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French president faces uneasy alliance

PARIS (AP) — Making a quick change of command, President Jacques Chirac handed the premiership Monday to former opposition leader Lionel Jospin, whose Socialists routed Chirac's conservatives in a stunning parliamentary upset.

Both Chirac and Jospin were tight-lipped about how they will share power and battle the record unemployment that led to the right's downfall in Sunday's vote. Questions also remained over whether Communists will join the Socialists in a coalition government.

A poll today confirmed job creation was the top priority for French voters, who overwhelmingly cited Jospin's promised job program for young people as their chief demand.

That and other Socialist campaign promises would reverse the conservatives' budget-cutting measures, which aimed to boost the private sector and qualify for the euro. The Euro's single currency planned for 1999 is part of an effort to turn the 15-nation European Union into an economic superpower.

"The New Chance," the leftist daily Liberation said in a headline Monday, after the left swept the right from power. Chirac had miscalculated in calling the vote 10 months early, hoping to save his crumbling majority in Parliament.

Monday began with Chirac's loyal lieutenant, Premier Alain Juppe, submitting his resignation at the president's Elysee Palace,

giving the news media only a tight-lipped smile.

When the left took an early lead in the first round of voting on May 25, France's most unpopular premier in 40 years promised to resign after the second round. But it was not enough for the right to survive: Voters fired him before he could quit.

Barely two hours after Juppe's ouster, his Socialist rival walked up the palace steps to take power. A jubilant Jospin, talking to reporters on the steps, called his meeting with Chirac "excellent."

The 59-year-old Socialist said he will form a new government "quickly, within the week," half the time he is allotted to do so.

He did not elaborate, but he faces the tough task of forming a diverse, leftist coalition that can keep his promises.

The Socialist Party's No. 2 leader, Daniel Vaillant, appeared to be trying to temper high expectations.

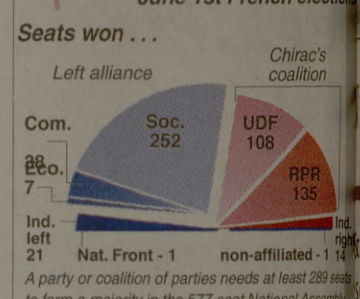
"The French elected us to succeed, but they also know the road will be difficult," Vaillant told RTL radio.

The Socialists won 252 seats, short of the 289 needed for a majority. They'll need to gather support from among the Communists, who won 38 seats; independent leftist parties with 16; and environmentalists with seven. The former governing center-right coalition won 243 seats.

The far-right National Front of Jean-Marie Le Pen took only one seat but played the spoiler, drawing votes from the center-right. Le Pen himself stayed out of the parliamentary election for the first time in three decades.

While Communist leader Robert Hue has expressed hostility toward the sell-off of state industries and the euro currency, he sounded conciliatory Monday. Jospin has said he would not block existing privatizations and that he backs the euro, though not at the cost of jobs.

Under French law, Chirac must wait a year to call elections again, and will otherwise govern in a split government with a leftist National Assembly until the next scheduled elections in 2002.



Percent of popular vote ...

Rally for the Republic (RRP)	22%
Union of French Democracy (UDF)	21%
Independent Right	2%
Socialist Party	40%
Communist Party	3%
Ecologists	1%
Independent Left	2%
National Front	5%

Remaining votes were split among minor parties.
Voter turnout: 71.1%

Canada's Liberal Party endures severe losses in parliamentary election

OTTAWA (AP) — The governing Liberal Party suffered severe early setbacks Monday in Canada's parliamentary election, losing two-thirds of its seats in the Atlantic provinces, including two held by Cabinet ministers.

The defeats raised the prospect that Prime Minister Jean Chretien's Liberals could lose their outright majority in Parliament and be forced to find coalition partners for a minority government.

The centrist Liberals, who five weeks ago were cocky enough to call the election 18 months early, were still expected to win the largest share of the 301 seats at stake in the five-party race.

They held 174 seats in the outgoing Parliament, including 31 of the 32 seats in the four Maritime provinces. But they lost two-thirds of those Maritime seats, including the Nova Scotia seat of Health Minister David Dingwall and the New Brunswick seat of Defense Minister Doug Young.

After the Liberals, the next biggest blocks of seats were expected to go to Quebec separatists and to the western-based, right-wing Reform Party, which opposes any special status for Quebec.

The Liberals' claim to be the only truly national party in Canada was in jeopardy. They were in danger of winning only a few seats in the far west, perhaps leaving populous Ontario as their only real stronghold.

