

Hundreds of thousands in France protest far right ahead of snap elections

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Paris, June 21 (RHC)-- Anti-racism groups joined French unions and a new left-wing coalition in protests across France against the surging nationalist far right as frenzied campaigning is under way in advance of snap parliamentary elections.

About 21,000 police and gendarmes were deployed at rallies on Saturday with authorities expecting between 300,000 and 500,000 protesters nationwide, France's interior ministry said.

In Paris, those who feared the elections would produce France's first far-right government since World War II gathered at Place de la Republique before marching. Crowds have been gathering daily in France, ever since the anti-immigration National Rally (RN) made historic gains in the European Parliament elections last Sunday. This prompted Macron to dissolve the National Assembly and call for a snap legislative election, to be held in two rounds on June 30th and July 7th.

A large crowd turned out in spite of rainy and windy weather on Saturday holding placards reading "Liberty for all, Equality for all and Fraternity with all" – a reference to France's national motto – as well as "Let's break frontiers. Documents for all. No to the immigration bill."

Speaking from Place de Republique, hard-left CGT union leader Sophie Binet told reporters, "We are marching because we are extremely worried [RN's leader] Jordan Bardella could become the next prime minister ... We want to prevent this disaster."

Among the protesters in Paris, some also chanted "Free Palestine, viva Palestina," and wore Palestinian keffiyeh scarves.

Among them was Nour Cekar, a 16-year-old high school student, who has French and Algerian parents and wears the hijab. "To me, the extreme right is a danger because it supports an ideology based on the fear of the other, whereas we are all French citizens despite our differences," she said.

Cekar added she will vote for the left-wing coalition because "it is the only political [entity] that addresses racism and Islamophobia."

Meanwhile, in the French Riviera city of Nice, demonstrators marched down Jean Medecin Avenue, the city's main shopping street, chanting against the National Rally and its leader Bardella, 28, as well as President Emmanuel Macron. Protest organisers said 3,000 took part, while police put the number at 2,500.

Nice is traditionally a conservative stronghold, but has, over the past decade, turned firmly in favor of Marine Le Pen's National Rally and her far-right rival Eric Zemmour.

Nacira Guenif, a sociologist at University Paris 8, called the rise of the far right a "very dangerous situation", and said many young people who attended rallies on Saturday denounced "the fascists".

"This is a greater danger than ever. This is the first time where the far right rose to 30 percent of the vote in the European elections. The reason the youth and a lot of people were on the streets today is to say they don't want this to happen in France," Guenif told Al Jazeera.

Reporting from Paris, Al Jazeera's Natacha Butler noted the French president's call of the election took everybody, including his own ministers, by surprise. "Macron says he called this election because he has heard the voice of the people, of the voters. He said he's seen the EU election that took place and saw that people are unhappy with his policies in this government. Therefore, he says he's given the choice back to the people."

The move is a huge gamble, she said. "People are here to say they fear the far right that would destroy France's values of rights, liberty, freedom and equality."

To prevent the National Rally party from winning the upcoming elections, left-wing parties finally agreed on Friday to set aside differences over the wars on Gaza and Ukraine and form a coalition. They urged French citizens to defeat the far right.

French opinion polls suggest the National Rally is expected to be ahead in the first round of the parliamentary elections. The party came out on top in the European elections last week, garnering more than 30 percent of the vote cast in France, almost twice as many votes as Macron's party Renaissance.

Macron's term is still on for three more years, and he would retain control over foreign affairs and defence regardless of the result. But his presidency would be weakened if the National Rally wins, which could put Bardella on track to become the next prime minister, with authority over domestic and economic affairs.

French voters go to the polls first on June 30th and again July 7th.

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