THE REFERENDUM AND AFTER

De Gaulle's un-Republican allies

By Darsie Gillie

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On September 28, in the referendum on his new Constitution, General de Gaulle will sweep into a single net the votes of Africans welcoming the right to secede and of Conservative Frenchmen who want a strong Government to discourage if not prevent any such secession; of General Chassin, leader of the "May 13 movement," who says that his "yes" is for a French Algeria and integration but not for the Constitution, and that of M. Gaston Defferres, the Socialist mayor of Marseilles, who wants a stable Government to negotiate with the Algerian rebels. Leaders of the Centre and Left talk of a new Government that will at last be able to carry out their parties' policies; leaders of the Right rub their hands in joy at the hope of an electoral law which will at last give them a majority in the Assembly, even if they do not possess it in the country.

This masterly political manoeuvre is only possible because of the General's personal prestige and of the widespread disgust with the feeble flappings of the Fourth Republic. That the General is a disinterested patriot with a unique position in his country's recent past, with a very distinguished mind and a wider view of public interests than most of his fellow-citizens is true. That the Fourth Republic broke down after repeated failures to repair its mechanism and mend its ways is also true. The General's criticisms of the Constitution of 1946 were from the first shrewd, and naturally give authority to his positive recommendations now about to enter into force which were not necessarily equally valid.

Obscure doctrine

These recommendations were, however, the natural consequence of the last Constitution's defects. That Constitution was based on the principle that the sole depository of the sovereign people's will was the National Assembly, which in practice meant that small parliamentary groups whose votes at any given moment could turn the majority could also determine national policy—at least in a negative sense. The new Constitution recognises the sovereignty of the nation as expressed through universal suffrage, but not the Assembly as its sole exponent. The doctrinal basis is obscure, for while the Prime Minister owes his nomination to the President he is responsible to the Assembly. The Assembly may not, however, participate in the Government, since deputies cannot be Ministers and its control over the Government is exercised across a barricade of precautions to prevent frivolously provoked Cabinet crises.

The President's authority also goes back ultimately to universal suffrage, but only indirectly. Indeed, as far as half his electors are concerned, doubly indirectly. His electors, it will be recalled, are to be the representatives of local self-government, about 75,000 in all. Every commune in France will at least be represented among these electors by its mayor. There are 38,000 communes in France, of which 31,000 have fewer than 1,000 inhabitants and 22,500 fewer than 500. It is not at all difficult to find communes with less than 200 or even 100 inhabitants. The mayor is himself elected for six years by the municipal council and often re-elected if he is satisfactory, though the political majority that first chose him has long since disappeared

Obstacle course

Thus on the one hand the popular will is to find expression through a general election to the National Assembly, where it will come up against a series of obstacles designed to prevent a frivolous misuse of powers by its exponents, the deputies, and on the other it will have been reduced to a fine spray before being condensed into the person of the President. One may wonder whether such a system will stand up well to a crisis of public opinion. But it will at least be launched by a man who enjoys at the moment an unusual degree of public confidence. It is hard to imagine indeed that the French would equip themselves with such a Constitution were it not for the threefold circumstance that the last one was working so badly that they were threatened with a military coup d'état from Algiers, and that Charles de Gaulle himself had such an unusual position and record—including that of having stepped out of office in January, 1946, under no pressure but that of his own judgment.

The Constitution is fitted with an impressive number of constitutional guarantees. The General concludes all his speeches with the words "Vive la République." He presented it to the nation on the Place de la République. It is no doubt in his mind a Republican Constitution containing guarantees of liberty and stable authority. None the less, in the circumstances of its origin, in the manner of its presentation to the nation, and in the motives for which it will receive votes, there are elements which depart a long way from normal French Republican tradition.

These are by no means altogether General de Gaulle's responsibility. He did not prevent the Assembly of the Fourth Republic from amending the old Constitution—a task publicly recognised as necessary by the leaders of every party. He was not responsible for successive Governments' failure to maintain discipline in the Army. The unauthorised capture of the Algerian rebel leaders, the bombardment of Sakiet, the repeated failure of the Algerian Governor-General to enforce respect for the Republic's authority among the "ultras" of Algiers, all prepared the way for the coup d'état on May 13. But that coup d'état has never been put down. The Army and the extremists of Algiers together upset what was left of the Fourth Republic and have not yet submitted to the Fifth. The General has ably and boldly pulled in France's new citizens in Black Africa to restore the balance among the old ones of Europe and Algeria, so that he will not risk owing his forthcoming victory to his un-Republican allies—but those allies are still there. It is still uncertain whether the vote of September 28 will consolidate a real Republic or in fact strengthen the hands of the enemies of Republicanism.

The superb political strategy shown in drawing together such diverse sections of the nation to vote for his Government's Constitution is going to lead to problems which will need no less skill but a strategy of a different kind. The mere fact that, in its overwhelming majority, the press is enthusiastically or tamely doing the Government's work is already making the Communist press much more attractive reading matter than it used to be. The General needs (and has said so) the support of men of the Left. He also needs the opposition of non-Communists of the Left if he is to promote a Republic. He will need above all that those men of the Left who have supported him shall not in a few months' time appear to have been dupes. For this, after the referendum, he will have to make decisions with regard to issues about which he has hitherto been scrupulously reticent.

Personal plebiscite

The mere fact that the new Constitution is being presented for a "yes" or "no" by the Head of the Government with the support of the apparatus of Government, and that one of the main arguments offered for accepting it should be confidence in the person of the General, makes the referendum in some respects a personal plebiscite. By all accounts the General was displeased at the turn taken by the ceremony of September 4 and especially by the fact that it should have been followed by the ruthless dispersal of counter-demonstrators, the use of fire-arms, and misstatements about the use of firearms. But this misfortune was organically related to the events that put the General into power as was the extraordinary behaviour of the military authorities responsible for shooting two young Italians by mistake for Algerian terrorists and then burying them before informing the families. The Army in Algeria has taken over the job of providing

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