



WHERE ARE THE FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL TICKETS? SOMETHING STRANGE IS HAPPENING IN FRANCE.

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The realisation hit me on returning from a research trip to Manila. The campaign for Congressional elections there is being held against a background debate on "cha cha" (charter or constitutional change), and its ostensible manipulation, in order to transform the Philippines from a presidential to a parliamentary system.

Back in Paris, at first glance, it would appear no such routine is being tried: there is a conventional presidential election campaign going on - albeit with an even larger dose of American style media hoopla - within the context of the system of the Fifth Republic.



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The problem is that the lofty neo-Napoleonic presidential regime of the Fifth Republic no longer exists, if it ever did. By a series of incremental steps dating from the 1974 election of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, French governance has become increasingly parliamentary. Giscard, from the centre right, had to contend with an independent minded prime minister, Jacques Chirac, enjoying his own political power base in the solid Gaullist bloc in the National Assembly. The three periods of "cohabitation" of 1986-1988, 1993-1995 and 1997-2002 saw presidents of both the left, François Mitterrand, and from the right, Jacques Chirac, having to contend with a National Assembly controlled by their political opponents and forced to choose prime ministers and governments from within this opposition.

It was precisely to end the phenomenon of "cohabitation" that starting from 2002 the presidential term was reduced from seven to five years and parliamentary elections synchronised immediately after the presidential elections. In doing so, the French presidential office lost a deal of its status as somehow being above the fray of domestic politics. In a sense, the presidential office became more like that of a British PM or a German chancellor that, over the last decades, have converged to become more presidential in nature.

With the introduction of the "quinquennat", five-year presidential term, the parliamentary nature of French democracy was reinforced. This year, the first round of the legislative elections will be held on June 10, with the second round one week later. The objective of this major systemic reform was to make sure newly elected presidents received a strong parliamentary majority, by brandishing the threat of political instability that would result from a recalcitrant electorate voting otherwise.

Nevertheless, this tactical calculation fails to take into account changing political reflexes caused by the "cohabitation" experiences which, at the time, were popular. Nor does it take into account the fact that the French electorate has become used to forms of internal "cohabitation", that is independent minded PMs jousting with presidents from their own majorities.

The rivalry between a Nicolas Sarkozy, bolstered by his position as president of the Gaullist Party, and number two in the present government, and Chirac is but the latest manifestation of this trend. Moreover, there has been a notable tendency for the electorate, through their vote, to impose the kinds of checks and balances on power at the centre that they are

deprived of by present constitutional arrangements. Thus the power of the Parisian centre is balanced by contending power centres elsewhere.

In a serious rebuttal to the governing right-wing coalition and Chirac, in March 2004 the Socialists and their allies were able to achieve a virtual clean sweep in the regional elections, winning all but two of the 22 regions in metropolitan France.

The power bases provided by the regions since the watershed decentralisation laws of 1981 are now factors to be reckoned with. For example, in the internal competition within the Socialist Party, Segolene Royal was able to use as a springboard her role as president of the Poitou-Charente region to eliminate her two very Parisian opponents, Laurent Fabius and Dominique Strauss-Kahn.

The present presidential campaigns of all candidates are virtually being conducted without reference to the legislative elections that must be held almost immediately. Yet, it could be argued that the logic of the "Fifth and a Half Republic" of France today should have candidates campaigning with a kind of presidential ticket including their candidate for PM.

The two main candidates could even do themselves a favour in introducing this US-type practice: Sarkozy is seen as lacking social sensitivity, while Royal is perceived as lacking a degree of gravitas on foreign policy issues. Both would seem to need a boost in credibility in selling their economic programmes. By choosing and campaigning with a number two, i.e. their prime ministerial candidate, they both may be able to compensate for these lacunas.

Moreover, the centrist rival threatening both of them, Francois Bayrou, would be obliged to clarify with whom he would govern, given that his party has always been part of a right-centre right coalition.

By campaigning as an independent outsider preaching the virtues of a kind of Blairist/Clintonian third way he has been able to avoid indicating how he will turn the 29 seats, out of 577, his party now holds into a majority. Above all, by being obliged to sketch out his future government, Bayrou, like the other candidates would bow to the reality of present constitutional arrangements.

In the end the independent spirit of the French voter would be respected and his/her choices for the National Assembly not taken for granted as some kind of quasi-automatic confirmation of presidential choice.

By integrating the legislative campaign within the presidential one, the true nature of contemporary French governance would be acknowledged.

Seen from outside, in playing a clean deck with the French electorate, the cause of European democracy would be advanced and, hopefully, the propensity of the West to offer gratuitous lessons on democratic reform in Asia would become more nuanced.