

By Diana Johnstone

PARIS

SOCIALISM AND PROPORTIONAL elections are both great ideas. But in the political climate of France in the '80s, the Mitterrand version is not going to do justice to either one of them.

After some suspense while computers ran through data from the latest cantonal elections and various polls, the French president announced he was asking parliament to change the electoral law by which its members will be elected next year. The existing two-round majority system, which dates from de Gaulle's takeover in 1958 and the establishment of the Fifth Republic, gave the Socialist Party such a lopsided majority in the June 1981 elections (following Mitterrand's election as president) that it can pass any law it chooses. Next year the same system could give the right just as lopsided a majority. There lies one good reason for Mitterrand to change the system.

There are others. And, despite the shrieks of outrage from right-wing politicians (some of whom in the past have said they favored the proportional system, just as Mitterrand himself used to be against it), it is neither surprising nor unusual in France to change the electoral system. In the past century or so, it has been changed almost every third election. The Socialist Party program promised to introduce a proportional system, and so did Mitterrand as a candidate.

Still, he hesitated, and the Socialist Party itself is divided on the matter. The two-round majority system created the Union of the Left, the basis of Mitterrand's victory in 1981. It forced Communists and Socialists to get together on the second round, with each party agreeing to desist in favor of the leading left candidate in each district. The system accentuated the sharp left-right political cleavage.

Now, says the Socialist Party's international and defense specialist Jacques Huntzinger, "the union of the left is dead." And with the proportional system there will be no good reason to revive it. Socialist Party first secretary Lionel Jospin puts it more cogently: "The union of the left is not dead, but we won't revive it in identical form because the Communist Party in particular no longer wants it."

Centrist alliance?

With the Communist Party (PCF) in decline and the left headed for almost sure defeat next year, Mitterrand and his popular young Prime Minister Laurent Fabius are visibly yearning for some sort of centrist alliance. By blurring the left-right dichotomy, the proportional would seem to offer greater hope of a varied political spectrum that could make Mitterrand's loss of a majority less obvious and give him a chance to put together a middle-of-the-road coalition.

In practice, however, the right-wing parties in line to win next year are ferociously opposed to any alliance with the Socialists and immediately signed a pact vowing to stick together. Former President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and Paris Mayor Jacques Chirac indicated their readiness to cooperate in a right-wing government while Mitterrand completes the last two years of his seven-year presidential mandate.

However, Giscard's former prime minister, Raymond Barre, swiftly denounced such "cohabitation." Barre demanded that a right-wing majority in the next National Assembly immediately repeal the proportional and restore the two-round majority system. He hopes that Mitterrand will be obliged to step aside and allow a presidential election that Barre himself clearly hopes to win. His impatience is easily explained by the fact that Barre is currently running far ahead of Giscard and Chirac in the polls, but has reason to doubt that his lead could survive a period of "cohabitation."

If Barre has his way, the proportional, as well as other Socialist reforms, will be of short duration.

In principle, the proportional is the more democratic of the two systems. The two-round majority system was invented in 1871 by monarchists and was favored by

conservatives from the start because it favors local "notables" over parties based on ideas and programs. So does the district election system used in the U.S. All other European democracies except Britain use some sort of proportional system.

In all these systems, voters choose between rival party lists of candidates, and

French politics has traditionally been a rival assemblage of prima donnas, each a potential Great Man, surrounded by his groupies hoping to pursue careers on his coattails. Mitterrand was a perfect product of that system in its post-war Fourth Republic version. Except for the Communist Party, French political parties are more or

pragmatist who recognizes the value of the market and free enterprise. As a result, Fabius has been skyrocketing in the polls and this month for the first time passed Rocard as the most popular political leader on the left, with 57 percent favorable opinions compared to 51 for the former champion.

Rocard could also be motivated to get out of the Agriculture Ministry before the peasants start rioting at the price they are going to have to pay for bringing Spain and Portugal into the Common Market.

Rocard bungled his exit. His objections to the proportional are too technical to rally a following. Mitterrand Socialists have a new reason for detesting him, and his chances of ever being Socialist Party candidate for president appear virtually nil.

