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1. Who is new France PM Michel Barnier? Why did his appointment take so long?**Introduction**

More than 50 days since France's parliamentary elections concluded, President Emmanuel Macron appointed Michel Barnier as the new prime minister.

Barnier takes over from the outgoing PM Gabriel Attal, who continued to serve even as the caretaker prime minister post the election results. This is the longest transition period between two prime ministers since France embraced the Fifth Republic — it had never exceeded nine days previously.

Who is Michel Barnier? Why did the President take so long to appoint a new PM? What comes next for France?

Who is Michel Barnier?

Hailing from Haute-Savoie in the French Alps, Michel Barnier is a career politician who is best known as the EU's chief negotiator with Britain during the Brexit talks in 2016.

He has had a storied political career of over 50 years, serving as France's foreign, European affairs, environment and agriculture minister, and two terms as the France European commissioner. He belongs to The Republicans (LR) party, and had challenged Macron for the presidency in 2022.

At 73, Barnier will be the Fifth Republic's oldest prime minister.

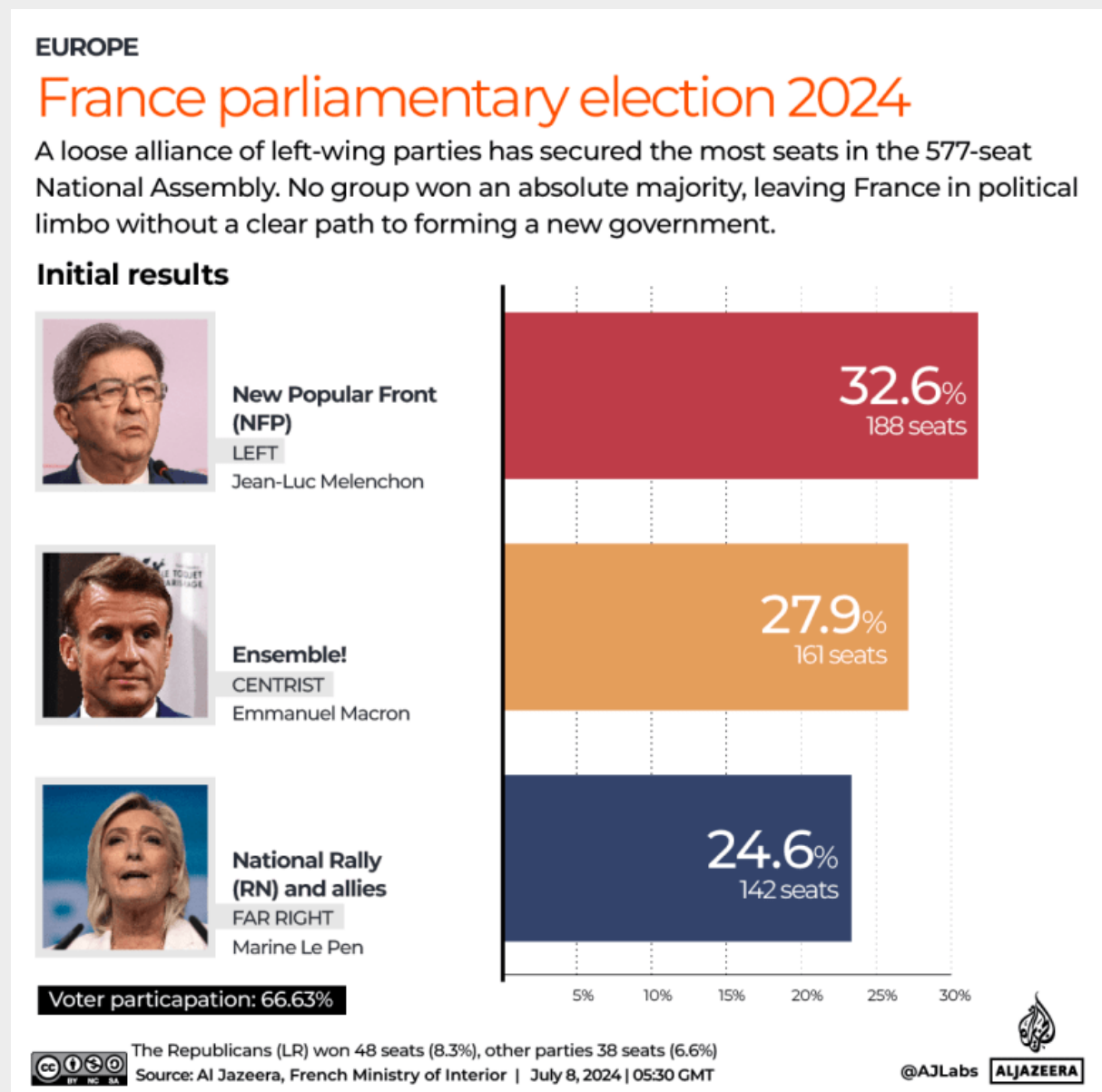
What was the outcome of the French parliamentary polls? Why did it take so long for Macron to appoint a PM?

