

Minorities caught in the middle



Oussama Romdhani

A few moments before the victorious Emmanuel Macron went on stage in front of the Pyramid near the Louvre

Palace to talk to his supporters, a particular type of music blared. The organisers played “Sidi Abdelkader,” an old Raï music hit by Algerian performers Cheb Khaled, Rachid Taha and Faudel.

It was not the type of music that would have celebrated an electoral triumph of the extreme right-wing camp of Marine Le Pen. This was as much a celebration of its defeat as it was an illustration of the reconfirmed legitimacy of inclusiveness and ethnic and religious diversity in France after the May 7 vote.

After decades of strong – even if complex – cultural ties between France and its former colonies in Africa and the Maghreb, it was strange that Algerian Raï music could have ever sounded like a threat to French identity. During the last few weeks of France’s electoral campaign, Le Pen’s culturally purist narrative started to sow doubts in the minds of France watchers. That was part of the negative package offered by the National Front to French voters.

Macron, a pro-NATO and pro-EU politician and advocate of preserving France’s traditional policies in Africa and the Middle East, won on a collective reflex of rejection of the risks associated with the far right rather than on his own promises. He was elected because the French wanted a smooth reformist at the helm and to avoid the abrupt turbulence advocated by his rival’s advocacy of a French version of Brexit.

Nearly 60% of Macron’s voters, a Harris Interactive poll indicated, picked him just to stop Le Pen from becoming France’s president. If the ratio of polls conducted in the first election round is any indication, Muslims



Sigh of relief. Supporters of French President-elect Emmanuel Macron outside the Louvre Museum in Paris, on May 7. (AP)

are likely to have voted in much higher numbers than that for Macron, again primarily out of wariness about Le Pen.

Her world, which divided French citizens “between patriots and globalists,” was custom-made to poke the fears of all things “foreign,” be they migrants, Eurocrats or even French nationals of Muslim faith.

Her anti-immigration and protectionist planks appealed to those of low-income, the unemployed and the disgruntled of rural France. The banner of socio-economic nationalism and protection of French identity had a definite appeal to her constituencies. Within the public at large, Le Pen herself became the subject of fear when she suggested that France leave the eurozone. That prospect seems

to have been her undoing.

But Macron knows that the anguish of an important segment of the French electorate is still simmering. “I know the anger, the anxiety, the doubts that very many of you have also expressed. It’s my responsibility to hear them,” he said in his victory speech.

Will the Macron victory in France stem the currents of xenophobic populism in France or in Europe? Unlikely.

Despite losing, the supporters of France’s far right are likely to feel a boost by the results of this election. With 34% of the ballots cast in her favour, Le Pen achieved the National Front’s best score in 44 years.

Other figures drive the point. An M6 television poll showed that 56% of those who said they

voted for Le Pen said they felt she embodied their preoccupations very well, compared to 21% among Macron’s voters who said they felt the same about their candidate. The turmoil Le Pen created within the ranks of voters and politicians is to blame for the more than 34% abstentionist and blank votes.

Suspensions of Islam and Muslims will not go away that easily. Even in the minds of moderate centrists such as Macron, there is apprehension about possible conflict between acting as a French citizen and being a Muslim. Last October, in Montpellier, the new French president had expressed his “hope” that French Muslims show themselves to be “always more proud of being French than of being Muslim.”

There is no way the poor electoral performance of populists in Europe following Britain’s Brexit vote in June and Donald Trump’s upset victory in November in the United States can be described as a definitive rejection of the populist agendas by Western voters. Norbert Hofer of the Freedom Party of Austria lost the presidential race last December narrowly. The Party of Freedom of Dutch anti-Islam MP Geert Wilders came in second in the legislative elections.

Minorities of Muslim faith and Arab stock are today caught in the middle. They will remain the populists’ favourite alibi for the woes of the West at the same time that jihadists want them to serve as the foot soldiers in a doomsday scenario of clash of civilisations.