In any case, Mitterrand's proportional system is not all that proportional, since it is by department, with no national corrective. That means that the elections will be run separately in each of the country's hundred departments (administrative units). Aside from the 5 percent barrier, most departments have too few seats in parliament—one per 108,000 inhabitants—to give representation to small parties.

As an illustration, suppose the Communist Party scored 11 percent nationwide, its score in last year's European Parliamentary elections. It would have a chance for a seat only in departments with six or more seats—that is, only 35 out of 100. Its votes in the other departments would be lost. As for still smaller parties, such as the ecologists, they will stand a chance only in the few departments with large urban areas giving them 10 or more seats—only 14 in all.

Communist André Lejoinie complained that "with this law, minority parties would be clearly under-represented." The Communist Party will try to amend it to include national recuperation of votes not represented in the departments, but half-heartedly. It seems to have just enough energy left to grumble a bit, but that's all.

More vigorous criticism came from the Unified Socialist Party (PSU): "This electoral system has as much to do with proportional elections as the neutron bomb has to do with ecology. It strengthens the big parties (PS, RPR, UDF—that is, the Socialists and the two right-wing formations), it cuts back the medium-sized ones (National Front and PCF) and excludes the rest."

On the right, only Jean-Marie Le Pen expressed satisfaction. Yet the proportional will get the main right parties, RPR and UDF, off the hook the Socialists had seemed to want to skewer them on: the choice of whether or not to ally with the National Front in the second round. ■

FRANCE

Socialists reform electoral policy

seats are distributed among the parties according to the percentage of the total vote won by their list. This is calculated by several different methods worked out by mathematicians (such as the "Hondt method" developed by the Belgian mathematician Victor Hondt a century ago). Some countries set a threshold under which a party is not represented. The threshold is 2 percent in Denmark, 4 percent in Sweden and 5 percent in West Germany.

The way the system works depends on how many voting districts the country is divided into. Holland has a pure proportional system: the whole country is a single circumscription and parliamentary seats are distributed to parties according to the percentage they got, even very small parties. Israel also uses a pure proportional system.

West Germany uses a complicated combined system that gives each voter two votes, one for the local candidate and the other for the favored party. All this is figured up to distribute Bundestag seats to parties according to the percentages indicated by the second ballot, but giving preference to individuals who won in their local districts.

The proportional system allows a full range of positions to be represented in parliament. It allows new movements like the West German Greens into the political system. Theoretically, it could do the same in France. But the signs are not encouraging. On the left, nothing is stirring in the grassroots in France. The ecology label may attract votes, but probably on a rather superficial basis. The only new movement certain to profit from the proportional is Jean-Marie Le Pen's extreme right National Front.

For French President Mitterrand to have a happy last two years as president, the right would need to fall into its component pieces.

less precarious alliances between these prima donnas. One question is how well they will stick together without the majority system to hold them together. For Mitterrand to have a happy last two years as president, the best thing that could happen would be for the right to fall into its component pieces, leaving the Socialist Party as the one big party as a center around which Mitterrand could try to juggle other ambitions.

But the opposite could happen: the right could get together to sweep the elections as the one biggest party, and the Socialist Party could split. This does not seem likely, but the possibility loomed when Mitterrand's former rival, Michel Rocard, quite unexpectedly resigned as minister of agriculture in protest against adoption of the proportional system.

Rocard complained indignantly that people suspected him of resigning only to further his presidential ambitions. Indeed, they did, especially since even the Rocardians in the Socialist Party couldn't understand the reasons for being so opposed to the proportional system. It appeared that Rocard jumped at the pretext to get back his freedom of speech to try to revive his image and popularity prior to the 1988 presidential elections.

At 54, the time to cash in on his boy-wonder image is growing short. Mitterrand dealt Rocard the worst possible blow to his future prospects by appointing as prime minister another, younger boy wonder, Laurent Fabius. As the most painful twist of the knife, Fabius—who pilloried Rocard at the Metz congress of the Socialist Party six years ago for preferring the market to socialism—has been playing to perfection the Rocardian role of the non-doctrinaire



Lionel Delevigne

The Communist Party is in decline and the left is headed for almost sure defeat next year. Mitterrand's current push for proportional elections could give him a chance to put together a centrist alliance.

By William Gasperini

MANAGUA

NICARAGUA RESPONDED TO Washington's declaration of a trade embargo last week by calling the move an "aggressive action which ironically will affect the private sector of the country's economy."

