO RUN CAN ONLY ADD TO THE PCF'S EMBARRASMENTS.

CONCLUSION

9. THE PRESIDENTIAL PROSPECTS REMAIN OPEN. ON THE LEFT THERE IS UNCERTAINTY OVER MITTERRAND'S INTENTIONS, ON THE RIGHT THE CONTEST BETWEEN CHIRAC AND BARRE IS COMPLICATED BY LE PEN'S INTERVENTION. THE HOLIDAY PAUSE WILL BE SHORT, AND IN SEPTEMBER THE CONTEST WILL RESUME IN EARNEST. MITTERRAND, ROCARD, CHIRAC AND BARRE ARE ALL STILL IN WITH A CHANCE EVEN IF, AT PRESENT, MITTERRAND IS BEST PLACED

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