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(COLLAR)

FRENCH INTERNAL POLITICAL SCENE

SUMMARY

1. SKETCH OF THE POLITICAL SCENE AT THE START OF A YEAR IN WHICH THE MAJOR POLITICAL PARTIES WILL HOLD CONGRESSES. NO NATIONWIDE ELECTIONS EXPECTED FOR NEXT TWO YEARS. IN ALL THE MAJOR PARTIES, PERSONALITY STRUGGLES UNRELATED TO ISSUES OF SUBSTANCE.

2. CHIRAC LEADERSHIP OF THE RPR UNDER CHALLENGE. SOCIALIST BARONS SLUGGING IT OUT BEFORE THEIR MARCH CONGRESS WITH EYE TO EVENTUAL SUCCESSION TO MITTERRAND.

3. BUT ROCARD GOVERNMENT STILL POPULAR AND LOOKS STABLE FOR THE MOMENT, AND MITTERRAND STILL DOMINATES THE POLITICAL SCENE.

DETAIL

4. BARRING ACCIDENTS, FRANCE POLITICAL CALENDAR IS BLANK UNTIL 1992 (REGIONAL ELECTIONS), 1993 (LEGISLATIVES) AND 1995 (PRESIDENTIALS). IN THIS VACUUM PERSONAL RIVALRIES HAVE BECOME SHARPEN AND THE FRAGILE POLITICAL PARTIES ARE UNDER STRAIN. SO MUCH IS POLITICAL LIFE HERE DOMINATED BY THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS THAT WITHOUT A DESIGNATED PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE THE PARTIES LOSE ALL SENSE OF PURPOSE.

5. ALREADY MINDS ARE TURNING TO 1995. MITTERRAND IS THOUGHT UNLIKELY TO STAND AGAIN. HE HAS AT LEAST THREE POTENTIAL SUCCESSORS FOR THE SOCIALIST PARTY CANDIDATURE, ROCARD, FABUS AND JOSPIN. FOR THE OPPOSITION GISCARD AND CHIRAC ARE LOCKED IN COMBAT AS THEY WERE TEN YEARS AGO. BUT THEY ARE GETTING OLD AND NEW CHALLENGERS ARE PROLIFERATING.

6. THE FOCUS FOR THE LEADERSHIP STRUGGLE IN THE SOCIALIST PARTY IS THE BIENNIAL CONGRESS ON 15-18 MARCH. FABUS IS CONFIDENT OF HIS GROWING SUPPORT AMONG THE PARTY'S GRASS ROOTS AND BELIEVES HIMSELF

TO BE MITTERRAND'S FAVOURITE: HE HAS REFUSED TO SIGN A CONSENSUS MOTION AND IS INSISTING ON TESTING HIS STRENGTH IN THE PARTY. HE HAS EFFECTIVELY SPLIT THE MITTERRANDISTE MAJORITY WHICH HAS DOMINATED THE PARTY SINCE MITTERRAND BECAME FIRST SECRETARY IN 1971. SEVEN MOTIONS WILL NOW BE PUT TO THE VOTE OF THE MILITANTS BEFORE THE CONGRESS, OF WHICH FOUR ARE BY MITTERRAND SUPPORTERS.

7. IF FABIUS DOES WELL HE WILL PROBABLY TRY TO RECONSTRUCT THE MITTERRANDISTE MAJORITY JUST BEFORE THE CONGRESS ON HIS OWN TERMS - POSSIBLY INCLUDING HIS REPLACING MAUROY AS THE PARTY'S FIRST SECRETARY. BUT THE BATTLE COULD SPILL OVER INTO THE CONGRESS ITSELF. IF IT DOES ROCARD MIGHT THEN HOLD THE BALANCE OF POWER BETWEEN FABIUS AND HIS MITTERRANDISTE RIVAL JOSPIN, GIVING HIM THE CHANCE OF FORMING A NEW MAJORITY AND DOMINATING THE PARTY.

