

# France: the politics of presidential candidate Jean-Pierre Chevènement

Marianne Arens, Françoise Thull  
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The campaign for the forthcoming presidential election in France has been under way since the end of January. The first round of the election is to take place on April 21, followed by the second round on May 5. Several weeks later, in June, the members of the new parliament will be elected.

The two main contenders are incumbent President Jacques Chirac (Gaullist, RPR) and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin (Socialist Party). While Chirac only this week officially declared his candidature, and Jospin apparently intends to wait until the last moment to launch the active phase of his campaign, a “third man” has been making a name for himself since September—Jean-Pierre Chevènement, Jospin’s former minister for the interior. At the moment, surveys indicate that Chevènement has a popularity rating of 14 percent, putting him closely behind Jospin and Chirac.

The media are according Chevènement an unusual amount of attention, referring to him as “Che” (after Che Guevara) and talking of his “winter campaign”. In his organisation, the Republican Pole (*pôle républicain*), Chevènement is uniting supporters of the extreme right, including monarchists and former followers of Le Pen and Pasqua, nationalists from the Gaullist, socialist and Stalinist camps, and former pseudo-Trotskyists, like François Morvan, an erstwhile leading member of the Communist Revolutionary League (*Ligue communiste révolutionnaire*—LCR).

Like all the French candidates, Chevènement is courting the favour of the anti-globalisation movement, Attac. Charles Josselin, a long-serving Socialist Party (SP) politician and Jospin’s minister for overseas development, commented cynically: “Back in the days of the SFIO [forerunner of the SP], it was said that you could win Congress by pandering to the left. I’d have nothing against this presidential election being won with the same tactics” (*Le Figaro*, January 1, 2002).

It is significant that the opening of this year’s French election campaign took place not in Paris, but in Brazil’s Porto Alegre. Apart from 40,000 opponents of globalisation, a jet-setting group of French candidates made the pilgrimage to Brazil for the opening of the World Social Summit, the alternative event to the World Economic Forum in New York. Among them were to be found not only six leading representatives of the Socialist Party, the Green’s presidential candidate Noël Mamère and the Pabloite LCR candidate Olivier Besancenot, but also Serge Lepeltier, the general secretary of Chirac’s Gaullist movement. Chevènement boasted that he was a “leader of the anti-globalisation movement” because he had also been there last year.

Chevènement has played an important role in French politics for over 30 years. At the Congress of Epinay in 1971 he helped François Mitterrand secure leadership of the Socialist Party in what amounted to a surprise coup. Chevènement had already been responsible for drawing up the party’s programme. After Mitterrand’s election victory in 1981, he was several times minister in a Socialist Party-led cabinet. He changed the name of his own organisation, CERES, to “Socialism and Republic”. Over the years, the “socialism” faded away, while the “republic”—a euphemism for French nationalism—came increasingly to the fore.

Chevènement has resigned from ministerial posts on three occasions, and each time the resignation had to do with his championing of French nationalism. His first resignation in 1983 was a protest against the political change of course undertaken by Mitterrand, who reversed the nationalisation programme implemented in 1981 and devoted himself increasingly to European integration. The second occurred in January 1991 in protest against France’s subordination to the US during the Gulf War. His third resignation, in the summer of 2000, was occasioned by Jospin’s project of limited autonomy for Corsica, which Chevènement opposed as a violation of the sovereignty of France and a step towards the regionalisation of Europe—a process he has loudly opposed. A long-time adversary of the euro, he has recently been forced to bite the bullet and accept the introduction of the common European currency.

In the autumn of 1992, Chevènement left the Socialist Party and founded the Movement of Citizens (*Mouvement des Citoyens*—MDC). In 1993 he stated in its programme: “The MDC assumes that the social question cannot be separated from the national question. The issue of the nation should not be left to the right and even less so to the extreme right.” The founding of the MDC was Chevènement’s answer to the French government’s support of the Treaty of Maastricht and European integration.

However, his anti-Americanism is even more pronounced than his opposition to European integration. As France is incapable of asserting itself against the US alone, he has been forced to come to terms with the European project. Discussing his ideas about relations with America in an interview with the newspaper *L’Express* last year, he declared: “I am for a European Europe that is capable of managing its own affairs. The United States has other things to do in this world! Today Europe has a reasonable chance of gradually attaining a certain degree of autonomy in relation to the US if we can, for example, organise the Euro zone properly

and if we allow ourselves a minimum of defence options in order to guarantee security in our territories and on our borders” (November 23, 2000).

