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FRENCH INTERNAL POLITICS

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SUMMARY

1. THE POLITICAL TEMPO IS QUICKENING. THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS DOMINATE EVERY CALCULATION. MITTERRAND REMAINS POPULAR BUT HIS INTENTIONS ARE UNCERTAIN. ROCARD IS CAMPAIGNING HARD. CHEVENEMENT WILL CHALLENGE ROCARD FOR THE SOCIALIST NOMINATION IF MITTERRAND STANDS DOWN. RPR MORALE HAS IMPROVED WITH SOME POLLS SHOWING CHIRAC AHEAD OF BARRE. BUT THE LATTER HAS BEEN HOLDING HIS FIRE, AND HAS BEEN BOOSTED BY THE PROSPECT OF SECURING LEOTARD'S SUPPORT. LE PEN REMAINS A COMPLICATION FOR BOTH RPR AND UDF.

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2. THE TEMPO OF FRENCH POLITICS IS PICKING UP AFTER THE SUMMER BREAK. THERE IS UNLIKELY TO BE ANOTHER RESPITE BEFORE NEXT YEAR'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS. AN UNCERTAIN AND POSSIBLY VOLATILE FEW MONTHS LIE AHEAD. FRENCH POLITICS WILL, FROM NOW ON, BE CONSUMED BY THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS AND THEIR OUTCOME. AND, AT PRESENT, IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO PREDICT WHAT THAT MIGHT BE. THE TWO TIER ELECTORAL SYSTEM, THE LIKELY SPLIT IN VOTES AT THE FIRST ROUND, THE UNCERTAINTY OVER WHICH TWO CANDIDATES WOULD GO FORWARD TO THE SECOND ROUND, AND THE CONFUSION OVER HOW VOTERS FOR THE RESIDUAL CANDIDATES WOULD THEN VOTE (OR ABSTAIN), MAKE FOR CIRCUMSTANCES FROM WHICH ONLY PROFESSIONAL COMMENTATORS CAN DRAW COMFORT.

3. ON THE LEFT, MITTERRAND CONTINUES TO ENJOY HIGH RATINGS IN THE POLLS, BUT THE UNCERTAINTY ABOUT WHETHER HE WILL RUN AGAIN IS LIKELY TO PERSIST INTO NEXT YEAR. IN THE HOPE THAT HE WILL NOT, ROCARD IS CAMPAIGNING HARD, AND WITH A DETECTABLE INCREASE IN RECENT WEEKS IN THE SERIOUSNESS WITH WHICH POLITICAL CIRCLES ARE TAKING HIM. ONE RESULT HAS BEEN CHEVENEMENT'S ANNOUNCEMENT THAT HE WILL CHALLENGE ROCARD FOR THE SOCIALIST PARTY (PS) NOMINATION IF MITTERRAND STANDS DOWN, PRESENTING HIMSELF AS A FULL-BLOODED SOCIALIST ALTERNATIVE TO WHAT HE ALLEGES IS THE MILK AND WATER SOCIAL DEMOCRACY THAT ROCARD

IS OFFERING.

4. CHEVENEMENT WOULD BE UNLIKELY TO SECURE THE PS NOMINATION, BUT IN HIS ANNOUNCEMENT HE STRESSED TWO OF THE THEMES THAT ARE LIKELY TO LOOM LARGE IN THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN. THE FIRST IS THE PLACE OF IDEOLOGY IN FRENCH POLITICS. CHEVENEMENT IS INSISTING THAT THE PS MUST OFFER A DISTINCTLY LEFT-WING PROGRAMME TO CHALLENGE THE RIGHT'S NEO-GAULLIST LIBERALISM. THIS IS SOMETHING THAT OTHER PS LEADERS ARE FIGHTING SHY OF IN THE BELIEF THAT THE FRENCH ELECTORATE IS CURRENTLY DISPOSED TOWARDS PRAGMATIC RATHER THAN IDEOLOGICAL SOLUTIONS TO FRANCE'S PROBLEMS. THE SECOND IS THE EMPHASIS HE PUT ON EUROPE. CHEVENEMENT ARGUES THAT THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COMMUNITY IS ESSENTIAL IF FRANCE IS TO SUCCEED IN OVERCOMING HER CURRENT ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES, A VIEW SHARED BY MANY ON BOTH LEFT AND RIGHT. HE ALSO BELIEVES THAT A RENEWED PUSH FOR EUROPEAN INTEGRATION IS ESSENTIAL TO COUNTER THE DANGER THAT THE FRG WILL SLIP ANCHOR AND DRIFT OFF TOWARDS NEUTRALISM AND REUNIFICATION. AGAIN, MANY SHARE THIS ANALYSIS ON BOTH SIDES OF THE POLITICAL DIVIDE. WE CAN EXPECT TO HEAR MUCH MORE OF IT.

