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Nicolas Sarkozy's victory

The Gaullist revolutionary

Does France know the full implications of what it has voted for?

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PARIS

“THE French people have chosen change, and it is change that I will implement.” So declared Nicolas Sarkozy in his victory speech on May 6th, before wildly cheering supporters in central Paris, shortly after the Gaullist candidate was elected France's new president by a decisive 53% of the vote. As the French prepare for the handover of power from President Jacques Chirac on May 16th, their country seethes with a strange mixture of celebration and apprehension. Since Mr Sarkozy is known for his hyperactivity, nobody doubts that he will move fast. But France is also undoubtedly heading for a period of turbulence.

Once again, the French turned out *en masse* on polling day. At 84%, voter participation was way above the latest comparable elections in Britain (61%) or America (64%). Mr Sarkozy's score was not a landslide. But, fully six points above that of his Socialist opponent, Ségolène Royal, it was the highest for a Gaullist candidate—apart from Mr Chirac's run-off score against the far-right Jean-Marie Le Pen in 2002—since Georges Pompidou in 1969. At 52, Mr Sarkozy will become the first French president born after the second world war; the first Gaullist president never to have served in government under Charles de Gaulle himself; the first Gaullist president since Pompidou not to have graduated from the elite Ecole Nationale d'Administration; and the first president whose father (a Hungarian immigrant) was not French.

It is a particularly remarkable performance. Until a few weeks ago, Mr Sarkozy was a member of an unpopular government under a worn-out president. After

12 years of Mr Chirac, this was the Socialist Party's election to lose. As it turned out, Mr Sarkozy managed to style himself as a fresh force for change, while Ms Royal failed to convince. Her message was incoherent: she had 100 campaign pledges, "99 too many", in the words of one visiting American political strategist. Her strategy was not credible: having denounced the centrists before the first round, she then described an abrupt U-turn to court them during the second. And her television debate performance raised doubts about her character: her explosion of what she called "healthy anger" at Mr Sarkozy seemed as aggressive as it was unprovoked.

Mr Sarkozy, on the other hand, had a clearer sense of purpose. He stuck doggedly to one chief message—France needs to change and the French need to work more—and hardened it with a right-wing law-and-order accent that he kept up even during the second-round quest for the centrist vote. This enabled him both to bag some two-thirds of Mr Le Pen's voters, despite the far-right leader's appeal to his supporters to abstain, and to secure the same share (40%) of the centrist vote as Ms Royal, despite a declaration by the centrist candidate, François Bayrou, that he would not vote for Mr Sarkozy.

In some parts of France Ms Royal did very well. She came top in 11 of the 20 arrondissements of Paris, as well as in a large swathe of central and south-western France, and in many of the working-class *banlieues*. She also won among the under-24s and older working voters aged 45-59, according to Ipsos, a pollster. Most women, however, did not vote for one of their own: Mr Sarkozy secured 52% of the female vote, as well as of the over-60s and the 25-44s. He also managed, spectacularly, to win in the industrial department of Nord, long a Communist and then a Socialist stronghold, even in such working towns as Tourcoing and Valenciennes. All those campaign stops on the factory floor, posing beside muscular men in overalls and hard hats, seem to have paid off.

On election night at the Salle Gaveau, a Paris concert theatre, the atmosphere was electric. Sarkozy supporters packed the hall to await the results, while hundreds more gathered in the street outside. When Mr Sarkozy at last appeared on the stage, picking his way up the steps with uncharacteristic deliberation, his message was clear: he would "break with the ideas, the habits and the behaviour of the past" in order "to get France moving again". His advisers, watching from the wings, were unequivocal. "Nicolas has a clear mandate for change," said Pierre Lellouche, a deputy and a foreign-policy aide, who may be given a national-security job in the Sarkozy administration. "He's an enormously hard

worker, and is courageous, so he will implement it."

Le tourbillon

With unfortunate symbolism, Mr Sarkozy then jetted off to Malta this week—

along with Cécilia, his wife, and ten-year-old son—to spend three days aboard a private yacht, courtesy of a French corporate raider. The idea was to take time off to prepare for office. But the outline of his programme, and his team, is already fairly clear. He is expected to name François Fillon, who brought in a contested pension reform and is his jogging partner, as prime minister. He will take Claude Guéant, a steady-minded prefect and long-time chief of staff, with him to that job at the Elysée Palace.

He has promised a small cabinet, of just 15 members, with half the posts going to women. Michèle Alliot-Marie, the defence minister, Rachida Dati, his spokeswoman, Valérie Pécresse, his party's spokeswoman, Christine Lagarde, the trade minister, and Anne Lauvergeon, head of Areva, a nuclear-energy group, are all tipped for jobs. Alain Juppé, a former prime minister and right-hand-man to Mr Chirac who has become a Sarkozy ally, is expected to get a top post. Mr Sarkozy might also make a surprising appointment from the left, finding a job perhaps for Bernard Kouchner, co-founder of Médecins Sans Frontières, or for someone from among France's ethnic minorities.

