

France: Black historian Pap Ndiaye appointed as education minister

Expert on colonialism and history of race relations faces persistent social inequalities in the school system



Pap Ndiaye alongside outgoing education minister Jean-Michel Blanquer at the handover ceremony.

Angelique Chrisafis *in Paris*
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Pap Ndiaye, the renowned Black French historian and expert on US minority rights, has been appointed education minister for the start of Emmanuel Macron's second term, as the country faces persistent social inequalities in the school system.

"I'm a pure product of republican meritocracy," Ndiaye said, referencing his mother who taught science at a middle school outside Paris. He said he was also "a symbol of diversity" which gave him a sense of "duty and responsibility" to the young people of France.

Ndiaye, an expert on colonialism and the history of race relations on both sides of the Atlantic, was head of France's Museum of Immigration and is seen as on the left. His appointment to Macron's mix of rightwing and centre-left government ministers under the new prime minister, Élisabeth Borne, was a surprise.

Ndiaye represents a break with the previous education minister, the rightwinger Jean-Michel Blanquer, who while in office founded his own thinktank to oppose what he called the US-imported "doctrine" of "wokism".

France has one of the most unequal school systems in the developed world. A pupil born and schooled in a deprived neighbourhood in France has less chance of escaping their socio-economic background than in most other developed nations, according to the OECD.

Ndiaye, born outside Paris to a Senegalese father and French mother, gained national prominence with his 2008 work “The Black Condition, an essay on a French minority.”

In an Associated Press interview last year, Ndiaye said France had to conquer racial injustice by confronting its often-violent colonial past, noting that “the French are highly reluctant to look at the dark dimensions of their own history.”

Ndiaye, whose sister is the award-winning novelist, Marie NDiaye, told Le Monde in 2017 that structural racism existed in France, whereby institutions such as the police may have certain racist practices.

Ndiaye was for many years a professor at the elite Sciences Po university in Paris.

“In the field of history, he is someone who has been innovative and able to show a new way of understanding the past,” the historian Pascal Blanchard told AFP. “He’s a teacher who knows what it’s like to be in front of a class of students. In a diverse society, it is important to have someone who is attentive to diversity.”

The far right’s Marine Le Pen swiftly attacked Ndiaye’s appointment, saying it symbolised “the deconstruction of our country, its values and future”.

Macron is under pressure to deliver on his election promise of renewal and a “new method” for politics in his second-term, with less top-down leadership and more listening to voters’ concerns. He has been criticised by opposition parties for waiting almost a month after his April presidential win against Le Pen to finalise a new government to serve under Élisabeth Borne, France’s first woman prime minister in more than 30 years.

The new government appointments mark the start of a bitter battle for next month’s parliamentary elections. Macron’s centrist grouping needs to win a solid parliament majority if he is to have a free-hand for his domestic overhaul of the pensions and benefits system, as well as changes to schools and the health-service. A historic left-wing alliance led by the radical left’s Jean-Luc Mélenchon is aiming to increase its seats.

Catherine Colonna, France’s ambassador to London and a former spokesperson to late rightwing president Jacques Chirac, was appointed foreign minister, making her only the second woman to hold the job, after the right’s Michèle Alliot-Marie over a decade ago.

Many of the government appointments were a continuation of Macron’s last term, with loyal ministers rewarded. Two key ministers on the right – Bruno Le Maire at the economy ministry and Gérard Darmanin at the interior ministry – both kept their seats. The justice minister Éric Dupond-Moretti also remained.

Macron's promised environmental drive for France to become "the first major nation to abandon gas, oil and coal" will be led by the prime minister with two ministers who had previously served in Macron's first term: Amélie de Montchalin, and Agnès Pannier-Runacher.