"Although they intend to harm our government by taking this action, those who will feel the blockade most will be private producers and the Nicaraguan people," said Vice-President Sergio Ramirez.

Although the full extent of the blockade is unclear, the meat and banana sectors are likely to be those most affected in the short run. Over two-thirds of Nicaragua's meat and bananas currently go to the U.S., and finding alternate outlets for these easily perishable products will be difficult. The U.S. market now accounts for only 16-18 percent of Nicaragua's imports and exports. The longer-term impact will therefore undoubtedly be secondary: the lack of spare parts and equipment for farm machinery, computers and other U.S. products widely used in Nicaragua. Inevitably, changing over to other technologies will involve high costs, and the immediate loss of just 15 percent will hurt the already fragile economy.

Defense Minister Humberto Ortega likened the blockade to the devastating earthquake that leveled Managua in 1972, and calls the embargo another step toward "an inevitable direct U.S. military intervention in the region." But, he said, Nicaragua will "never cry uncle."

"After causing this earthquake [the blockade], which we will survive, which we already are surviving, they stab us and say, 'surrender,' ask our 'pardon,' 'kneel down,'" Ortega said. "They ask us, 'You want chiclets?' 'Yes, Uncle Sam.' 'You want consumer products?' Yes, Uncle Sam."

The announcement of the blockade came just days after the country responded favorably to Congress' decision to not continue financing the counterrevolutionary *contras*. However, for Nicaragua the issue was not whether the U.S. backed the anti-Sandinista *contras*. Rather, what was at stake the night of April 23, as Congress prepared to vote on the \$14 million *contra* aid, involved basic international rights and national sovereignty.

"Independent of what individual Congress members think of the Sandinista revolution, the issue is instead what should be considered proper international conduct and principals of law," said a government communique released shortly after the initial vote results came in on April 23. "The very fact that a Congress of a country calling itself democratic and respectful can discuss continued financing of military and para-military activity against a sovereign state violates the most elemental form of international conduct."

The statement then criticized Senate approval of aid but applauded the House actions, calling it a signal that the U.S. wanted to "overcome its lost credibility as a serious and responsible member of the international community." The vote renewed hope for peace in the region, for the Contadora peace process, according to the communique.

For weeks discussion ensued in Managua as to what difference the \$14 million would actually make in continuing the war. It is no secret that the *contras* receive help from other sources, so the money was not the real issue. Political forces and congressional influence on Reagan administration policy lay at the center of the debate.

"They [the *contras*] needed to know the U.S. fully backed them," said one observer. "They can carry on with other money, but they will be demoralized without Congress' support. But it will not be catastrophic."

Others disagreed, saying it was obvious that the *contras* were not doing well and needed more money than they were getting. Reporters who recently visited the main base of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) in Honduras found a lack of supplies



NICARAGUA

House vote: a big step forward Trade embargo: a few steps back

and ammunition. FDN military leader Enrique Bermudez talked of difficulties maintaining supply lines to command forces fighting inside Nicaragua.

A Belgian TV crew recently encountered *contras* in the north who appeared gaunt and poorly supplied, pulling back in the face of a major Sandinista offensive that has pushed them eastward away from the Esteli and Jinotega regions and toward the Honduran border. Twelve special fighting battalions of 600 men each are now pursuing the *contras* in the interior, apart from regular army troops and interior ministry forces.

Commenting on the issue of the funding, Interior Minister Tomas Borge, the only surviving founder of the Sandinista Front, said, "Fourteen million dollars more or \$14 million less" would never change the "character" of the revolution.

"They can talk about this money, about breaking relations with Nicaragua, even about a direct invasion," he said. "But they can never discuss the will of our people to defend their country."

Borge then turned the tables on the U.S. "What would they say if Commandante Carlos Nunez and our National Assembly were to discuss spending millions of *cordovas* to bomb Mr. Reagan? No country has the right to discuss how to attack another in this manner."

In the end, however, few disputed the significance of the vote and its implications for Nicaragua's future. In Managua, April 23 had the feel of an election night. Anyone with a short wave radio was listening to the Voice of America, awaiting news from Washington. The country was on the edge—a decision affecting its future was being made in a distant capital. People were confused as word came in that the debate was continuing over the two compromise proposals.

