

Zemmour and Le Pen: The Two Faces of France's Far Right

Article by Cécile Alduy

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A new force in France's political landscape, polemicist Éric Zemmour, is seeking to displace Marine Le Pen as the face of the country's far right. But what sets these two candidates apart? And why has there been such bitter rivalry throughout the campaign between two politicians who seemingly share much ideological common ground? Cécile Alduy takes a closer look at the rhetoric to identify whether the differences have been played up for political points, or whether they point to a more fundamental rift within the far right.

"Blunt," "too radical" (*Bloomberg*) and surrounded by "a group of Nazis" (*Le Figaro*). Marine Le Pen is not gentle when she characterises her presidential rival, Éric Zemmour, whom she even accuses of being guilty of the "political immaturity" of "those who, in the harshness of their rant, have become intoxicated by a false sense of power" (press conference, 26 January 2022). Not to be outdone, Éric Zemmour describes Marine Le Pen with disdain as a "left-wing woman". And dealing the final blow: "I feel sorry for her that she has to talk like Marlène Schiappa, like the left, like the feminists." An insult coming from someone who has made a name for himself by publishing *Le Premier Sexe* (2006), a virulent anti-feminist plea.

Are these attacks fair game at election time between two rivals for presidential office? Or are there signs of substantive differences that would justify the new split within France's far right, resulting from Zemmour's sudden emergence as a candidate, with a new party at his service, Reconquête?

If the two main far-right contenders in the French presidential election are tackling each other this way at arm's length, it is no doubt primarily a tactic to win points, to beat the other to the punch and get to the second round. But this begs a serious question about what separates – and what links – Marine Le Pen, National Rally candidate to the presidency for the third time, and Éric Zemmour, a former journalist and columnist whose candidacy in the election caught everyone by surprise.

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The heirs of LePenism

One inherited a party founded in 1972 by Jean-Marie Le Pen with a few small-royalist, neo-Nazi, and nationalist factions nostalgic for “French Algeria,” before purging him from it in 2015 after the umpteenth blunder loaded with anti-Semitic and Pétainist overtones. The other is a man of words more than a bureaucrat. Yet he has been dubbed by none other than Jean-Marie Le Pen, who describes him as a sort of spiritual son: “The only difference between Éric and me is that he is Jewish,” the patriarch confided to Le Monde on 2 October 2021, before adding: “He says what I think, but draws a larger audience.” Are Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour both, as Jean-Marie Le Pen himself put it, the descendants of LePenism and closer than either of them would rather admit?

Le Pen writes in her official agenda that she vows to “save the French people from a flood of immigration.” Meanwhile her rival also pledges to “stop immigration in order to preserve our identity.” Both defend a “Europe of nations,” both criticise NATO, and both supported Vladimir Putin in Russia’s interventions in Syria and Crimea. They also share a wish to encourage the birth of French families exclusively and reserve all social subsidies and benefits for French people only – thus, both of them stand behind the principle of “national preference” that has been the National Front’s hallmark since 1985. Finally, both are convinced that this election is a “clash of civilisations” (Marine Le Pen), a “civilisational struggle” (Éric Zemmour).

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The same base of supporters

Indeed, they have, or have had, the same supporters, and it is the same political staff who inspire their campaigners and run their respective campaigns. Éric Zemmour himself boasts of having grabbed his best spoils of war from among the elected representatives of the former National Front: Gilbert Collard, elected deputy under the auspices of the National Front since 2012 and then National Rally MEP in 2019; Jerome Rivière, National Rally MEP who joined Éric Zemmour’s party in 2021; Senator (former National Rally) of Marseille Stéphane Ravier; Nicolas Bay, member of the National Front since 1992, National Rally MEP; and, of course, Marine Le Pen’s own niece, Marion Maréchal, the youngest MP in 2012 on the National Front ticket. A key figure is Damien Rieu, founder of Génération Identitaire (a far-right faction that was dissolved by the Ministry of the Interior in 2021 because of its “hate speech inciting discrimination or violence against people on the basis of their origin, race, or religion”), parliamentary assistant to Marine Le Pen’s brother-in-law, Philippe Olivier, who is now one of the major players in Éric Zemmour’s political activism both online and on the ground.

Éric Zemmour is also highly popular among the former generations of Jean-Marie’s version of the National Front, seethed by Marine’s excessively “left-wing” management of the party. Brunot Mégret, Le Pen’s right-hand man in the 1990s, officially endorses him, just like Jean-Yves Le Gallou, a “return migration” theorist and inventor of the “national preference”

doctrine in the National Front at that time, now a member of the Reconquête party's political committee.

These "migrations" between the National Rally and Reconquête reveal a first dividing line between the two leaders of the far right. They openly expose the deep internal divisions that have long fuelled the frictions within the National Rally. On the one hand, an identity-based "Catholic-traditionalist" branch that is very conservative on social issues such as marriage equality, abortion, and even the death penalty, but more "liberal" or even anti-state when it comes to the economy: it advocates a more traditionally right-wing fiscal and economic policy (less taxes, raising the retirement age, domestic economic liberalism), with protectionism at the borders, and has a traditionalist view of French society. Éric Zemmour, with his nostalgic rhetoric advocating for France as it was in the 1950s, his explicit defence of patriarchy, his disdain for the "gay lobby," and his antiquated literary style, speaks to these orphans of Jean-Marie Le Pen's homophobic, reactionary, and macho discourse. On the other hand, there is a more social, tolerant, or indifferent "Marinist" current on social issues that Marine Le Pen views as accessory, interventionist, and "statist" in her economic approach, favouring measures to support the poor and boost purchasing power.

