

Ex-conservatives rise to prominence in new Macron government



Buenos Aires, July 7 (RHC)-- France's reappointed Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire promised on Tuesday a company-focused recovery plan to reboot the economy, but said he would not lose control over spending in a new government that sees conservatives gaining in influence.

Le Maire spoke as a new centrist government took office with former conservatives, including the finance minister, in control of the most influential ministries — a sign President Emmanuel Macron will seek to rally voters from the center-right.

"Believe me, we will not give up on the supply-side policies which had already helped us win on the industrial front," Le Maire said in a speech at his ministry, noting French growth was amongst the highest in the euro zone before the coronavirus pandemic hit.

"Our recovery plan will be green," he said. But he added, "it is out of the question that economic stimulus gets done at the expense of well-managed public accounts over the long term."

Macron, 42, swept to power in 2017 promising to cut corporate taxes and ease regulation to drive growth and create jobs, while protecting the most vulnerable. But the worst depression in decades has reversed some hard-fought gains and left Macron with 21 months to persuade voters that his reforms will leave them better off.

Redrawing the political landscape three years ago, he poached ministers from the left and right. On Monday, he let go of several former Socialist ministers, while promoting others from conservative ranks. He also named a former ecologist to lead the environment ministry, but campaign groups voiced doubt over how much influence Barbara Pompili would have.

An Odoxa-Dentsu Consulting poll showed eight in every 10 people believed the reshuffle would not lead to a shift in policy direction. Macron's pro-business reforms unleashed waves of protests during his first three years in office.

Gerald Darmanin, a 37-year-old close friend of former conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy, took over the interior ministry, a powerful administration that oversees the police, counterintelligence, and religious matters.

He replaces Christophe Castaner, a former Socialist, who had a troubled relationship with police unions. Their angry response in past weeks to his ban on chokeholds as anti-police violence protests spread to France forced Castaner to back down. "Police forces can be assured of my total support," Darmanin said.

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