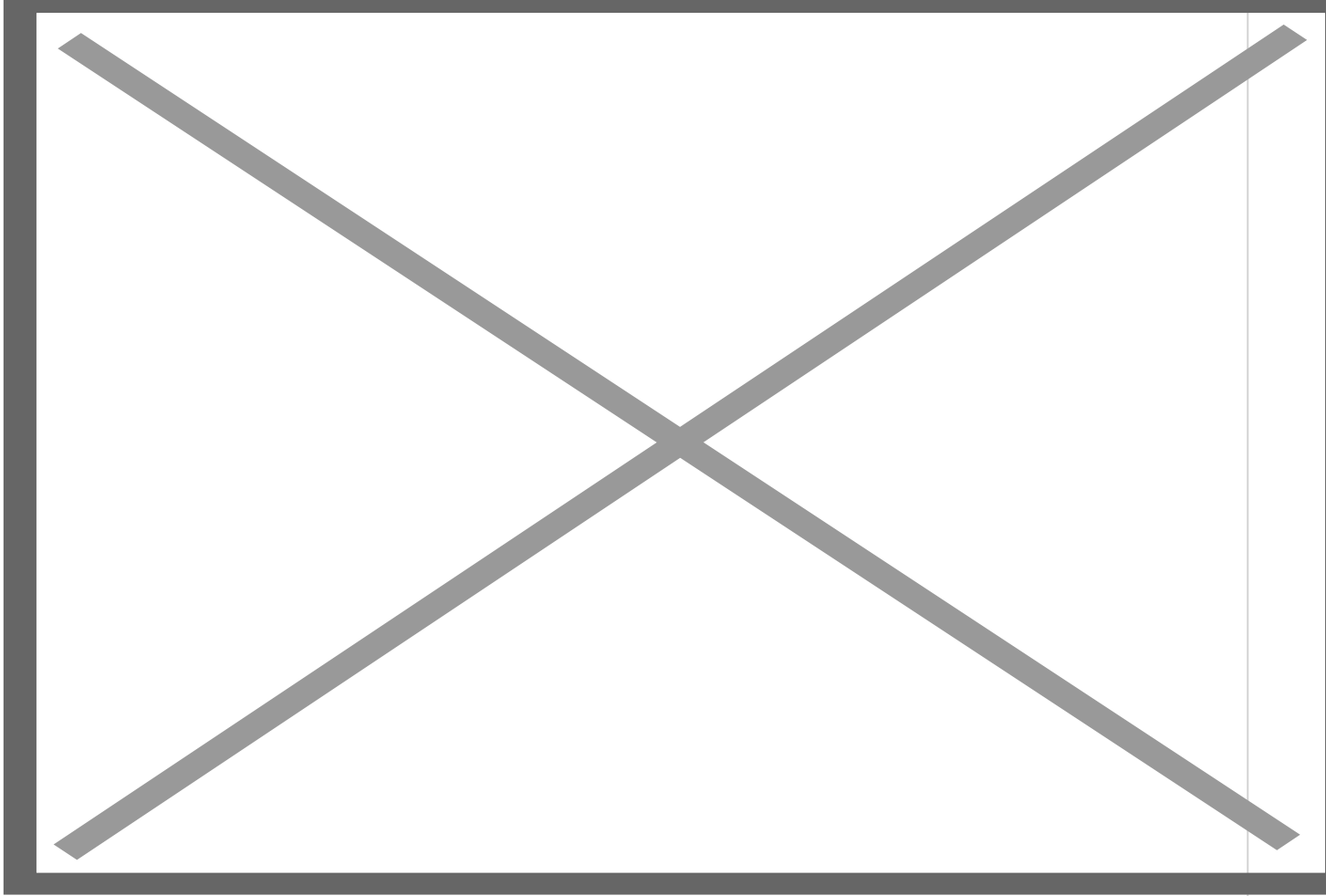


France exit polls show left-wing alliance in lead, far right in third place

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Loose alliance of French left-wing parties on course to become the biggest parliamentary bloc and beat the far right, according to projections. **La France Insoumise - LFI - (France Unbowed) founder Jean-Luc Melenchon, right, clenches his fist with other party members after the second round of the parliamentary elections in Paris**

[Thomas Padilla/AP]

Paris, July 8 (RHC)-- A loose alliance of French left-wing parties thrown together for snap elections is on course to become the biggest parliamentary bloc and beat the far right and President Emmanuel Macron's coalition, according to exit polls.

No one group won an absolute majority in Sunday's runoff vote, plunging France into political limbo with no clear path to forming a new government, two days before a major NATO summit and three weeks before the Paris Olympics.

Prime Minister Gabriel Attal said he would offer Macron his resignation on Monday but was ready to serve "as long as duty demands", notably in light of the imminent Games.

The New Popular Front (NFP) – formed last month after Macron called the snap elections – brought together the previously deeply-divided Socialists, Greens, Communists and the hard-left France Unbowed together in one camp.

The left-wing group was predicted to take between 172 and 215 seats, with the president's alliance taking 150 to 180 and the National Rally (NR) – which had hoped for an absolute majority – in a surprise third place with 115 to 155 seats.

This marks a new high-water mark for the far right, but falls well short of a victory that would have been a rebuke for Macron, who called the snap election in what he said was a bid to halt France's slide towards the political extremes.

Firebrand leftist Jean-Luc Melenchon, leader of the hard-left France Unbowed (LFI) and the controversial figurehead of the NFP coalition, demanded that the left be allowed to form a government.

"Its constituent parts, the united left, have shown themselves equal to the historic occasion and in their own way have foiled the trap set for the country. In its own way, once again, it has saved the Republic."

Veteran presidential candidate Marine Le Pen's National Rally (RN) led the race after the June 30 first round, with opinion polls predicting she would lead the biggest party in parliament after Sunday's poll.

But projections based on vote samples by four major polling agencies and seen by AFP news agency on Sunday showed no group on course for an absolute majority, and the left-wing NFP ahead of both Macron's centrist Ensemble and Le Pen's Eurosceptic, anti-immigration RN.

Macron, who has yet to speak in public about the projections, is calling for "prudence and analysis of the results", said an aide, asking not to be named, according to a report by the AFP news agency. Le Pen, for her part, declared: "The tide is rising. It did not rise high enough this time, but it continues to rise and, consequently, our victory has only been delayed."

Al Jazeera's Natacha Butler, reporting from Paris, said people were "all taken off guard when the [exit polls] results came through." "These are just exit polls. For people here at the RN headquarters, this is a huge blow," she said. "Le Pen had wanted to be the president of France for so long ... She has been beaten once again."

The election campaign, the shortest in French history, was marked by threats and violence – including racist abuse – against dozens of candidates and canvassers.

French far-right leader Marine Le Pen gets ready before an interview with journalists after partial results in the second round of the parliamentary elections in Paris [Sarah Meyssonier/Reuters]

Some 30,000 police were deployed to keep order, and many voters expressed fears that rioting could

erupt in some cities after the results were announced.

Turnout was nevertheless high, with left-wing and centrist candidates urging supporters to defend democratic values and the rule of law while the far right scented a chance to upend the established order.

By 5 p.m. (15:00 GMT), according to figures from the Ministry of the Interior, some 61.4 percent of voters had turned out – the most at this stage of a legislative race since 1981.

Rim-Sarah Alouane, a researcher at the University Toulouse-Capitole, told Al Jazeera that France has “avoided the worst tonight, that’s for sure.” “There was a massive vote from people who I think simply realised how dangerous it was with the far right coming to power,” she said. “But we should still be concerned that we were in that situation in the first place.”

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