About 20 million Canadians were eligible to cast ballots at 53,000 polling stations spread across the world's second-largest country in terms of geography. In all, 1,672

candidates were running. Reform, which won 52 seats during its first national campaign in 1993, tried to expand its support with suggestions that Chretien and other mainstream leaders have spent too much energy trying to defuse separatist sentiment in Quebec.

Reform's leader, Preston Manning, was denounced as an anti-Quebec bigot by several of his rivals, including Jean Charest, whose Progressive Conservative Party was battling with Reform for right-of-center votes.

The Progressive Conservatives, reduced to just two seats in the 1993 election, fared well in the Maritimes, winning at least 13 seats. The other big winner there was the left-wing New Democratic Party, which won at least seven seats.

The NDP was the only party to hit hard on the need to curb a 9.6 percent jobless rate.

Chretien, 63, was seeking to become the first Liberal prime minister since 1953 to win consecutive majorities. He led the Liberals to a landslide win in 1993 as voters fed up with Brian Mulroney reduced the Progressive Conservatives from a parliamentary majority to only two seats.

When Chretien called this election April 27, opinion polls indicated the Liberals would add to the 174 seats they held in the outgoing Parliament.

But the Liberals ran a lackluster campaign, and the final polls last week indicated they would likely lose some seats. They need at least 151 to retain a majority.

Nigerian warships attack military coup headquarters

FREETOWN, Sierra Leone (AP) — Nigerian warships bombarded the port capital of Freetown on Monday, pounding away at the headquarters of the leaders of a week-old military coup. At least seven people died in the attack and fighting onshore.

Mutinous troops responded by taking aim at the beachfront Mummy Yoko Hotel, where hundreds of Nigerian troops sent in to back the ousted government have set up a command post.

Hundreds of frightened foreigners cowered in the basement of the hotel after Nigerian gunships off the coast started firing toward the coup headquarters in the former defense headquarters a few miles inland.

"We've been attacked by the Sierra Leonian soldiers," said one hotel guest, who refused to give his name. "The Nigerians are trying their best, but they're running out of ammo."

He said six Nigerian soldiers had been wounded.

Low-ranking troops in Sierra Leone's disgruntled military ousted the elected president on May 25 in the West African country's third coup in five years.

Nigeria — the chief power in the region — bolstered its military presence in Sierra Leone over the weekend to try to pressure coup leaders to surrender power, then launched a surprise offensive Monday.

The attack appeared timed to follow the weekend evacuation of most Westerners and came after the coup leader, Maj. Johnny Paul Koroma, made clear he had no intention of giving up.

On Sunday, Koroma named a 20-man ruling council to govern the country, a sign that diplomatic attempts to restore President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah to power had failed.

Some of the foreigners evacuated earlier from the hotel arrived Monday in neighboring Guinea, including an American woman who managed to get 18 orphans out of Freetown on U.S. military helicopters.

"It was just awful. It was terrible," said the

woman, Pinkie McCann-Willis, who heads the Freetown office of the Indianapolis-based Americans for African Adoption agency.

McCann-Willis said she and the children spent two days pinned down by gunfire in the Freetown compound before she was able to pile the children into the back of her pickup truck and make a dash for the Mummy Yoko.

Once there, McCann-Willis obtained State Department permission to carry the non-American orphans out on evacuation choppers. In all, the U.S. helicopters carried 1,200 foreigners from the hotel grounds over the weekend.

At least one shell fired by the mutineers from their hilltop headquarters hit a house in the Aberdeen neighborhood between the rebels' and Nigerians' strongholds.

At the Connaught Hospital, the main government hospital in central Freetown, the bodies of two women and a child from Aberdeen were brought to the morgue. It was unclear whether they had died from shrapnel or bullet wounds.

A hospital official interviewed by Sierra Leonean journalists said four other people had died of bullet wounds east of the city, near the site of earlier skirmishes.

The Nigerian offensive appeared to surprise other countries involved in efforts to negotiate Koroma's exit and the return of Kabbah, who fled to Guinea after the coup.

"We have all along insisted on a negotiated settlement. This morning's attack came as a surprise," said Foreign Minister Kwamena Ahofofora of Ghana, which sent soldiers into Freetown over the weekend both to stabilize the situation and to evacuate about 1,000 Ghanaian civilians trapped there.

In Washington, White House spokesman Mike McCurry said the United States was "interested in diminishing the violence."

"We are supporting efforts to deal directly with the parties, both factions, rebel factions. We encourage the institution of a cease-fire," McCurry said.

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