After the defeat of the referendum in France

Chirac appoints a new government

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Two days after the defeat of the referendum on the European constitutional treaty, French President Jacques Chirac has sacked his prime minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, and appointed a new government led by former minister of the interior Dominique de Villepin.

Severely weakened in his presidential authority, Chirac is making a desperate attempt to establish some political stability by reshuffling his cabinet. He has categorically refused to resign—a course Charles de Gaulle famously chose when defeated in a referendum in 1969. This is made easier for him by the fact that the main opposition party, the Socialist Party, has also been discredited by its support for the referendum.

The dismissal of Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, who has led the government for the last three years, has long been expected. He was extremely unpopular and would have been obliged to quit even if the referendum had passed. It was not clear, however, who would succeed him.

Chirac's party, the UMP (Union for a Popular Movement), is deeply divided between his own supporters and those of party chairman Nicolas Sarkozy. While the diminishing Gaullist old guard around Chirac maintains a veneer of social cooperation with the trade unions, Sarkozy promotes an extreme neo-liberal economic programme à la Thatcher, combined with law-and-order activism and xenophobia aimed against immigrants.

Sarkozy has repeatedly made known his intention to succeed Chirac as president. Last year, he conquered the leadership of the UMP against the will of the president, who had formed the party in 2002 in order to bolster his own rule.

The referendum's defeat has weakened Chirac and benefited Sarkozy, who, while loyally calling for a "yes" vote, always kept a certain distance from Chirac's campaign.

With Dominique de Villepin, Chirac has entrusted the leadership of the government to one of his closest and most loyal confidants. At the same time, he has called Sarkozy back into the government, appointing him as number-two man in his old job as minister of the interior, where, in the first Raffarin government, he made a reputation for himself as an indefatigable proponent of law and order and immigration controls.

De Villepin is a non-elected, aristocratic career diplomat and government servant. He was born in 1953 in Morocco and spent much of his youth abroad in Venezuela and the US. His diplomatic career also took him outside France. In 1984, he was appointed first secretary at the French embassy in Washington, and in 1989, he joined the New Delhi embassy. In 1993, he was head of Alain Juppé's staff in the ministry of foreign affairs, and in 1995, became Chirac's secretary general at the Elysée palace. He became foreign affairs minister in 2002 in Raffarin's first cabinet and later interior minister.

He, like many leading members of France's political establishment, is an *énarch*, a graduate of the elite ENA, National School of Administration.

He joined the Gaullist party, the RPR (Rassemblement pour la République), at the age of 24 and has remained a Gaullist ever since, but has never run for office. He met Chirac in 1980 and is one of his most trusted collaborators. His hour of glory was when, at the United Nations, he opposed the American invasion of Iraq and insisted on UN approval for any such measure.

The stand he took on this occasion and his urbane manner have won him a certain respect in France and undying hatred from the American Republican right. He correctly pointed out at the Security Council on February 14, 2003, just before the start of the war: "The option of war may a priori appear to be the quickest solution. But let's not forget that after winning the war it will be necessary to build the peace."

His appointment as prime minister is designed to buy Chirac some time, to maintain social peace in France and to keep Sarkozy at bay.

Sarkozy had sought to eliminate his main rival by underlining that a person who had not subjected himself to the ballot was not suitable. As speculation mounted as to whom Chirac was going to appoint as prime minister, Sarkozy declared, in a clear reference to De Villepin, "The

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ones that have the right to speak in France's name are those who have submitted themselves once in their lives to universal suffrage and succeeded in winning its confidence."

Chirac's choice was made somewhat easier by the fact that the vote against the European constitution was clearly directed against the liberal economic policies embodied by Sarkozy. As *Le Figaro* pointed out, quoting a source close to Chirac, "On Sunday, the voters said no to a free market Europe. Sarkozy embodies economic liberalism. He would not have been the appropriate response to the message from the voters."

By bringing Sarkozy back into the government, Chirac is trying to subject his rival to a certain discipline and control. The same paper commented, "The head of state has appointed the president of the UMP interior minister and number two in the government, 'because it is better to have one's enemies inside than outside,' as Francois Mitterrand used to say."

However, Sarkozy has shown no inclination to abandon his ambitious plans. As a condition for rejoining the government, he struck a bargain that was humiliating for Chirac, demanding that he should remain chairman of the UMP. This reversed Chirac's ruling that had obliged him to step down as treasury minister last year when he took up the chair of the UMP. Sarkozy can also remain as chairman of the Hauts-de-Seine department council.

He told the UMP parliamentary group on May 31 that he agreed to take the post of minister of the interior under de Villepin because he was convinced "there is no future if the 22 months to come [of the president and the government's term of office] are months of confrontation between the UMP and the government."

Wednesday's *Le Figaro* indicated the sharpness of the conflict within the UMP: "It was 9 a.m. yesterday morning, and by phone Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy said yes to each other. Not for the better, but to avoid the worst: the implosion of the party."

At a meeting of UMP members of parliament, Sarkozy drove home his point: "Either I'm outside the government and the fight begins this very afternoon, or I'm in it, and, in that case I can envisage a guarantee of unity." He concluded with a warning to Chirac and de Villepin: "Make no mistake, a change of people is not enough. A government cannot win trust if there is not a radical change of policy. Whatever happens, I shall remain chairman of the UMP. I was elected by the membership for three years, and I will carry out that job to the end."

A *Libération* reporter comments, "If it doesn't work, he will always find an excuse to slam the door on the government in a few months. And he'll be free to go for the campaign for the presidency."

This is the style of the street fighter. It gives an inkling of the kind of party he wishes to turn the UMP into and the kind of people he wishes to attract to it.

Libération quotes a young UMP deputy and gives a sense of the radical mood developing in the party: "Given the atmosphere in the group it's clear that we couldn't have swallowed the Villepin pill without Sarkozy. The other problem about this duo is that the challenge to the French social model has not been made. Chirac did not want to make a choice between the social model and the liberal challenge to it, and that leaves us rather doubtful about what will happen."

This makes achieving the objectives Chirac expressed when he announced his appointments seem somewhat unlikely: "In a spirit of uniting the party, I asked Nicolas Sarkozy to join the government as minister of state, which he accepted."

The president went on to say that the new government's priority would be employment and would demand a "national mobilisation" which he had decided to "inscribe resolutely in the respect of our French model."

"This model is not an Anglo-Saxon type of model, but neither is it a model synonymous with immobility," Chirac continued. "It is a model based on dynamism and individual initiative, on solidarity and social dialogue." He called on business and the trade unions to join and "win the fight for employment while remaining true to ourselves."

This feeble shot across Sarkozy's bows will not make much of an impression. Sarkozy has made it one of his main battle cries that the "French model" has to be abandoned in order to fight unemployment.

The "no" vote in the referendum has been called "a peaceful insurrection." Everyone is aware that it is a further expression of the massive working class opposition to the political elite, which showed itself in mass strikes and street demonstrations in defence of jobs, working conditions, wages, social and democratic rights throughout the Raffarin government. The movement in the bourgeoisie gathering behind Sarkozy shows that the period of arrangements cobbled together with the trade union bureaucracy—and a certain class peace—is coming to an end.

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