The first few months will be marked, characteristically, by a *tourbillon* of activity. Mr Sarkozy is likely to head to Berlin for his first foreign trip, to revive the Franco-German alliance and consolidate his tie to Angela Merkel, Germany's chancellor, whom he congratulated in the familiar *tu* style as soon as she was elected. He will also drop in on Brussels to show that, after the paralysis of the twilight years of Mr Chirac and the French rejection of the European Union constitution, France "is now back on the scene in Europe" (see article). Foreign meetings already crowd his diary: the G8 summit in early June, in Germany; the European Council at the end of the month, in Brussels; Africa, sometime soon.

Mr Sarkozy will mark a distinct break with the Chirac era, not just in tone but in substance. He is more instinctively sympathetic both to Israel and to America than any French leader for 40 years; he wants to take a tougher line towards Russia and Iran, and put an end to France's traditional African policy, "based on personal ties between heads of state", in favour of a more transparent, democratic approach. Mr Sarkozy has called America "the greatest democracy in the world", and looked immensely chuffed last September after a meeting with

the world", and looked immensely chuffed last September after a meeting with George Bush in Washington—despite the disapproval it provoked back home. His rapport with Britain's Tony Blair, who called him "a friend" in a congratulatory message he posted—in French—on YouTube, is genuine; Mr Blair was expected to visit him in Paris this week. He knows Gordon Brown, Mr Blair's presumed successor, far less well.

AFP

Ségolène, still in the cold

Indeed there is almost a danger that Mr Sarkozy's Atlanticist leanings have raised expectations unrealistically high in Washington and London. The new president will certainly be keen to avoid what he called the "arrogance" of the

French threat to veto UN military action in Iraq in 2003. But he nevertheless backed Mr Chirac's opposition to the invasion. He explicitly told the Americans in his victory speech that "friendship means accepting that friends can think differently". Some of Mr Sarkozy's views collide directly with those of America and Britain, including his vehement hostility to Turkish entry to the European Union, his doubts about the continuing presence of French troops in Afghanistan and his industrial protectionism within Europe. President Sarkozy will be an easier transatlantic ally, for sure, but he will still be no walkover.

On the domestic front, say his advisers, Mr Sarkozy intends to use the five-year mandate in three phases. In the first two years, he will implement tough reforms; in the second two years, he will consolidate them; in the fifth year, he will prepare for re-election. His first hurdle is parliamentary elections on June 10th and 17th. Early polls suggest that the French, despite their reputation for rebellion, could well hand him a majority: his party would get 35% of the first-round vote, compared with 30% for the Socialists and 15% for the centrists, according to a CSA poll this week. All candidates scoring at least 12.5% in the first round will go through to a run-off.

Wasting no time, Mr Sarkozy intends to call parliament into extraordinary session this summer. He wants laws passed to exempt workers from tax and social-security charges for hours worked above the 35-hour week (thus both encouraging the 35-hour rule to crumble, and rewarding people for working hard). He also wants to let mortgage-interest payments be deducted from income tax; to tighten immigration rules; and to stiffen sentences for young and repeat offenders.

Other reforms he plans to push through early are a guarantee of minimum service on public transport during strikes; a loosening of the legal right of the big five unions to represent all employees in a workplace, whether or not they

are union members; the introduction of a single job contract with progressive rights; the reform of unemployment benefit, in order to penalise claimants who refuse two job offers, while improving services for job-seekers. In time, Mr Sarkozy also plans to make 50% the top limit on all personal taxation and social charges; to grant universities more autonomy to set fees and recruit staff and students; to reduce inheritance tax; and to reform the special pension privileges of certain public-sector workers.

Threats of resistance

Veteran France-watchers say they have heard it all before. Governments have repeatedly tried to trim privileges and benefits in order to rescue the welfare system from collapse, only to be defeated on the street, the favourite theatre of protest for the French. Dominique de Villepin, the outgoing centre-right prime minister, was fatally wounded by street protests and student-led sit-ins against his proposed, less protected job contract for the young. Mr Chirac also backed down in 1995, when Mr Juppé was his prime minister, in the face of crippling national strikes against proposed reforms. Mr Sarkozy, say the sceptics, will lose his reformist zeal once in power, drop his semi-professed liberalism, and ultimately *se chiraquiser*.

Resistance is certainly likely. Mr Sarkozy inspires both admiration and hostility. He was demonised during the campaign by his opponents, almost absurdly so; yet his hard line on immigration and on criminality lent him an undeniable harshness. On election night 730 cars were burned, and protesters clashed with riot police in central Paris and a few other cities. Ms Royal, having threatened at her last campaign rally that the French would revolt if Mr Sarkozy were elected, left it to François Hollande, the Socialist Party leader (and her partner), to call belatedly for an end to violence and for the verdict of the poll to be respected.

With a nod to those who accused him of divisiveness, Mr Sarkozy announced on election night that his was "not the victory of one France against another" and that he would be "the president of all the French". He will need to be particularly careful to include the country's black and Muslim minorities, at the very least by bringing diversity into his government. Ms Dati, whose parents are north African, would be one symbolic appointment.