5. ON THE RIGHT, RPR MORALE IS BETTER THAN FOR SOME MONTHS. CHIRAC'S ADVISERS ARE INCREASINGLY HOPEFUL THAT MITTERRAND WILL NOT STAND AGAIN, AND INCREASINGLY OPTIMISTIC THAT CHIRAC CAN BEAT ANY OTHER RIVAL. THEY ARE PARTICULARLY PLEASED THAT SOME POLLS NOW SUGGEST THAT CHIRAC HAS PULLED AHEAD OF BARRE. CHIRAC AFFECTS TO BE TOO BUSY COURAGEOUSLY TACKLING FRANCE'S PROBLEMS TO HAVE TIME FOR ELECTIONEERING, AND HAS SAID THAT HE WILL ONLY START CAMPAIGNING AT THE END OF THE YEAR. THIS DOES NOT HOWEVER SQUARE WITH HIS FEVERISH PURSUIT OF PUBLICITY. (HE WAS RECENTLY PHOTOGRAPHED IN JEANS WITH A SONY WALKMAN CLAPPED TO HIS EARS HAVING REVEALED A HITHERTO UNEXPECTED ENTHUSIASM FOR MADONNA.)

6. FOR THE MOMENT IT IS CHIRAC'S LIEUTENANTS WHO ARE TAKING THE FIGHT TO THE LEFT. THEY HAVE BEEN TRYING TO DENT MITTERRAND'S POPULARITY BY RECALLING WHAT THEY CLAIM WERE THE SOCIALIST EXCESSES IN THE EARLY YEARS OF HIS SEPTENNAT, AND BY DRAWING ATTENTION TO THE FACT THAT HE WOULD BE NEARLY 80 AT THE END OF ANOTHER 7 YEAR TERM. THE ELYSEE HAVE RIPOSTED NEATLY WITH A REMINDER THAT DE GAULLE WAS 75 WHEN HE STOOD FOR A SECOND TERM IN 1965.

7. BARRE HAS DELIBERATELY BEEN KEEPING A LOW PROFILE, PACING HIMSELF FOR THE MARATHON AHEAD. MEANWHILE HIS SUPPORTERS PROMISE TO BE CRITICAL OF BALLADUR'S BUDGET PROPOSALS WHEN PARLIAMENT REASSEMBLES IN OCTOBER. THEIR AIM WILL BE TO SIGNAL THEIR DIFFERENCES WITH THE

RPR BUT IN A WAY THAT FALLS WELL SHORT OF RUPTURE. THE MOST ENCOURAGING DEVELOPMENT FOR THE BARRE CAMP IS LEOTARD'S APPARENT ACCEPTANCE THAT HE IS NOT WELL-ENOUGH PLACED TO CHALLENGE FOR THE PRESIDENCY HIMSELF BUT WILL HAVE TO FALL IN BEHIND THE UDF CANDIDATE, IE BARRE. HE MAKES LITTLE SECRET OF HIS LACK OF ENTHUSIASM FOR THIS COURSE (AND IF BARRE FALTERS HE MIGHT YET TRY TO ENTER THE RACE), BUT THE SUPPORT OF LEOTARD'S CLOSE MINISTERIAL COLLEAGUES AND THE REPUBLICAN PARTY MACHINE WOULD BE A CONSIDERABLE ASSET TO BARRE.

8. ON THE EXTREME RIGHT LE PEN HAS HAD A GOOD SUMMER, TOURING THE BEACHES IN A BLAZE OF PUBLICITY. CHIRAC AND BARRE HOPE HIS SUPPORT WILL NOW SLIP AS SERIOUS CAMPAIGNING BEGINS. BUT WHETHER IT DOES OR NOT, THE QUESTION OF HOW THE TRADITIONAL RIGHT SHOULD DEAL WITH THE EXTREME RIGHT THREATENS TO PROVE AS DIFFICULT AND DIVISIVE FOR THE UDF AND RPR AS THE QUESTION OF PS RELATIONS WITH THE COMMUNISTS USED TO BE BEFORE THE LATTER'S SUPPORT WENT INTO A FREE-FALL FROM WHICH IT SHOWS NO SIGN OF RECOVERY. LE PEN INDEED IS BENEFITTING FROM SOME EX-COMMUNIST SUPPORT.

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