After the second round of voting, tactical withdrawals by the centrist and leftist coalitions successfully thwarted the far right National Rally's (RN's) march to power. Eventually, RN finished with 142 seats, the leftist New Popular Front (NFP) won 188 seats, and Macron's centrist Ensemble won 161 seats.

However, France now had a hung house, with no party or coalition getting close to the majority of 289 seats.

Subsequently, Macron called for "republican forces" (centrist parties) to unite to form the government.

According to the French system, the power to appoint the prime minister rests solely with the president. However, the President appoints that person as Prime Minister who enjoys majority in the parliament.



Relevance: GS Prelims; International Issues
Source: Indian Express

2. The significance of the first global 'legally binding' pact on use of AI

Introduction

The United States, the European Union, and the United Kingdom (UK) are expected to sign the Council of Europe's convention on artificial intelligence (AI), the first "legally binding" international treaty on the use of the revolutionary new technology.

The treaty, which prioritises human rights in its approach to the regulation of public and private-sector AI systems is seen as the first real agreement among the key players in the development of AI, amid concerns that disparate regulations proposed by individual countries could hinder the evolution of this technology.

The treaty, officially known as the Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law, was opened for signature during a conference of Council of Europe Ministers of Justice in Vilnius, Lithuania.



Pact with teeth, responsibility

The treaty that was drafted over the past 24 months by more than 50 countries adopts a risk-based approach to the design, development, use, and decommissioning of AI systems. It covers the use of AI systems in the public sector — including companies acting on its behalf — and in the private sector, and will be applicable across geographies.

Signatories will be accountable for “any harmful and discriminatory outcomes of AI systems”, and will ensure that “outputs of such systems respect

equality and privacy rights, and that victims of AI-related rights violations have legal recourse”.

Council of Europe Secretary General Marija Pejčinović said: “The Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence is a first-of-its-kind, global treaty that will ensure that AI upholds people’s rights. It is a response to the need for an international legal standard supported by states in different continents which share the same values to harness the benefits of AI, while mitigating the risks. With this new treaty, we aim to ensure a responsible use of AI that respects human rights, the rule of law and democracy.”

Obligations and applicability

Upon ratification, member states will have to ensure that

- * their AI systems are “consistent with obligations to protect human rights”;
- * these systems are not used “to undermine the integrity, independence and effectiveness of democratic institutions and processes, including the principle of the separation of powers, respect for judicial independence and access to justice”;
- * measures are put in place “to protect...democratic processes in the context of activities within the lifecycle of artificial intelligence systems”, including individuals’ fair access to and participation in public debate, as well as their ability to freely form opinions.

There are a few exemptions in the scope of applicability of the Framework Convention, such as national security and research and development. The treaty puts an obligation on parties to address the risks posed by activities within the lifecycle of AI by public and private actors. The treaty comes at a time when sovereign governments and smaller multilateral groups have come up with a clutch of new regulations and agreements to oversee AI tools, including the

G7 pact on AI (October 2023), Europe's AI Act, and Bletchley Declaration signed by 28 countries (November 2023).

Issues and concerns with pact

Even though the treaty is being called "legally binding", there are concerns that it does not contain provisions for punitive sanctions such as penalties or fines. Compliance is primarily ensured through "monitoring", which is not much of a deterrent from an enforcement point of view.

