

French right elects new leader

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French president Chirac's governing party, the UMP, enthroned its new leader Nicolas Sarkozy last Sunday at a mass gathering of the party faithful in the hangars of Le Bourget airport in Paris. Around 25,000 guests were invited, and most press commentators said the function exuded the hoopla of an American election primary, costing between 5 and 8 million euros.

Sarkozy has now positioned himself as the firebrand candidate, heir to Jacques Chirac's presidency in the upcoming 2007 election—much to the distaste of Chirac and his allies. Having won 85 percent of the vote among the party's membership, he intends to float his personal policy initiatives based on nationalism and free market economics. The tone of his leadership was apparent in the comments at Le Bourget when, referring to Islamic religious leaders, he declared, "I don't want any more Imams who don't speak a word of French."

As minister of the interior in 2003, Sarkozy set up the French Council for the Muslim Faith in an attempt to bring under state control the diverse strands of Islam and subdue any external influence of fundamentalist origin. He now has the aim of reforming the 1905 secular law governing the relations between the state and the religious establishment to allow state financing for the construction of mosques in major towns and for training French-style Islamic clerics. In general, he is in favor of the reestablishment of the catechism in state schools. Taking a leaf from George Bush's book, he said that this Catholic ritual has "given entire generations of citizens a sharp moral sense [of right]."

He has ruffled many feathers, including those of Chirac's followers, in his haste to make his bid for the French presidency. Chirac himself reacted with fright to the proposed reform of the 1905 law, saying it was "the pillar of the temple" (of the state) and not to be tampered with. Another unoriginal idea of Sarkozy's—affirmative action as a means of integrating

immigrants into French society—has also been denounced by the Chirac camp.

The nationalist spirit of Sarkozy's thinking shows through in relation to his hostility to Turkey joining the EU. The majority of the UMP has now undermined one of Chirac's key foreign policy initiatives. It is felt within the Chirac camp that Sarkozy has too much of a leaning towards communalism and is overly attracted to the American way of doing things.

Sarkozy's orientation is now to appeal to the basic instincts of the French right and to cut a path for the defense of the interests of the employers and the French state. To this end, he had already set up a think tank headed by Michel Camdessus, former director general of the IMF, to propose policies to overcome "the brakes on economic growth."

In October, Camdessus's report, signed by economists, businessmen and trade unions like the CGT (communist party controlled) and the CFTC, laid out the terms for economic recovery. The report's bottom line was that French workers must be forced to labor longer and harder. "Over 20 years, the entire growth gap separating us from the US and Britain corresponds to the change in working hours," it stated.

Sarkozy's speech at Le Bourget, echoed this sentiment: "The France which works must be encouraged, rewarded, thanked, shown as an example ... the leveling down, public assistance and equality do not form a part of our basic values."

It is not surprising, therefore, that Sarkozy has accepted the essence of the Camdessus report and stated that it will be his bedside reading in the run-up to 2007. For him, it "rehabilitates work." The new president of the UMP is intent on turning the party away from social cohesion and staking out an agenda based upon nationalism and the unfettered free market. Sarkozy was unabashed in replying to those—both within and outside his party—who criticized the lavish

spending on his investiture, at a time when many people in France are unemployed and scraping by for an existence. He cynically declared, “They’ve seen nothing yet; it’s the beginning.”



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