

French right-wing party splinters

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The French right-wing party Rassemblement Pour la France (RPF—Assembly for France) has ceased to exist as a unified organisation. Originally formed during the run-up to the European elections of 1999 from an alliance between the two anti-Europe politicians, Charles Pasqua and Philippe de Villiers, the party quickly gained influence in French politics.

But scarcely seven months after its official founding, its president, Pasqua, decided on June 22 to “put it to bed”. With this decision the veteran Gaullist politician is, for the time being, putting an end to months of conflict with RPF Vice President Philippe de Villiers and his supporters within the party. Pasqua wants to pursue a political course alone, but he is reluctant to leave the name of the RPF to his former ally.

In the last European elections, the RPF received more votes than any of the other scattered right-wing formations—13 percent, compared to 12 percent obtained by the list officially endorsed by French President Jacques Chirac, and less than 10 percent received by the Union Démocratique Française (UDF—French Democratic Union). A member of the Gaullist RPR (Rassemblement pour la République—Assembly for the Republic) until the beginning of 1999, Charles Pasqua left his former party and decided to undertake an election campaign at his own expense. Confronted with unfavourable pre-election surveys, he formed an alliance with de Villiers, who more than 10 years before had positioned himself far to the right of the RPR and UDF and, like Pasqua, had crusaded against European union.

The conflict between the party leaders began to reach a critical level during internal party voting last February. Two political tendencies became clearly apparent, with de Villiers and his supporters finally gaining victory. A few weeks later the rivalry was renewed when Pasqua tried to position himself as the uncontested leader and only legitimate RPF candidate for the 2002 presidential election. He aimed to secure the party's approval for this course by means of a referendum—without consulting his rival. De Villiers' supporters regarded this manoeuvre as a “coup”. They took the issue to court and accused their opponent of violating RPF statutes.

In June Pasqua and de Villiers made attempts at a reconciliation. Together they began a campaign against Jacques Chirac's proposed constitutional amendment that would limit the president's term to five instead of seven years, and also against “cohabitation” (when the presidency is held by the right and the prime ministership by the left, or vice-versa). At a hastily convened assembly in Paris, the RPF declared its intention of launching a united campaign in relation to the referendum on the presidential term of office, which is planned for the coming autumn. One day before the RPF collapsed, both leaders appeared together to lend this campaign a degree of credibility, although the two had not spoken with each other for months.

The RPF proclaims itself “pro-sovereign” in order to stress its opposition to any diminution of France's sovereignty in the form of European integration. It directs its attack to the European common currency and recommends, in its stead, a common monetary policy. It is adamantly opposed to globalisation, which it sees as an extension of American hegemony to the detriment of Europe.

Among other things, it was NATO's intervention in Kosovo that induced Pasqua to openly oppose the politics of the RPR and Jacques Chirac. To Pasqua's great annoyance, the European Union had to swallow the fact that the US was determining Europe's military policy. He is for an authoritarian government flying the flag of law and order. The supporters of Pasqua and de Villiers can agree on all these points without difficulty.

But while these common views on Europe were sufficient to hold them together for a while, other differences soon came to the surface. Pasqua complains that de Villiers has not submitted to the party's accounts all the (apparently substantial) finances at his disposal. While Pasqua has brought more members into the PRF, de Villiers' contribution seems to lie more in the area of finance.

Each of the two men represents a sharply defined tendency. Pasqua places himself firmly in what could be called the republican tradition. In particular, he stresses the importance of secularism and the separation of church and state. De Villiers, on the other hand, has been drawing support for almost 10 years from a sizeable royalist

faction—in general, from those elements who call into question the achievements of the French Revolution. He bases his campaigns consistently on Catholicism, which wins him the support of Catholic fundamentalists (including those responsible for attacks on hospitals by opponents of abortion). In this way he created his most stable basis of support in the Vendée, a mainly rural area where he heads the Regional Council.

Pasqua could be called a chauvinistic populist. His campaigns have a plebeian character. He presents himself as a “man of the people” and solicits the votes of the “little people”.

When workers at the weapons factory in Toulon ransacked the branch office of the Socialist Party after the announcement of sackings, one of his closest collaborators—the former prefect of Toulon, Jean-Charles Marchiani—was quoted in the press as saying that he sympathised with the workers and would welcome their electoral support. The same article went on to sensationalise his denunciation of the socialists as “left-wing caviar munchers” and the traditional right as “right-wing moneybags”.

In the last European elections, the RPF succeeded in gaining a foothold in the old industrial centres of northern France—to a considerable extent among former voters for the National Front (FN). By contrast, the tendency led by de Villiers—strongly anchored in the conservative layers of the petty bourgeoisie in the west—claims the allegiance of a network of dignitaries there and is distinguished by its aristocratic character.

Each of the tendencies aims at a different sector of the political spectrum. De Villiers has his roots in the extreme right. For years he has been on good terms with the CNIP (Centre National Indépendent et Paysan—National Centre for Independents and Peasants). This group was an influential power in the Fourth Republic and currently steers a course between the RPR and the National Front. Pasqua, on the other hand, has tried to attract “advocates of sovereignty from the left”—in particular, Jean-Pierre Chevènement and his MDC (Mouvement Des Citoyens—Citizens Movement), which had welcomed Pasqua's departure from the RPR and the founding of his own list before the European elections.

Above all, Pasqua advocates state intervention in the economy. In this he is in line with the policy of the French bourgeoisie through most of the second half of the twentieth century. For his part, de Villiers stands for a “liberalisation” of the economy. Before he threw himself into his conservative “fight for values” campaign in 1991, he had been a member of parliament for the Christian-Democratic UDF. To the extent that the French upper middle classes (under the guidance of the business association, Medef) were

becoming converted to the idea of the state's retreat from involvement in the economy, the RPF had to decide, sooner or later, on one or the other option.

The French judiciary has been playing a role in the sharpening leadership conflict within the RPF. Close confidants of Pasqua have been investigated in relation to the Elf oil affair. Examining magistrates wanted to know whether the Elf oil company had paid salaries to a number of people working for Pasqua. Since April, intimate friends of de Villiers have also been made subjects of an inquiry into “misdirected finances” originally intended for the Regional Council of the Vendée.

Up to now, neither Pasqua nor de Villiers has been able to take advantage of the dissipation of the right, the decline of the RPR or the debacle of the National Front to win back some of their voters. They, too, are being caught up in the general crisis of the right. It is becoming clear that, with the fragmentation of the traditional right and the rightward shift of social democracy, right-wing reorganisation is proceeding mainly in the form of a regrouping of the extreme right.

Pasqua and de Villiers have temporarily created a home for those factions of the RPR which did not agree with the party's swing to the politics of ultra-liberalism, and which refused—or saw as a rotten compromise—cohabitation with the socialists and the Communist Party. A representative of these forces is, for example, Charles Millon with his movement La Droite (the Right), who appealed for votes for the RPF at the European elections in June last year. (In 1998, thanks to votes from the National Front, Charles Millon assumed leadership of the Rhone-Alpes Regional Council).

De Villiers had made alliances with the National Front in order for his Mouvement Pour la France (Movement for France) to be able to field candidates in municipal and regional elections. Since the split in the National Front, a number of FN politicians have again attached themselves to the RPF. It is characteristic that one of the political gestures of the RPF in the European Parliament was to form an alliance with the Italian ultra-right Alleanza Nazionale of Gianfranco Fini.



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