The following day Foreign Minister Miguel D'Escoto applauded the House's final rejection of any type of aid, including the compromises. He said the U.S. lawmakers had given a categorical *no* to continuing "state banditry" and a clear *yes* to "seeking peace."

D'Escoto also said that the House vote reflected a "victory for the millions of North Americans with a Congress they can feel proud of, and want an end to the war against us. We hope this action will make President Reagan reflect on his policies and impell him to renew the talks with Nicaragua."

Almost before D'Escoto finished speak-

ing, Washington fired new salvos as Reagan announced that he would investigate other measures the administration could take without congressional approval. In response, President Daniel Ortega accused Reagan of "subverting the will of Congress and the American people" by insisting on new measures. He reiterated Managua's rejection of dialog with the FDN, strongest of the five *contra* groups, because it is run by the ex-Somoza National Guardsmen.

For two days prior to the April 23 congressional vote, a group of 38 mothers held a mass in a Managua church. All were mothers of children killed in action or currently serving in the armed forces. Hundreds of supporters came to the church during the 48-hour fast, including a group of handicapped war victims.

"I came for my son who was killed in combat, for my son in the army and for my young daughter," said Tomasa Lopez. "And I ask God to give me the strength to resist all of the things that have happened to me," she added, her voice cracking with emotion.

President Ortega also paid a visit, telling the crowd of mothers and supporters their fast was sending a signal northward. "The problems of Nicaragua can never be solved through violence and war, but only through dialog and negotiations." He told the mothers the North American people were "no different from you in desiring peace," and said U.S. public opinion was helping change policy toward Central America.

The day following the final House vote, *El Nuevo Diario*, one of Nicaragua's three daily newspapers, ran a series of photographs that appeared in the April 29 issue of *Newsweek*. The photos showed a *contra* cutting the throat of a Nicaraguan peasant. The pictures had a visible impact, although news of such atrocities is nothing new to Nicaraguans. Many expressed the hope the photos would further influence U.S. public opinion.

"We know the majority of North Americans are with us," said Josefina Gurdian, one of the fasting mothers. She was attending the 75th consecutive vigil that a committee of U.S. citizens living in Nicaragua have held in front of the U.S. Embassy in Managua. The citizens' group presented Gurdian and other mothers present with a symbolic check for \$1,400, "in contrast to the \$14 million Reagan wants to continue his war against the Nicaraguan people," according to the group. The committee later

delivered a real check to a National Emergency Relief fund helping persons displaced by the war.

The day following Congress' vote, word came that a tentative cease fire had been reached between the government and the Miskito Indian rebel group MISURASATA after talks in Mexico City. In exchange for a cessation of hostilities, the government agreed to send medical and food aid to villages on the coast, promote development programs such as fisheries and extend a general amnesty to rebel combatants in effect since December 1983.

Under the latter part of the agreement, Managua released on April 28 16 prisoners arrested for collaborating with MISURASATA. The former rebels were freed in two separate ceremonies in the Atlantic coast town of Puerto Cabezas.

The prisoners had been held for several months, some for up to a year. Approximately 50 more had been released previously, while others have surrendered and are now free under the amnesty law.

The Mexico talks were the fourth in a series of negotiations that began with MISURASATA leader Brooklyn Rivera's return visit to Nicaragua in October. The next round of talks will take place May 25 in Bogota, Colombia.

Sandinista leaders are careful to make the distinction between the negotiations with MISURASATA and their refusal to talk with the FDN. In his recent speech Interior Minister Borge said those in the Miskito group are "confused individuals who want to reach an accord with us," while the FDN is led by ex-National Guardsmen receiving their support from Washington. The other Miskito rebel group, MISURA, is aligned with the FDN and remains active on the Atlantic coast. Attacks directed by this group, including the ambush of several government vehicles, have increased in recent weeks in the north Zelaya region.

Also, two weeks ago the Vatican elevated Managua Archbishop Miguel Obando y Bravo to the status of cardinal. Obando has been one of the most outspoken critics of the Sandinistas, and the action will surely affect often strained church-state relations. President Ortega paid the new cardinal a visit after the Vatican announced his elevation.

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