The unions, too, could prove difficult. Mr Sarkozy considers his plans for minimum service on trains and buses to be the key to unlocking reform

elsewhere. Once it becomes impossible to paralyse cities and stop commuters getting to work, strikes will lose much of their wider political potency. The statutory role of the five largest labour unions to negotiate on behalf of all workers gives them huge clout, and is one reason why Mr Sarkozy also intends to open up first-round elections within companies to representatives outside the dominant five.

Students too, having defeated Mr de Villepin last year, are bracing for a new struggle. This week, student unions at one of the Sorbonne universities in Paris voted to strike and blockade their campus, in protest at Mr Sarkozy's university-reform plans. Not only does he intend to inject a small element of competition into France's bureaucratic university system, but he laid into the May '68 generation during the campaign, accusing the "inheritors of May '68" of imposing "moral and intellectual relativism" and calling for this heritage to be "liquidated". As a student himself, a few years after the May events, Mr Sarkozy marched against striking students at his own university, calling for classes to resume.

Powers on his side

Nonetheless, there are grounds to think that President Sarkozy could get further than his predecessors. First, he has a mandate for change. Mr Chirac in 1995 also won a robust majority (52.6%), but campaigned to "mend the social fracture", not to change France. Mr Sarkozy's mandate secures him electoral legitimacy and, at least in the short run, puts public opinion broadly on his side. For those who considered France too restive, conservative or skittish for change, Mr Sarkozy's victory suggests otherwise.

Second, the crushing defeat of the hard-left parties robs the biggest union, the Communist-backed Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), of some of its force. The CGT has in the past been behind many of France's biggest street protests. Mr Sarkozy's tactic is to bring in the unions for negotiations first, while holding out the threat of legislation if no agreement can be reached with them. This is how he plans to bring about a deal on minimum service on public transport, telling unions and employers that they have until the end of the summer to do a deal; after that, he will start to legislate.

Third, Mr Sarkozy's hallmark is to introduce reforms with well-communicated and plain-spoken appeals to common sense. The style of his presidency is likely to be hands-on, in contrast with the remoter manner of Mr Chirac, with regular press conferences and, he has suggested, even appearances to explain himself

press conferences and, he has suggested, even appearances to explain himself before parliament.

The new president is often caricatured as brutal. Yet during the student protests against Mr de Villepin, Mr Sarkozy urged the prime minister to shelve the reform, since it had never been subject to negotiation and had been rushed through parliament by decree. He has long argued the need to build a consensus around reform by laying out the case for it, rather than proceeding by stealth. If anything, Mr Sarkozy is sometimes too ready to cut deals and to use heavy-handed tactics, as he demonstrated when he was finance minister in 2004,

threatening to "out" grocery bosses in the press if they did not bring down prices.

The next six months promise to be turbulent. The Socialist Party too will be keen to resist a politician that their candidate called "dangerous"—although the party itself is now in disarray. Like the Labour Party in 1987, after Margaret Thatcher's third Conservative victory, the Socialists now face a total of 17 years without presidential power, after their own third consecutive presidential defeat. The party is deeply split over what conclusions to draw. Dominique Strauss-Kahn, a moderate, argued in a fierce election-night attack on Ms Royal's performance that the party had not modernised itself and offered only "passé solutions". Laurent Fabius, by contrast, on the party's left wing, argued that the Socialists should stay true to their traditions. Rival Socialist bigwigs, Ms Royal and Mr Hollande jostling among them, already have their eyes on the 2012 elections, and will struggle to overcome the party's divisions in time for the June elections.

Arguably, this defeat could be the shock that the Socialist Party needs to force it at last to break its old links to the Communist Party and the hard left, and transform itself instead into a modern, electable party of the left. Even if this shift were to take place, however, the space looks too cramped to accommodate both a modernised Socialist Party and the new centrist party, the Democratic Movement, that Mr Bayrou launched this week. During the campaign Mr Bayrou baffled many of his own deputies by lurching towards the left after the first round, laying into Mr Sarkozy and flirting with Ms Royal. In the end, three-quarters of them came out in support of Mr Sarkozy, arguing that, with their roots in centre-right Christian Democracy, they had little in common with Ms Royal's state-oriented economic programme. In return, Mr Sarkozy has offered not to run Gaullist candidates against these deputies in June. It remains to be

seen whether Mr Bayrou can do a comparable deal with the Socialist Party.

The Socialists may not like the example, but Mr Sarkozy supplies perhaps the best case study in how to grab hold of a political party, against the will of its elders, and use it to secure the presidency. In a handover ceremony on May 16th Mr Sarkozy will receive the keys to the Elysée Palace from Mr Chirac, the veteran politician who gave him his first break in politics when he was a fresh-faced, long-haired 20-year-old student, and whom he let down by backing a rival presidential candidate 20 years later. Mr Sarkozy declared in that first speech, back in 1975, that "to be Gaullist is to be revolutionary". Little can Mr Chirac have known then that the upstart youngster would one day seize the presidency on

the promise of a revolutionary break with the era presided over by Mr Chirac himself.

LEADERS

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