This stance did not hinder him from supporting the US in its “war on terrorism” after September 11. In that matter, Chevènement was less concerned with solidarity with the American government than with pursuing France’s interests in the strategic battle for the world’s raw materials.

Chevènement welcomes support from all quarters. He has declared: “I call on all Frenchmen and French women, those who understand the principles of republicanism ... to gather ’round me. And I won’t be asking anyone where he comes from.”

This also applies to the 81-year-old Pierre Poujade, who decided to support Chevènement in November. In 1953, Poujade founded an extreme right-wing movement of shopkeepers, craftsmen and farmers, the UDCA, which organised a tax boycott. In 1956, he helped Jean-Marie Le Pen, the current fascist leader of the National Front, to gain a seat in parliament.

Chevènement’s candidature is a sign of the profound tensions within French society. His Republican Pole constitutes an attempt to gather together the traditional middle classes that have always played a major role in French politics and are now being crushed by globalisation, European integration and social polarisation. This is the only way to explain the motley range of support he receives, from the ultra-right to former left-wingers. “He is receiving support from all sides,” wrote the newspaper *Le monde*, “particularly from the right—47 percent of his potential voters consider themselves not to be left-wing” (December 25, 2001).

Medef, the employers’ association, is traditionally on the side of the Gaullists. It supports European integration and the introduction of the euro, and is forcefully intervening in election issues with the aim of dismantling the welfare state and reducing the living standards of French workers.

In Lyon on January 15, Medef Chairman Baron Ernest-Antoine Seillière, fuming about the many “problems obstructing growth and prosperity”, incited representatives of the business community as follows: “How infuriating it is for us to see our society being so held back, right at the moment when all our European partners have chosen the path of adapting to the modern world and are really getting under way!”

Seillière is demanding the abolition of the 35-hour week, the introduction of a “modern taxation policy ... that allows every businessman to work with the same economic weapons as his foreign competitors,” “social renewal” (*refondation sociale*, i.e., the smashing of the welfare state), and the right of firms to reach wage agreements without the participation of trade unions.”

During its frontal attack on the Jospin government in mid-January, Medef received backing from the Constitutional Council, the highest state body and the one whose decisions are incontestable. It ruled that several important decisions of the Jospin government were unconstitutional and thus invalid.

First it declared an article in the new “Law for Social Modernisation,” prohibiting dismissals from employment under certain conditions, to be inconsistent with “entrepreneurial freedom”. Then the court refused to give its consent to Jospin’s Corsican policy, declaring independent legislative competence for

the Corsican parliament—the core requirement for limited Corsican autonomy—to be incompatible with the French constitution.

Jospin, currently governmental head of a coalition of five parties considered to be left of centre (the Socialist Party, the Greens, the Communist Party, the MDC citizens movement and the Party of the Radical Left), has largely exhausted the trust that helped him so surprisingly assume power in 1997, following the mass strikes of 1995. He has betrayed his election promises and political projects one after the other in order to accommodate his policies to the interests of the business world. Increasing, poverty and social polarisation have angered sections of the population that had initially supported him, and turned them against his policies of privatisation, social service cuts and rearmament.

However, Jospin’s main rival candidate—the Gaullist Jacques Chirac—is finding it difficult to take advantage of this situation because he is embroiled in numerous corruption scandals. Surveys currently show his popularity to be sinking, and many of those questioned rate his credibility at near zero.

Chirac did manage to shake off the bothersome examining magistrate, Eric Halphen, who led investigations into his affairs and those Jean Tiberi, Chirac’s successor as mayor of Paris. Last month Halphen resigned his position, claiming he and his family felt threatened. But with the recent return to France of Didier Schuller, a key figure in the Gaullists’ corruption affairs, the scandals appear to be catching up with Chirac again.

Many former leading Gaullist politicians, such as former premiers Edouard Balladur and Alain Juppé, have rushed to Chirac’s aid. One section of the rival conservative party, UDF, even decided to support Chirac in the first ballot instead of their party’s own candidate. Philippe Séguin, who distanced himself from Chirac two years ago, has returned to the party. But he warned that the RPR could wither into a purely presidential party, that it was surrendering the issue of “the Republic” far too much to other groups and parties, and was running the danger of neglecting the interests of the business community.

Coming onto the scene as the “man of the nation”, Chevènement likes to define himself as “neither right-wing nor left-wing”. He represents those sections of the French bourgeoisie and middle class who regard both European integration and the US alliance with scepticism.

In line with the tradition of the French bourgeoisie, Chevènement now invokes the “Republic”. At the same time he is exploiting all the opportunities thrown his way and trying to give a progressive gloss to his chauvinism by adapting himself to the anti-globalisation movement.



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