

Battle for Paris mayor's office highlights crisis within France's right-wing parties

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At the present time France's right-wing parties, which have been in parliamentary opposition to Lionel Jospin's left-wing coalition for the past three years, are enmeshed in bitter internal struggles. These conflicts, raging between as well as within the various parties, have intensified in recent months. The animosities, rivalries and intrigues revolve around the coming communal, parliamentary and presidential elections, due to take place in 2001 and 2002.

It is difficult to define the real political criteria for the divisions, as politics are seldom discussed. Prominent representatives of the various right-wing parties are continuously moving from one organisation to another.

The turmoil within the right is expressed most clearly in the conflict surrounding the election of the Parisian mayor, dubbed by the press "The battle for Paris". In the last two months four candidates from the same right-wing party, the RPR (Rassemblement pour la République—Assembly for the Republic) stood against each other in Paris. Jacques Chirac, the current president of France, is leader of the RPR, which has controlled the mayor's office since it was created in 1976.

There would likely have been more candidates if Chirac hadn't brought his authority to bear to hold back other politicians, such as Jacques Toubon (also a RPR leader and former minister of justice), from entering the race.

Following the withdrawal of his rivals under protest, Phillip Séguin has emerged as the winner in the battle between right-wing aspirants, and has been named the RPR's official candidate by party chairwoman Michèle Alliot-Marie.

Séguin was chairman of the RPR as well as the French parliament until he stepped down shortly before the run-up to the European elections in 1999. His resignation followed months of quarrels with Chirac. He is the candidate with the strongest support among right-wing voters in general, and within the RPR in particular. He is generally considered the best qualified politician to retain Paris for the RPR and hold together the right-wing parties and the different fractions of the RPR, whose main competition on the right is the RPF (Rassemblement pour la France et l'indépendance de l'Europe—Assembly for the Republic and Independence from Europe). Charles Pasqua, formerly a leading member of the RPR, and Gerard de Villiers, an anti-European politician, founded the RPF in 1999 in a right-wing split from the RPR.

While attempting, whenever possible, to avoid precise political statements, Séguin did in the course of his campaign make a demagogic attack on social inequality. Aiming to whip up local Parisian chauvinism, he declared that Parisian citizens faced worse disparities in wealth than their counterparts in the provincial towns.

Séguin banked on the unity of the right wing and was very conciliatory towards all right-wing parties, including Pasqua's RPF. Although he did not openly speak out against the monetary union and European integration, he declined to repudiate his previous anti-European views, which distinguish him clearly from the pro-European Edouard Balladur.

The current mayor, Jean Tiberi, right-hand man and successor to Chirac (himself the first mayor of Paris), was long looked upon as the most promising candidate. However, after a spectacular fight with the official leadership of the RPR he was unceremoniously pushed aside.

The struggle took place openly in the media and in the courts and was a mud-bath on both sides. The accusations against Tiberi were by no means mere inventions. For instance, the RPR in Paris accused Tiberi of using false membership cards. After former friends denounced him and many of his followers left him, Tiberi ended up on the political scrap heap. He decided to lead his own campaign, which is evidently aimed at enabling him to retain his mandate as delegate for the fifth district of Paris.

Françoise de Panafieu, the delegate of the 17th district of Paris (one of the wealthiest areas), was supported by circles around Chirac. She was urged into the arena in the first place to get rid of Tiberi, regarded as the main obstacle to radical political change in the office of the Parisian mayor.

Panafieu's campaign concentrated on portraying the other candidates as "old fashioned" and closely attached to the "system" of the Parisian city council. In the view of the press and public opinion, this is equated with nepotism and corruption, which must be dealt with at all costs.

With the support of the media, she presented herself as the personification of "renewal", a modern woman standing against the men from the past, who had compromised themselves in ugly intrigues within the "old" RPR. The fact that she, herself, had been at the heart of the RPR apparatus in Paris for 20 years was conveniently overlooked. Even though she has not become the designated candidate of the RPR, she will play a role in a split-up of the old RPR.

Edouard Balladur, who was last to step into the ring, is also a long-time RPR politician. He was prime minister of a centre-right government in 1993-95 which "cohabited" with head of state François Mitterrand from the Socialist Party. In 1995 he stood as a candidate in the presidential elections but was defeated by Chirac. After initial approaches to Françoise de Panafieu in Paris and indications that he was prepared to lead a mutual list of candidates with her, the two soon came into conflict.

Balladur conducted his campaign under the motto "emancipate Paris". A central point of his programme was a pledge to change the

constitution of Paris. He called for more power and autonomy for the city against the state. Paris, he maintained, should receive powers which have up until now been privileges of the state.