Is this to say that the Le Pen-Zemmour dual candidacy in 2022 was actually the result of a split on the far right between a radical identity-based wing and a more social and less extreme Marinist National Rally wing? The nuances of sensibilities exist, and so do these two currents – "traditionalist" and "social." However, beyond different sensibilities, Éric Zemmour and Marine Le Pen share the same nationalist, identity-based, xenophobic (literally "rejection of foreigners" – it is the main axis that guides and underlies their entire agenda), authoritarian (reinforcement of the means of repression), and protectionist ideology. They convey the same worldview of a fundamentally Christian, "native-born" France besieged by a "flood of immigration" (Marine Le Pen), and even a "great replacement" (Zemmour) that must defend itself against the civilisational threat that they perceive all diversity and all cultural, linguistic, and ethnic mixtures represent. Both of them could reclaim Jean-Marie Le Pen's signature slogan "France and the French first," and both inherited a common vision of national identity based on blood, origins, land, and ancestry.

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Two polar opposite media and campaign strategies

The two candidates are mainly divided between two distinct media and campaign strategies: differences in style, form, and targeting of voters.

Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour start from different premises, which explains why their stylistic choices are diametrically opposed. Both firmly believe in the "cultural battle": the Gramscian idea that they must first infuse the minds of others, impose their worldview and words, before they can win electoral battles. But Marine Le Pen makes the diagnosis that

this cultural battle over immigration as the greatest evil and over Islam as an intrusion in France has already been won. Other leaders on the right (Gérald Darmanin, Éric Ciotti, François Fillon) and on the left (Manuel Valls, of the Printemps Républicain party) vindicate this by adopting the National Front's once-marginal framework for thinking about these issues. Hence, she views the second electoral battle as an urgent priority and learned the hard way in 2017 that it was about being able to appeal to voters other than those who are already decided, and thus not to cause fear. And, above all, not to make the mistake – as her father did, once stuck under a glass ceiling – of saying too much, of blundering, or of uttering that little phrase that will come to haunt a candidate forever and confine him to the radical fringes.

In this regard, she has softened and expunged the National Front's traditional rhetoric, without abandoning its agenda and fundamentals, but presenting them differently in a consensual, republican, secular, and rational language. She avoids inflammatory language and makes every effort to appear presidential: she focuses on concrete proposals, the day to day, shows empathy and flexibility (welcoming Ukrainian refugees, abandoning the exit from the euro), rather than clashing with abstract, rigid theories like Éric Zemmour. She carves her own path in contact with people, without making any blunders, and appears calmer, more serious, approachable, and less prohibitive. Everything rolls right off her, even though Zemmour has repeatedly damaged himself during this campaign with blunt, untimely words, such as swearing that there would be no invasion of Ukraine a few weeks before the invasion of Ukraine, or outright refusal to accept Ukrainian refugees. This normalisation of style has led her to tone down his anti-immigrant and anti-Islam rhetoric in mainstream media (though not necessarily at her rallies). So much so that her former endorser Gilbert Collard sarcastically commented: “[she] will end up becoming president of [French antiracist NGO] SOS Racism.”

Éric Zemmour makes a different diagnosis: whereas Marine Le Pen now says that she wants to “win the battle for solutions,” he still thinks that he must “inoculate people” with his vision, and that he must not hold his tongue and his “observations,” even if it means offending with harsh expressions that he regards as necessary wake-up calls. He wields the French language like a gun, consciously and in a very calculated manner. He chooses his words to impose frameworks of thought and animates his speeches with grandiose and loaded rhetoric about the risk of France disappearing forever because of a “great replacement” (a xenophobic theory coined by Renaud Camus) and even a “war of races” that is supposedly already taking place before our very eyes in the suburbs. This sweeping pseudo-historical fresco must gain support by emotional attachment.

Éric Zemmour is in fact betting on this apocalyptic and daunting description to mobilise voters to participate out of fear: it confronts them with a struggle for survival. Either the (true) French will take action (and elect him) and defend their identity, or they will be destroyed – literally wiped off the map or annihilated. In the face of such an alternative, there is only one possible response: vote, take action, try to survive, and believe the prophet who proclaimed these catastrophes. Marine Le Pen was in the same apocalyptic mythology just a few years ago. From 2012 to 2015, when she spoke to supporters, she adopted the same archetypal narrative of a “decline” or even “decadence” of France that required an “awakening” and a “reconquering.” But now she knows that she no longer needs to spread the hyperbolic narrative: Éric Zemmour does this for her, and she can

focus on specific French problems such as purchasing power, a key concern for voters, to appear as the leader with the answers, as opposed to an apocalyptic preacher.

After all, Éric Zemmour's abrasive, violently xenophobic rhetoric will serve her in the likely scenario of a run-off against Emmanuel Macron. The polemicist lays his topics on the table in vivid terms, normalises the airing of racially and violently charged vocabulary at prime time, mobilises the foundation of "daddy's National Front" and those who are nostalgic for Jean-Marie Le Pen, while allowing Marine Le Pen to finetune her position as a calm, united, and rational head of state. She will probably reap the benefits, without having to tarnish her image as a presidential contender. As in 2012, when she benefited from a positive comparison to her father's exaggerations, Marine Le Pen capitalises on Zemmour's extreme radicalism, which contrasts with her image as calm, poised, open, and as one who does not divide.

Rather than two irreconcilable extreme right wings, in this campaign we should read the emergence of a two-headed far right that will present voters with two faces: one violent and explicit, the other sugar-coated and hypnotising, yet both are speaking the language of exclusion.



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