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The Long and Winding Road of the Front National

Ismail FERHAT

The Front National has been an established player in French political life for thirty years now. Nevertheless, behind the figure of its historical leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, the development of the party itself has had its fair share of vicissitudes.

Reviewed: Valérie Igounet, *Le Front national de 1972 à nos jours. Le parti, les hommes, les idées*, Paris, Seuil, 2014. 496 p., €24.

Since the 1980s, the Front National, or FN for short, has been a continuous presence in the French political arena. How can we explain that a party that claims to reject the game of politics as a whole has survived for thirty years, and at such a high level in terms of votes? How can this stability square with the upheavals that have affected French society over the same period?

These thorny issues are tackled by Valérie Igounet in her capacity as historian, in light of the undeniable fact that the FN can no longer be considered to be merely a temporary eruption in French political life. The author of this book is a specialist of Holocaust denial[1]. She offers us a study that is based both on in-depth interviews with (current or former) members of the FN, the party's publications or those of "friendly" organisations, and often previously unseen archive material. The book has a chronological structure, while highlighting key dates for the movement (1972, 1983, 1999, 2010) and providing in-depth portraits of its cadres.

The History of a Rise

While the FN may seem inseparable from Jean-Marie Le Pen, or even from the Le Pen family, this movement was not actually instigated by him originally. In the late 1960s, the Far Right was being undermined by divisions and failures (Vichy, Poujadism, French Algeria). One group stood out from the crowd: "*Ordre nouveau*" ("New Order"), which had been founded after "*Occident*" ("The West") was banned in 1968. Alain Robert, its leader, asked Jean-Marie Le Pen to take part in the project of a "*Front national pour l'unité française*" ("National Front for French unity").

A conflict soon broke out, and in 1972 the activist group was dissolved. Le Pen tried to edge out its members, who made up the backbone of the new party. 1973 saw the first of a series of splits that have marked the FN's history: in 1974 the former members of "*Ordre*

[1] Valérie Igounet, *Histoire du négationnisme en France*, Paris, Seuil, 2000.

nouveau" founded the "*Parti des forces nouvelles*" ("Party of New Forces," PFN). The FN then went through a paradoxical period, which lasted through to 1983: despite the party being marginal in terms of votes, it underwent a structuration process, built up an initial pool of cadres, and made the original decision to merge together different far right groups.

Under the influence of the inflammatory François Duprat (who was assassinated in 1978), a nationalist revolutionary and a Holocaust denier, the issue of immigration became the heart of the FN's ideology and political programme at the end of the decade. In 1976, the Le Pen family survived an attack on its Parisian home, just as the leader of the party was inheriting a fortune that allowed him to devote himself full-time to his political career.

When the Socialists came to power, the FN was at its lowest level (Jean-Marie Le Pen was unable to stand at the presidential election in 1981, and the party had only 150 fully paid-up members in 1982). And yet, this is the decade that marked the emergence of the party. 1983 was a turning point: Jean-Marie Le Pen was invited to take part in the television programme "*L'Heure de Vérité*" ("The Hour of Truth"), and Jean-Pierre Stirbois became deputy mayor of the right-wing majority in Dreux. The party had a string of successes at the European elections in 1984 and the legislative elections in 1986. In a context of increasing right-wing radicalisation, young cadres from the conservative RPR and centrist UDF parties, who surrounded the senior civil servants Bruno Mégret, Yvan Blot and Jean-Yves Le Gallou, went over to the FN, which offered them dazzling career opportunities (p. 173).

The years 1986-1988 were defined by a two-fold split according to Valérie Igounet, who in this regard agrees with the documentary *Le diable de la République* ("*The Devil of the Republic*"), which was broadcast on France 3 on 30 November 2011. As right-wing parties were returning to power, the FN chose not to join forces with them, which triggered the departure of the more moderate voices in the party. In 1987, Jean-Marie Le Pen's statement qualifying the gas chambers as a "minor detail" of the Second World War turned him as a leader, and then the FN as a whole, into a political pariah (p. 188-195). This put an end to the quick rise of the party, its attractiveness as an ally, and even its leader's political hopes. His later provocations perpetuated this repulsion.

Ruptures and Setbacks

When Jean-Pierre Stirbois died in 1988, Bruno Mégret, who had become the general delegate, and his team took control of the party. Their strategy, which they implemented from 1988 to 1999, was based on three pillars: professionalising the party, drawing up a doctrine (including the concept of "national preference") and investing the social field. The "*mégretiste*" approach is summed up in a document recommending the semantic replacement of "chuck the wogs into the sea" with "organise the return of Third World immigrants to their homes" (p. 230).

