The Future of France's National Front

Marine Le Pen Is Down but Not Out

By Cécile Alduy, FOREIGN AFFAIRS, February 1, 2018

"I was born with political setbacks." At the time she made this confession, back in October 2012, Marine Le Pen, then the up-and-coming new leader of France’s National Front party, did not mean it as an admission of doom. In her stark office on the second floor of the National Front’s headquarters in Nanterre, a lackluster residential banlieue a few miles west of Paris, she retraced her bumpy political life to me. For many years, she had operated in the shadow of her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, who generated decades of headlines and court cases with his anti-Semitic and racist outbursts. “To run for Congress and then to lose, that’s been our daily lot,” she philosophized. “Some have pleasant political journeys. Us? We trek with our backpacks on, we fall, we get back on our feet, we fall again, we get back on our feet again.”

In hindsight, Le Pen’s statement sounds prophetic. After a stratospheric rise that pushed her party to the front of the pack in the first round of regional elections in 2015, with up to 40 percent of the vote in some strongholds in the north and the south-east of France, Le Pen made it to the second round of the French presidential election last May only to be crushed, 34 percent to 66 percent, by Emmanuel Macron, a political newcomer. In the following parliamentary elections, the National Front spiraled down to a miserable 13 percent, the same score as five years before. Today, with party members jumping ship by the hundreds, dissenters openly questioning Le Pen’s leadership abilities, a trial for allegedly embezzling funds from the European Parliament on the horizon, and a financial crisis within the party, commentators have been quick to write Le Pen’s obituary.

Should they write her off so quickly? It’s tempting to declare the French far right obsolete. But doing so would risk repeating the same mistakes and allowing the same lack of vigilance that in part led to U.S. President Donald Trump’s shocking victory. The 10.6 million French voters who cast their ballots for Le Pen last May have not vanished. Nor will the National Front’s appeal to them disappear anytime soon.

CRASH AND BURN

To be sure, the National Front will be licking its wounds for some time. From 2011, when she took over the party, until her defeat last year, Le Pen enjoyed a winning streak. Under her leadership, the party seized control of a dozen mid-sized cities, won 25 seats in the European Parliament, and got two Senators and thousands of local officials elected for the first time in its history. In three consecutive midterm elections in 2014-2015, it garnered more than 25 percent of the national vote. In the months leading up to the presidential race, Le Pen led the polls; the question was not whether she would reach the second round, but whom she would face. In October 2016, she was even projected to win a second-round match against incumbent president François Hollande. (Hollande chose not to run.) Momentum was on her side.
Then came the crash. On May 3, 2017—four days before the final vote—Le Pen’s credibility imploded during her final debate with Macron. She did not flunk the debate; she butchered it. Throughout the debate, Macron was poised and civil; she was aggressive and arrogant. He was patient and articulate, even on complicated policy matters; she fumbled through a pile of cheat sheets and could not explain the single most important economic measure in her platform, a French exit from the Eurozone. Shaking his head in disbelief, one far right supporter of 40 years told a reporter, “I stopped watching after 20 minutes. I was afraid I would not vote for her anymore if I did.”

Since then, one hope after another has been crushed. Le Pen was aiming for at least 40 percent of the vote against Macron; she got just 34 percent. She had expected as many as 60 seats in the new National Assembly; she painstakingly salvaged just seven. Within the National Front, the blame game started. The old divisions that had ruined its electoral strategy during the campaign burst into the open. Defections piled up. The party’s darling, 28-year-old Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, Marine’s niece, made a polite but noticeable exit from politics two days after her aunt’s defeat in May, citing her wish to go back to her motherly duties. In September, Marine Le Pen’s second-in-command, Florian Philippot, a media-savvy technocrat who is widely credited as the architect of Le Pen’s ascent, stormed out of the National Front over policy differences and founded his own rival party, The Patriots. The specter of division, which has plagued the far-right movement in the past, reared its head once again. Party membership dropped from 63,000 last April to 51,400 in late December. And that may not capture the full decline: only 30,000 members responded to a party-wide poll launched in December to assess their desires for the future of the movement.

More important, Le Pen has failed to cash in on the political capital she could have received from reaching the second round of the election, a rare feat for an extremist party that has long been marginalized and demonized. On paper, the face-off with Macron should have set her up as Macron’s nemesis, and therefore as the second-most-important political leader in France. The “globalist” against the nationalist, the smug representative of the elites and international finance (Macron once worked for the investment bank Rothschild) against the champion of the “real” people—the contrast was almost too perfect.

Yet Le Pen sabotaged her chances. In an incredible self-destructive blow, she missed the opportunity to spearhead the political resistance to Macron’s contentious labor reforms and pro-business fiscal policies. While she was busy bickering with Philippot, Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s far-left movement La France Insoumise (“Rebellious France”) monopolized the airwaves. According to a January 2018 survey by Ifop-Fiducial, 37 percent of the French see Mélenchon’s movement as the main opposition to Macron’s government. The National Front comes in third, at 22 percent, after the center-right Republican Party, at 24 percent.

THE COMEBACK PARTY

The National Front is in for a bout of self-examination. But defeat is not the same as decline. Short-term electoral setbacks should not be confused with long-term political and ideological trends. Before 2017, the National Front saw years of sustained growth, and large segments of French society adopted its ideas. The party’s struggles are real. But so are the racist and anti-
Muslim prejudices that the party’s decades-long cultural war has helped normalize and entrench in France.

