France: ruling parties in crisis as Chirac and Sarkozy spar

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The rout of French President Jacques Chirac's Union for a Presidential Majority (UMP) party in the regional elections of March 28 has heightened the crisis of French politics: although the Chirac establishment and its policies are widely discredited, no existing political formation in France has the ability to propose alternative policies or gain public support.

The elections were a debacle for the right-wing UMP. From controlling 14 of the 22 regional administrations in France, it went to controlling only one. The center-left Socialist Party (PS) took control of the other 21 regions. Widely viewed—both by voters and pundits—as a flat rejection of the social austerity policies of the government of Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, the election forced Chirac to reorganize the Raffarin government. Although polls showed only 29 percent support for Raffarin to stay at his post, Chirac nonetheless re-nominated Raffarin as prime minister on March 30.

The media had openly speculated that Chirac would be forced to name his arch-rival, former Iinterior minister Nicolas Sarkozy, prime minister. Despite Sarkozy's known support of extreme free-market policies and social cuts, positive media coverage of his promotion of law-and-order measures has made him the most popular right-wing politician in France. Sarkozy has flaunted his ambitions to be elected head of the UMP and ultimately run as its presidential candidate in 2007, in an open challenge to Chirac and his cronies.

Chirac redesigned the government around four "super-ministers" chosen amongst the members of the Raffarin government not directly associated with its most unpopular policies: Sarkozy in charge of finance and economy; Dominique de Villepin as interior minister; François Fillon as minister of education; and Jean-Louis Borloo at the head of a nebulous Ministry for Employment and Social Cohesion.

The personnel changes, far from being dictated by any desire to change the content of the government's policies, largely represent an attempt by Chirac to influence UMP politics in his favor. Sarkozy, formerly the interior minister, will no longer oversee law-and-order policies broadly supported by the media; that relatively easy task will fall to de Villepin, who is reputedly loyal to Chirac. Instead, Sarkozy will have the task of selling unpopular cuts in social spending and public sector workers' salaries and benefits, while fixing a massive governmental budget deficit. Other prominent Chirac supporters—Defense Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie, Justice Minister Dominique Perben, and Agriculture Minister Hervé Gaymard—retained their posts.

Borloo, considered to be a popular figure due to his speeches on the difficulties of poorer neighborhoods as urban minister, has been set up with a modest budget (at most 6 billion euros per year, currently threatened with large cuts) adequate only for cosmetic measures.

The creation of Borloo's position is part of a broader propaganda campaign by the Chirac team to argue that it has "heard" the voters and is taking on a more "social" coloration. Planned cuts in unemployment insurance have been delayed. Striking scientific researchers received on April 8 the permanent positions they were demanding, and negotiations are resuming with part-time theater workers on how to recalculate their unemployment benefits.

These largely token policy shifts have not placated the electorate. Chirac's and Raffarin's approval ratings have plummeted even further, according to an April 21-22 Sofres poll, to 32 and 26 percent respectively. Chirac's choice to re-nominate Raffarin is widely perceived as illegitimate; newspapers persistently speculate that the new government will only last until the upcoming European elections on June 13

However, the shift in presentation has upset French business circles, which fear that even these miniscule concessions might make workers unwilling to shoulder the massive social cuts that they have planned. On April 7, the business daily *Les Echos* quoted Daniel Dewavrin, head of the industrial section of the principal business lobby, Medef (Mouvement des entreprises de France—movement of France's enterprises), as saying he was "concerned by a political atmosphere particularly disconnected from reality" and that "does not inspire confidence in CEOs." Dewavrin called for cuts in national health insurance plans, decreasing corporate tax rates, and increasing export subsidies.

Medef director Ernest-Antoine Seillière's April 3 comments underscored both the concerns of French business circles and the growing struggle between Chirac and Sarkozy for the political loyalties of the French ruling class. Seillière commented that the two previous governments under Raffarin had been too "timid" in their "reforms." Referring to soccer

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star Zinédine Zidane, he said that Sarkozy is "the Zidane of the governmental team, the player we're counting on to score goals."

The Chirac team has responded by taking measures to reassure the ruling circles that the current team is quite capable of defending their interests.