8. MITTERRAND HAS BEEN CAREFUL SO FAR NOT TO INTERVENE DIRECTLY - 'LET THE BEST MAN WIN' HE SAID RECENTLY. IT WOULD NOT ANYWAY BE AN EASY CHOICE. FABIUS MAY BE POLULAR WITH THE PARTY MILITANTS, BUT ROCARD IS MUCH MORE POPULAR IN THE COUNTRY AS A WHOLE AND AT THIS EARLY STAGE LOOKS THE MOST CREDIBLE PRESIDENTIAL SUCCESSOR.

9. ON THE RIGHT THE MOOD REMAINS PESSIMISTIC. THERE IS MUCH TALK OF AMERICAN-STYLE PRIMARIES TO CHOOSE A SINGLE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE, BUT NO CONVINCING SYSTEM HAS BEEN FOUND. THE RIGHT SEES ITSELF AS VICTIM OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM DEVISED BY DE GAULLE WHICH MITTERRAND HAS SINCE TURNED TO HIS OWN ADVANTAGE. NO ONE YET PROMISES TO EMERGE TO UNITE THE RIGHT AS MITTERRAND UNITED THE LEFT IN THE 1970S.

10. GISCARD D'ESTAING'S SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP OF AN UNITED OPPOSITION LIST AT THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS HAS PUT HIM BACK IN THE PRESIDENTIAL LEAGUE. HE RECENTLY OVERTOOK CHIRAC IN THE OPINION POLLS AND HAS THE ADVANTAGE OF NOT HAVING BEEN DEFEATED IN THE LAST PRESIDENTIALS. BUT HE HAS SEVERAL YOUNGER RIVALS TO CONTEND WITH.

11. IN THE GAULLIST PARTY (RPR) CHIRAC AND JUPPE'S LEADERSHIP IS NOW OPENLY CONTESTED BY TWO OF CHIRAC'S FORMER MINISTERS: CHARLES PASQUA AND PHILIPPE SEGUIN. LAST WEEK THEY ANNOUNCED IN A JOINT STATEMENT THAT THE RPR HAD NOT 'RECOVERED ITS SELF-CONFIDENCE' AND THAT THEY WOULD BE PUTTING FORWARD TO THE PARTY'S TRIENNIAL ASSIZES (CONGRESS) IN FEBRUARY AN ALTERNATIVE STRATEGY. JUPPE AND CHIRAC ARE FIGHTING BACK HARD. THEY WILL PROBABLY SEE OF THE CHALLENGE, BUT IF HE IS TO REGAIN LOST GROUND CHIRAC NEEDS TO SHOW MORE CONFIDENCE AND FLAIR THAN HE HAS OF LATE.

12. ABOVE THESE PARTY POLITICAL SQUABBLES, AT THE LEVEL OF GOVERNMENT AND PRESIDENT, CALM STILL PREVAILS. MITTERRAND AND ROCARD TOP THE OPINION POLLS. THERE HAS BEEN LESS PUBLIC SECTOR UNREST THIS AUTUMN THAN LAST. THE ECONOMY IS DOING WELL, WITH GROWTH RUNNING AT OVER 3 PERCENT PER ANNUM AND INFLATION MODERATE. REMAINING EXCHANGE CONTROLS WERE DULY LIFTED ON 1 JANUARY WITH NO UNTOWARD CONSEQUENCES FOR THE FRANC. THE MAJOR BLACK SPOT REMAINS UNEMPLOYMENT (CURRENTLY 9.5 PERCENT)

13. ROCARD SHOWS EVERY SIGN OF WANTING TO STAY ON. HIS LACK OF AN ABSOLUTE MAJORITY IN PARLIAMENT HAS FORCED HIM TO MAKE INCREASING USE OF THE GUILLOTINE EQUIVALENT TO GET HIS LEGISLATION THROUGH. BUT THE OPPOSITION PARTIES DO NOT LOOK LIKE COMBINING IN A SERIOUS THREAT TO HIM. IN FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE HE HAS BEEN CAREFUL TO LEAVE MITTERRAND A CLEAR FIELD. THROUGH RELATIONS BETWEEN PRESIDENTS AND PRIME MINISTERS IN THE FIFTH REPUBLIC ARE NOTORIOUSLY VOLATILE, IT IS HARD AT PRESENT TO SEE REASONS FOR MITTERRAND SOON TO CHANGE A SUCCESSFUL FORMULA.

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