This combination of strategy and radicalism had the aim of pushing the FN towards an alliance with moderate right-wing parties. The municipal elections of 1995 and the regional elections of 1998 seemed to be moving towards making this desire a reality. However, this expectation of those who were soon to become known as the "*mégrétistes*" was to come across a considerable obstacle: Jean-Marie Le Pen, who was happy to remain in the role of the voice of protest.

The rupture between these two groups grew progressively from 1995, and exploded in 1999. Valérie Igounet shows that this date marks the start of a relatively homogenous period in the history of the FN until 2010, as a party crippled by setbacks. There was a particularly

severe haemorrhage among the party's cadres, most of which went over to Bruno Mégret's "*Mouvement national républicain*" ("National Republican Movement," MNR), although this latter party still failed to seriously challenge the FN. From this perspective, the book reveals that the result of the presidential election in 2002 is the tree that hides the forest of problems afflicting the FN. The issues of Jean-Marie Le Pen's own ageing and the party's infiltration by the most radical branches of the far right (which had been kept at its margins until then) were compounded by electoral difficulties from 2002, followed by financial troubles.

From 2008 to 2010, the FN underwent a little-known but fundamental crisis within the context of the power struggle between the two vice-presidents appointed in 2007, Bruno Gollnisch and Marine Le Pen. The leader's daughter's winning of the presidency of the party in 2011 marked a new stage in its development, with the departure of several historical cadres. And Marine Le Pen's approach, incidentally, is not completely dissimilar to some of the strategic desires expressed by the *mégrétistes* twenty years earlier[2].

An Organisation that is not so "outside the system" as it claims

This book highlights several tensions and factors that run through the FN's complex history, and calls into question the external image that the party has created of itself or that has been created around it. We might briefly mention three key elements, ranging from the particular to the general: the leader, the party, and their interactions with the political system.

On the one hand, paradoxically, Jean-Marie Le Pen appears as relatively moderate in the context of the ultra far right. He is an anti-Semite, a racist and a colonialist, but also a long-elected public figure, connected to a far right that is at once a protest movement and a legalistic one, and that prefers ballot boxes to street battles – though it will occasionally take part in the latter. This relative moderation is his most formidable strategic weapon: it has allowed him to achieve the amazing feat of making the entire range of French far right groups coexist within one same structure.

On the other hand, the ideological malleability of the organisation itself is one of its most remarkable aspects, as is illustrated by its shift from Atlanticism to anti-Americanism. This state of affairs is the result of little-known and recurrent tensions between *frontistes* (FN members and supporters), starting with the discord between François Duprat's nationalist revolutionaries and Jean-Pierre Stirbois' solidarists at the end of the 1970s. These tensions have not died down since: the topics of discord have simply changed. The malleability of the party's ideas is geographically defined. The FN of the old industrial regions of the North East sometimes uses left-wing language. That of the South is mainly defined by the legacy of militants from French Algeria and from a more bourgeois far right.

Finally, the FN and the political system have an ambivalent relationship. The party has intermittently tried to move closer to other right-wing groups. These approaches were confounded by the twofold obstacle of Gaullism (the rejection of which has long been a common bedrock of the *frontistes*) and the fluctuations of the FN. Certain cadres of the RPR and of the UDF (such as Charles Pasqua in 1988), however, did not lose hope that a grand alliance might be created.

On the other side, is it possible that part of the left-wing élite saw the FN as a tool with which to divide the right wing? A terrible sentence uttered by Pierre Bérégovoy suggests that

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[2] On this topic, see the biography written by Caroline Fourest and Fiammetta Venner, *Marine Le Pen*, Paris, Grasset, 2011.

this idea at least existed, just as the party was starting to take off: “It is absolutely in our interest to push the Front national, it makes the right wing unelectable. The stronger the FN is, the more unbeatable we are. This is a historic opportunity for Socialists” (p. 127).

The FN, far from being merely a firebrand of political life, has become a familiar part of it. This is at once the strongest conclusion of a fascinating book and the most striking outcome of the thirty years that have followed the party’s breakthrough in Dreux.

Published in Books&Ideas, December 3rd 2015. Translated from the French by Kate McNaughton, with the support of the Institut Français.

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First published in laviedesidees.fr, on 10 October 2014