These minorities know their welfare rides on the success of mainstream European leaders in winning elections and, after they do, in spurring economic growth and thwarting terror attacks. Their only defence is to act as fully fledged citizens of their adoptive countries.

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Too early to predict Macron’s foreign policy despite boldness on Algeria



Francis Ghilès

The priorities of France’s new president, Emmanuel Macron, are domestic and political. Parliamentary elections are to

be in June and, unless Macron secures a majority, he will find it even more difficult to enact bold reforms that many of his countrymen are in any case reluctant to accept.

The second focus of the next few weeks will be Germany and more broadly the European Union, of which Macron is a staunch defender, albeit in a much-reformed cast.

Predicting what his policy might be on the Mediterranean and in the Middle East is a hazardous exercise that is rather pointless. That said, a few pointers are worth noting. One of the few foreign countries the candidate for his recently founded En Marche movement visited during the presidential campaign was Algeria, where he dared recognise that France had, during the colonial period (1830-1962), committed crimes against humanity.

This provoked an uproar in France but it is worth noting that Macron also mentioned the harkis, the French native troops during the war of liberation of Algeria (1954-62) who were

treated harshly by the new rulers of Algeria after 1962 and killed by the thousands.

Such behaviour speaks of boldness and a willingness to confront the blemishes of colonial history that France shares with the United Kingdom, Spain, Germany, Italy and others.

Algeria is in many ways the black box of French history. The far-right National Front candidate Marine Le Pen, who faced Macron in the May 7 run-off election, is the daughter of a man who tortured Algerian nationalists with his own hands when he volunteered to fight in the French Foreign Legion in Algeria in the late 1950s. Symbols do matter and not just in France.

As far as the Middle East goes, Macron has not expressed strong views, which is hardly surprising given that his speciality is finance, economic affairs and Europe.

The presidential campaign was very much focused on domestic affairs and how to revive the economy but the new president did make it clear May 3 during a very nasty debate during which he confronted Le Pen that condemning terrorists, particularly French-born ones, was fine but that understanding what led them to commit such acts was also critical.

He refused to give any sweeping condemnation of Islam, unlike former Prime Minister Manuel

Valls, conservative candidate François Fillon and Le Pen. In a country as deeply fractured as France, refusing to pander to the lowest common denominator is a good sign. That will not in itself stop the wave of populism but for the republican monarch, which is what the president of France is, symbols matter.

A further point is worth making. Macron’s adviser on Middle East affairs is none other than Jean-Claude Cousseran. Former director-general of external security, ambassador to Iraq, Tehran, director of strategy at the Ministry of Defence and director of Middle East and North Africa at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Cousseran, who has roots in Jewish Cairo, is a diplomat’s diplomat. A consummate negotiator, he was a key player in the negotiations that helped release French hostages in Beirut in 1985-86.

Macron’s campaign headquarters were the target of hacking from US right-wing groups and Russia. That is being investigated by the French government’s cyber-security agency ANSSI. His position on Russia was tougher than either Fillon’s or Le Pen’s, whose campaign was financed by Russian bank loans.

To that extent, the new president offers a line of continuity from his predecessor but, short of a major international crisis before the June elections, there is little

reason to expect any major pronouncement. Macron will attend the NATO and Group of Seven summits before those elections but his focus remains firmly domestic and European.

He understands better than many French politicians that France must improve its economic performance, contain its foreign debt and reduce unemployment if it wishes to pull its weight in Europe and rebuild strong relations with Germany. That is the sine qua non of regaining any serious influence in world affairs.

As to the Mediterranean and the Middle East, Macron is too wise not to understand that he has nothing to gain by shooting his mouth off – he is no Donald Trump. His key advisers are of the highest order and the region we are talking about is a minefield.

Were any terrorist attack to occur in France, Macron could rely on Jean-Michel Fauvergue, who heads RAID, an elite law enforcement unit of the French National Police. When the new government is appointed, the personality of the foreign minister might tell us more about the president’s foreign policy but only time will tell. Domestic and economic issues, more than ever before, top the agenda.

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