Such a constitution would have assured Paris more flexibility as a financial centre in a globalised financial world. As the plan of a politician known for his concern for the interests of the Parisian stock exchange, the constitution project actually seemed to be going in this direction.

Balladur presented himself as a candidate of the entire traditional right and was supported by the centrists (UDF, Nouvelle union pour la démocratie française—New Union for French Democracy) and the liberals (DL, Démocratie libérale—Liberal Democracy). He proposed to extend the right wing to include the Ecological Party as well as the RPF.

A central role in this political bloodbath was played by Chirac himself, the former mayor of Paris, current president of the republic, head of the RPR and declared candidate for his own succession in 2002.

Bitter struggles are also raging in the other traditional right-wing parties. Even if the UDF and the DL aren't standing their own candidates and are supporting the candidate of the RPR in Paris, the strains between the leaders of these parties are intense.

The battle in Paris, which has turned the RPR leaders against one other, is echoed in other French cities. Here the issue is not just the RPR, but different political combinations. A typical case is Lyons, where Raymond Barre of the UDF governs as mayor. He was prime minister under Giscard d'Estaing (president from 1976 until 1981).

At the moment five different right-wing candidates are standing in Lyons. A struggle is taking place between the RPR and the UDF and within each of the two parties. Two UDF and two RPR candidates are standing against one another. In addition, François Millon, another right-wing politician, is standing in the election. (Millon was expelled from the RPR in 1998 after allowing himself to be elected with the help of the right-extremist Front National in the region of Rhône-Alpes. Later the election was annulled). In addition are candidates from Mégret's MNR (Mouvement National Républicain, a split-off from the Front National) as well as from Pasqua's RPF.

Another example is the former industrial centre of St. Etienne. The retiring mayor is under attack from opponents from within his own party.

Although the French right-wing parties have their own specific features, the same crisis can be seen in the traditional right-wing parties throughout Europe, especially in Italy (Democrazia Cristiana), in Germany (CDU/CSU) and to an extent in Great Britain (Conservative Party).

Up until now the parties of the traditional right wing, and especially the RPR, have constituted what is usually called a “people's party”. They were socially based on the industrial and financial bourgeoisie, but also on layers of the petty bourgeoisie, especially farmers, artisans and even sections of the working class.

The social cohesion possible within the framework of the nation-state system and the relative economic equilibrium in the post-war period facilitated the coexistence of the bourgeoisie, petty bourgeoisie and working class. Under the influence of globalisation this cohesion has fallen apart. A large part of the petty bourgeoisie, fallen victim to globalisation, are looking for parties that articulate their frustration, helplessness and fears.

A section of politicians from traditional right-wing parties are turning towards right-wing populism, with its chauvinist and

xenophobic programme combined with a large dose of hostility towards parliamentarianism. In so doing, they attempt to capitalise on the moods of their former clientele. They often share the electorate with other petty-bourgeois protest parties, ranging from the environmentalists to the Front National. The preparation of a precise political programme is put on the back burner—they prefer to resort to demagoguery.

Pasqua was the first RPR politician to make a decisive step in this direction when he founded the RPF. The followers of Pasqua call themselves defenders of sovereignty, and unconditionally defend the nation-state. They claim that globalisation is generally a justification for the expansion of American supremacy.

At the moment, on the basis of their opposition to the Maastricht Treaty, they have come to an agreement with de Villiers, who also owes his career to opposition to a united Europe. Pasqua and de Villiers are also benefiting from the deep crisis in the Front National. However the marriage of convenience between Pasqua and de Villiers was tainted with conflicts from the beginning, and no other prominent figures have thus far joined the group.

Others, like Chirac, have rejected this tendency, while at the same time seeking to disassociate themselves from the Socialist Party. Another group, including Philippe Séguin, alternate between both poles. Séguin does not come out against the economic aspects of globalisation, which he regards as “objective”, but rather against the political consequences—what he derides as a loss of national sovereignty. Edouard Balladur's political line is the more traditional, pro-European line of the Parisian stock exchange and financial bourgeoisie.

Another wing of the traditional right-wing parties support the policies of the Socialist Party, which they regard as best suited to prevent political destabilisation. This orientation is made all the easier by the obvious fact that the Socialist Party's policies favour the big transnational corporations and the Parisian stock exchange.

The wavering on the part of these tendencies explains the sharp turns undertaken by certain politicians. In the course of a single year they can be resolutely opposed to Europe, and a few months later steadfastly in support of European monetary union. In the struggle for the mayor's office in Paris it has become clear that politicians such as Séguin, Chirac and Balladur find it increasingly difficult to work within the same apparatus, and that a reorganisation of the right-wing in France is imminent.



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