Hanne Juncker, the Director of Security, Integrity and Rule of Law at the Council and who is in charge of the negotiations, was quoted by the Financial Times as saying that 10 participants are expected to be among the first to approve it when the convention opens for signatures. "This is confirmation that [the convention] goes beyond Europe and that these signatories were super invested in the negotiations and...satisfied with the outcome", she said.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organisations

Source: Indian Express

3. Significance of the China-hosted FOCAC summit, with 53 African countries in attendance

Introduction

Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged \$51 billion of funding to African countries on Thursday (September 5) at the ninth edition of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Beijing. China will support 30 infrastructure projects across the continent, with 360 billion yuan (\$50.7 billion) to be offered as financial assistance.

The move comes as China tries to scale down its big-ticket infrastructure investments amid pressures on its own economy in recent years. Why is FOCAC significant and how have China's relations with Africa evolved?



What is the FOCAC?

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation was established in 2000 to formalise the strategic partnership between China and African nations. A summit is conducted every three years, with the host alternating between China and an African member.

The FOCAC counts 53 African nations as its members – the entire continent except Eswatini, which has diplomatic ties with Taiwan against Beijing's "One China" Policy. The African Union Commission, the continental bloc tasked with ensuring cooperation and economic integration across its member countries, is also a member.

African leaders will engage in bilateral talks with China on political and economic cooperation over three days. The theme this year is "Joining Hands to Advance Modernization and Build a High-Level China-Africa Community with a Shared Future."

According to Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Chen Xiaodong, FOCAC will be the largest diplomatic event China has hosted in recent years and have UN Secretary-General António Guterres as a special guest.

The last FOCAC summit was held virtually in Beijing and Dakar, Senegal in 2021, owing to Covid-19 restrictions. Commitments to continued economic and political cooperation were made. The current summit is expected to address state governance, industrialisation, agricultural upgradation, and improved cooperation over China's infrastructure financing via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

A key outcome would be establishing consensus and an action plan for improving China-Africa cooperation over the next three years.

How have China's relations with Africa evolved?

As a Communist nation, China stood for the decolonisation of multiple African countries in the 1950s by supporting their liberation movements and establishing bilateral trade relations. These efforts paid off in the 1970s, as China rallied the support of these nations to displace Taiwan as the official representative of China in global forums like the UN Security Council.

The transnational Tanzania-Zambia railway, completed in 1976, was China's first infrastructure project in Africa. China amped up its investments in Africa in the 1990s and the 2000s to become Africa's largest bilateral trading partner since 2009. Africa-China trade amounted to \$282 billion in 2023, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

China gets 20% of the region's exports, mainly primary commodities like metals, mineral products and fuel, and is responsible for about 16% of African imports, chiefly Chinese manufactured goods, electronics and machinery.

Africa is also an integral partner in the BRI, which intends to establish cross-border economic, political and cultural relations akin to the erstwhile Silk Road through land and maritime routes. China has reportedly invested over \$120 billion in supporting infrastructure for the BRI over the past decade.

A big draw for African nations seeking Chinese funds has been the absence of constraints linked to environmental or human rights protections, characteristic of loans from the IMF and the World Bank. China and Nigeria released a joint statement recently, stating, "Both sides... oppose the politicisation of human rights issues, i.e. the interference in other countries' internal affairs under the pretext of human rights." The US investments in Africa have also not kept pace with China in recent years.

However, China has been accused of using the BRI to foster 'debt trap diplomacy'. Geostrategist Brahma Chellaney described this as a situation where the Chinese government

extends huge loans to support infrastructure projects in strategically located developing countries, leaving the borrowing country in a debt trap and vulnerable to China's influence.

This argument has been used to explain China's association with the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, which it helped built. But when Sri Lanka failed to pay the debt, a majority stake in the port was sold to a Chinese firm on a 99-year lease.

Another view attributes the defaults to domestic mismanagement by the borrowing country, arguing that China's financing policy is too fragmented and vast to pursue a concerted debt-financing strategy. China has also rejected this accusation.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organisations

Source: Indian Express