WHY SHOULD FILIPINOS CARE ABOUT THE FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION?

by Uriel N. Galace

Last April 23, the French people cast their ballots in the first round of France’s elections in what is considered one of its most consequential presidential races in recent memory. Emmanuel Macron, an independent candidate, came out on top with 24 percent of the vote, followed by Marine Le Pen from the far-right National Front who finished with 21 percent. The two are set to square off in the runoff on May 7 to determine the ultimate winner.

The result was considered a rebuke by French voters of the country’s two establishment political parties—the Socialists on the left and the Republicans on the right—who had traditionally held power over France throughout the past half century. More than just deciding who will be France’s next leader, however, this election is also considered a referendum on the European Union (EU). The far-right candidate Le Pen is vociferously opposed to the EU and has promised to pull France out of the regional bloc. Her opponent, Macron, holds the opposite view, strongly favoring greater regional integration for France into Europe.

So why should Filipinos care about the French Presidential Election? The outcome of this election will not only determine who will be the next president of France, it could also decide the fate of the EU, and by extension, the global economy at large.

En Marche! (Forward!)

Emmanuel Macron, a 39-year old investment banker with no experience in elected office and who is married to his high school teacher, is the overwhelming favorite to capture the presidency in the runoff. Formerly appointed as Economy Minister by outgoing president Francois Hollande, he later resigned when he was unable to push his reforms through and founded an independent party called En Marche!, a centrist outfit that melds together ideas from both the left and the right.

Running on a pro-business, pro-immigration, pro-European Union platform, Macron is considered an outsider to the system, but is nevertheless the establishment’s overwhelming choice over his rival Le Pen, who is considered toxic in most political circles. His base consists primarily of middle-class, educated voters clustered around cosmopolitan cities such as Paris and Bordeaux. His youth and inexperience will be his main weaknesses in the upcoming runoff.

Betting markets currently give Macron an 88 percent chance of winning the runoff, while early polls give him a 26-point edge in a head-to-head matchup against Le Pen. A model by The Economist puts Macron’s chances of winning the presidency at over 99 percent. However, it is worth pointing out that similar models failed to predict Brexit and the Trump presidency last year.

Au nom du people! (For the French people!)

Marine Le Pen is by far the most closely watched and heavily scrutinized candidate of the French presidential elections. The daughter of Jean Marie Le Pen, the founder of the far-right National Front party who likewise advanced past the first round of the presidential elections in 2002 but wound up getting routed in the runoff, Marine is a firebrand candidate who runs on an anti-immigration, anti-European Union, populist platform.

Le Pen has worked assiduously to clean up the National Front’s image, which had been variously described by detractors as racist, xenophobic, and anti-Semitic, going so far as to expel her own father from the party. Since then, she has embraced a softer, more palatable tone, calling instead for the revival of France’s culture and heritage, as well as more secure borders
against those who seek to disrupt it. This nationalist message appears to have resonated with a large segment of French society, particularly working-class citizens from the countryside, whose livelihoods are being threatened by outside forces ranging from mass immigration to globalization.

Nevertheless, as the standard bearer of a far-right party, she is perceived both within France and the broader global community at large as a threat to the reigning international liberal order. Her defeated opponents in the first round, including Republican candidate Francois Fillon and Socialist candidate Benoit Hamon, have rallied against her, calling on their supporters to vote for Macron in the runoff. Likewise, her poll numbers give her a dismal outlook, capturing only 37 percent of the vote compared to Macron’s 63 percent. Betting markets and The Economist’s statistical model put her odds of winning at 12 percent and less than 1 percent respectively.

Why should Filipinos care?

Given that these events are happening halfway across the globe in a foreign country with which the Philippines has had no significant historical contact, it is fair to wonder: why should Filipinos care about the French presidential elections?

First, France is an important partner of the Philippines. It contributes enormously to the Philippine economy, being the country’s second largest EU trading partner, with two-way trade between the two nations valued at $2.39B as of 2014. France was also the 3rd largest source of foreign investment in the country in 2011, amounting to $1.14B. And in 2015, a total of 45,505 French tourists visited the Philippines in 2015, pouring in $34M into the Philippine economy.

Second, France is home to a significant Filipino community. The Commission on Filipinos Overseas estimates there are as many as 48,018 Filipinos living in France as of December 2013, many of which are employed in the services sector or as skilled professionals. The election of a president hostile to immigrants could adversely impact the lives of these Filipinos.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the French election effectively serves as a referendum on the EU. France and Germany are currently considered the two most important economies in the EU and a Le Pen presidency would likely result in France pulling out of the regional bloc, leading to the end of the European project as we know it. The EU could very well survive Brexit; it is doubtful that it can survive both Brexit and Frexit.

Because the EU is the Philippines’ 4th largest trading partner, with significant economic, political, and socio-cultural linkages between them, the collapse of the EU would have devastating consequences for the Philippines. Scores of Filipinos would lose their jobs, families would be torn apart, and Filipinos in France could be subject to trafficking and other transnational crimes without EU protections in place.

Filipinos therefore should keep a close eye on the geopolitical developments in France in order to carefully protect its interests including the international liberal order.

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