First, they have announced measures to show that their domestic policies remain the same: to attack, as much as is politically prudent and feasible, the social position of the working class while fostering a right-wing law-and-order atmosphere. On April 22, Raffarin signed a decree instituting voluntary private pension funds, understood to be a first step towards the dismantling of public Social Security funding. The newly installed Health Minister, Philippe Douste-Blazy, is slated to soon present a plan for reducing the national health plan's 14 billion euro deficit. Forty-seven UMP National Assembly deputies also proposed on April 29 to reinstate the death penalty for "acts of terrorism."

Moreover, Chirac has allowed a recent political brawl between Sarkozy and the PS to highlight differences between himself and Sarkozy on questions of international relations. During his April 23-24 visit to the US, Sarkozy posed as a possible pro-US French president, as opposed to Chirac, whose opposition at the UN to the US buildup to the war against Iraq soured Franco-US relations.

Sarkozy's ideological inclinations towards the free market and the far right, as well as his history of associations with Droite Libérale, the free-market ultraconservative party of the staunchly pro-US Alain Madelin, make him a natural ally of Washington in French politics. In an April 21 article, *Le Monde* noted that Washington had particularly appreciated his decision to cancel Air France flights to the US at Washington's request, despite doubts by French police about US evidence that these flights posed a security threat. Echoing the line of the Bush administration in justifying its invasion of Iraq, Sarkozy commented: "I'd much rather act too fast than too late."

Although he was technically visiting Washington DC as the French finance minister, attending a meeting of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Sarkozy met with US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of State Colin Powell. He also visited a banquet organized by the American Jewish Committee (ACJ), the organization that honored Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi in September 2003 for his links to Israel, despite his pro-Mussolini comments. The ACJ praised Sarkozy for his supposed contributions to the fight against anti-Semitism—presumably a reference to his role in beginning the witch-hunt against Muslim headscarves in French public schools, and in setting up large-scale police intervention forces in poor French Muslim neighborhoods.

Upon his return to Paris, Philippe Martin, a PS delegate to the National Assembly, asked him: "[have you] placed American politicians in the position of choosing amongst us the good leaders who are treated like heads of state and those who get the minimum treatment? [Don't you] fear that you risk weakening the voice of the president of the Republic and of the UN?"

Sarkozy replied: "I was invited by all the American Jewish associations who wanted to thank France for its determined struggle against anti-Semitism.... Because after five years of the government of [Socialist Lionel] Jospin, we had managed to make the US think that France is an anti-Semitic country." Socialist delegates thereupon demanded an apology from Sarkozy, who was subsequently roundly criticized in the press.

Significantly, Chirac responded by refusing to defend Sarkozy, echoing the PS's arguments that "anti-Semitism is too grave a subject to use for polemics." Although it is unclear what role if any Chirac played in this incident, it highlights tensions between Chirac and the PS—who favor a pose of independence from Washington through the UN, even though they ultimately have voted there in favor of the US occupation of Iraq—and those, such as Sarkozy and Madelin, who aim to align Paris unequivocally behind US foreign policy.

In the absence of a political movement of the working class, French politics is dominated by these debates over how fast to impose unpopular social cuts, and how best to cut deals with US imperialism.

The current forces of the political left, despite their various electoral fortunes, are thoroughly discredited, unable and unwilling to mobilize popular opposition to these reactionary policies. It is well known that the PS advances policies of social cuts and privatizations quite similar to those of Chirac and Raffarin. The pseudo-Trotskyist "far left" parties, Lutte Ouvrière (Workers' Struggle) and Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist League) have not recovered from their joint betrayal of the May-June 2003 anti-pension reform strikes, in league with the trade union bureaucracy.

The bankruptcy of the PS was perhaps most strikingly expressed by a March 18 conversation between PS heavyweights Jack Lang and Julien Dray, unwittingly captured by a live microphone. As it became clear that the UMP would lose massively in the regional elections, Lang and Dray exchanged the following comments:

Lang: "The government will be beaten. But frankly, tomorrow we're in power, and what do we do?"

Dray: "We don't know what to do. For the time being, don't say anything except 'Down with Raffarin!'"

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