The National Front’s electoral results in 2017 were disappointing only when compared to the opinion polls; set against a longer history, they were far more impressive. If anything, Le Pen brought her father’s party to levels undreamt of in its 45-year history. Between 2002—the last time the National Front made it to the second round of a presidential election—and 2017, the party doubled its political heft, gaining five million voters (out of an electorate of 47 million) and 16 percentage points of the vote. In the first round of the 2017 presidential race alone, when she was competing against 11 other candidates, Le Pen convinced 7.6 million people to vote for her. Between the first and second rounds, she rallied nearly three million more to her name, despite record low turnout and calls to vote against her from every other political party (except Nicolas Dupont-Aignan’s Gaullist Debout La France, “Stand Up, France”). By contrast, Jean-Marie Le Pen, the National Front’s candidate in 2002, barely improved his score between the two rounds of the election.

Contrary to popular belief, the 2017 election did not stop populism in its tracks. For one thing, Macron played the part of the anti-populist hero even as he jammed on a number of populist-sounding tunes, from portraying himself (with some chutzpah for a former minister of the economy) as the ultimate anti-establishment candidate to accusing the ruling “elites” of failing “the people.” Second, Macron’s transformative energy is probably as overrated as the National Front’s appeal is underrated. The deepest layers of French society, the ones furthest away from employment, higher education, and social advancement, view the European Union with disgust or contempt and don’t feel they will ever reap the fruits of globalization. They are unlikely to be convinced by Macron’s vision of a “start-up nation” or his lyrical Europhile speeches.

Joel Gombin, a political analyst at the Fondation Jean Jaurès think tank in Paris, dismisses the idea that Macron’s win signed the National Front’s death certificate. “Macron’s rise could very well coincide in the long term with that of the National Front,” he told me. “Both trends don’t exclude each other. On the contrary: they could be two symptoms of the increased importance of a new political divide around ethnocentrism versus cosmopolitanism.”

Le Pen’s electoral base will likely stick with the National Front, given the lack of alternative parties advocating the same kind of anti-elitist, anti-Europe, anti-immigration, protectionist platform, or simply abstain from voting at all. “We could very well have a Marine Le Pen who lost her credibility but continues to score really well in upcoming elections,” Nicolas Lebourg, a historian of the National Front, told me.

Recent surveys continue to put the National Front second after Macron’s party, La République En Marche. In October, Le Pen still polled at 22 percent in an Ifop survey asking citizens how they would vote “if the presidential election happened today,” remarkably close to the 21 percent she scored in the first round of the actual election.

The lesson of the last 30 years is that the National Front has established itself as a permanent feature of the French political landscape, much more so than any other party. Its strengths lie in its remarkably sociologically and ideologically homogeneous base and its firm geographical
strongholds on the outer fringes of big cities and in rural and post-industrial regions in France’s north and southeast. National Front supporters share a distinct set of beliefs and concerns. According to a June 2017 survey by Cevipof, 92 percent of them think that there are “too many immigrants in France,” compared to 53 percent of French people overall. Similarly, 84 percent of National Front supporters are convinced that “Islam is a threat to the West”; that figure drops to 56 percent for the nation as a whole.

THE NEXT ACT

The National Front’s high electoral scores have always been a measure of its opponents’ shortcomings. Macron bulldozed his way through the old political system; not much is still standing in the resulting wasteland. The National Front is actually doing slightly better than its arch-opponents of the past, the Republican Party and the Socialist Party. Both have suffered massive hemorrhages among their bases and elected officials, who fled en masse to Macron’s movement. They are fighting for survival. The National Front is not.

Meanwhile, the National Front can claim a few ideological victories. On immigration and, to a lesser extent, on Muslims’ place in French society, the far right has largely imposed its views and conceptual framework on the rest of the political spectrum. In a survey released on January 10, 64 percent of French people polled declared that the pace of immigrant arrivals into France was too high (among National Front sympathizers, the figure was 95 percent), 57 percent were in favor of ending policy that allows legal immigrants to bring in their spouses and children, and 75 percent opposed women wearing the Islamic headscarf in universities (even though this is legal in France).

Even the liberal Macron has partially bowed to the pressure, by implementing what the historian of French immigration law Patrick Weil has called “the most extreme anti-immigration decrees since WWII.” Human Rights Watch has denounced the routine use of pepper spray on children and adult migrants in the Calais region. And non-profit organizations have warned of the potential for “serious human rights infringements” under the new policies.

The story of the sudden obsolescence of a National Front has been told many times, and each time it has been refuted by events. In 1999, the bloody split between Jean-Marie Le Pen and his second-in-command, Bruno Mégret, was supposed to drain the National Front of its vital force. In the next European elections, in 1999, the party received less than six percent of the vote, and Mégret’s new party got half that share. But by 2002, Le Pen shocked everyone when he received 17 percent of the vote in the first round of the presidential election, beating Lionel Jospin, the incumbent socialist prime minister, and securing his place in the run-off against the Republican Jacques Chirac. During the 2007 presidential campaign, the Republican candidate, Nicolas Sarkozy, looted the National Front’s platform and pet themes in a bid to nab its voters. Jean-Marie Le Pen plunged to 10 percent. Then in 2012, Marine scored 18 percent in the presidential race and became the highest vote-getter in the party’s history.

Le Pen is well aware of this history of false hopes, failed attempts, divisions, and comebacks. “That’s the source of our immense strength actually,” she said on that rainy morning back in 2012 when her future was still wide open, as she described to me the outsider mentality that
she—and her fellow National Front sympathizers—grew up with. Mixing her instant coffee with a tiny plastic spoon, she brushed aside any qualms about being doomed to lead a perpetual protest party. “It’s after a loss that you see who is a real leader: you need to be able to take the folks who are crying by the shoulders and tell them, ‘Now stop, we’re going back in the ring.’”

Behind her wooden desk, among the many titles in the wall-to-wall bookshelves, large golden letters on the spine of a black volume caught my eye: Survive: How to Win in Hostile Terrain. A useful manual for the years to come.