

The coronation of Nicolas Sarkozy

French interior minister named Gaullist presidential candidate

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The January 14 anointing of French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy as the presidential candidate of the governing Gaullist party, the UMP (Union for a Popular Movement), in this year's elections was a chilling spectacle.

In politics, it is necessary to avoid superficial parallels. Sarkozy is not a fascist and the Gaullist UMP is not a fascist movement—at least not at this point. Nevertheless, Sarkozy's style in many respects evokes disquieting memories of the most horrific period in European history.

There was the mass parade of 80,000 jubilant members of his party, which terms itself a "movement." There was the 98 percent result in the poll of UMP delegates in favour of his candidacy. And there was the non-stop invocation of honour, nation and patriotism.

Amidst the bombastic trappings more appropriate to the crowning of a monarch, Sarkozy used his acceptance speech at the UMP convention to condemn the class struggle and call for the surmounting of differences between left and right. "My France," he declared, "is that of all Frenchmen, who basically do not know if they stand on the right, the left or the centre because they are, above all, of good will."

He sought to reconcile the irreconcilable: "My France is the country which carried out the synthesis between the Ancien Régime and revolution, between the Capet state and the Republican state." He evoked the figure of the socialist opponent of war, Jean Jaurès, who was murdered at the start of the First World War, and Georges Clemenceau, the prime minister who in 1918 declared his intention of continuing the war to the bitter end. In the space of one sentence Sarkozy conjured up the revolutionary Danton, the colonialist Jules Ferry and the post-war French leader Charles de Gaulle.

He appealed to sacred tradition, saying, "We are inheritors of two thousand years of Christianity and its priceless spiritual values," and he identified his own personal "dream" of becoming president and making himself "useful for France" with "a victory for France." Modesty is not Sarkozy's strong suit.

Sarkozy knows neither parties nor classes, but only good and bad Frenchmen. His gushing rhetoric, his appeal to all Frenchmen irrespective of political, social or other differences is often dismissed as election campaign tactics, as an attempt to extend the electoral basis of his party beyond its traditional Gaullist constituency. There is more to it than that, however.

Sarkozy is attempting to develop a new mechanism to uphold the rule of the French bourgeoisie. His aim is to establish a bonapartist-type government with powerful authoritarian elements, which on the one hand is based on the state apparatus, and on the other on an amorphous mass of discontented middle class layers and disoriented sections of the working class. This aim underlies his social demagoguery, which recalls the demagoguery of a Mussolini, a Goebbels and other such

representatives of authoritarian rule.

He made a name for himself in the post of interior minister as a hard-line advocate of "law and order," as a right-wing provocateur and friend and ally of the police. According to press reports, he has personally shaken the hands of no fewer than 26,000 policemen.

As presidential candidate, he poses as the representative of a Republic that is based on "the values of order, service, work and responsibility."

Sarkozy dedicated a large part of his speech to outlining his vision of such a Republic. In this Republic, *égalité* does not mean social equality, but rather "equal opportunities for advancement." It is a Republic that is afraid "neither of orientation, nor of selection, nor of Republican elitist thinking," which "forms the basis for social ascent."

Every right implies obligations: "Obligations are the counterparts of rights." Nobody is to receive without contributing: "I suggest that no social minimum be granted without return in the form of socially useful activity."

Discipline and order are writ large among Sarkozy's priorities. He wants schools "based on authority and respect, in which the pupil rises when the teacher enters, where girls do not wear veils and pupils take off their caps."

Sarkozy's invocation of nostrums previously associated with fascist ideologues is most clearly revealed in his glorification of the concept of work.

The aim of the Republic, he declared, is "the acknowledgment of work as a source of property and property as the embodiment of work." He attributed the "moral crisis of our republican model" to the "devaluation of work." He added, "Work has been devalued, working France is demoralised."

The Gaullist candidate goes so far as to accuse the official French left of betraying the worker: "For a long time, the right ignored the worker, and the left, which once identified with the worker, eventually betrayed him. I want to be the president of France who restores the worker to the centre of society."

This avowed friend of French big business is even prepared to speak in favour of wage increases: "Work is not sufficiently recompensed, assessed, respected. Therefore, purchasing power is too weak, wages are too low and the deductions too high."

This type of two-faced glorification of work as the moral basis of society and capitalist property is a component of the corporatist ideology of fascism and is intrinsically opposed to the democratic and social rights of workers—in particular, the right to strike and organise. Work, according to the corporatist, is subordinated to the public interest, to society as a whole and to private property. Labour strikes offend such an ethic of work and represent egoistical and particularist interests.

Accordingly, Sarkozy combines his hymns of praise to work with legal restrictions on strikes in the public services. Such strikes have rocked the country at regular intervals over the past decade-and-a-half. In his speech, Sarkozy denounced strikers for turning public service clients into “hostages.” He is intent on pushing through a law this summer requiring the public sector to maintain emergency services and impose a secret ballot on all strike actions.

Within this reactionary context, he called for a mandatory six-month term of civil service for all young people—a kind of forced labour scheme.

Sarkozy began his tribute to the value of work with the words: “Work is freedom”—an expression, perhaps unintended, which recalls the motto writ large above the gates to the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz: “Arbeit Macht Frei.”

Sarkozy’s ascent to become the presidential candidate of the UMP was carried out against the opposition of the Gaullist old guard. In particular, President Jacques Chirac and his closest supporters opposed this outsider.

Sarkozy is the son of a Hungarian noble who immigrated to France after the Second World War and served five years in the French Foreign Legion. His mother was of Greek-Jewish origin. After his father deserted the family, his mother was forced to bring up her three children alone while pursuing a career.

Sarkozy drew from his childhood heritage a tireless ambition and drive to force his way to the top—whatever the odds. Unlike the other members of the political elite in France, Sarkozy did not pass through the cadre school École Nationale d’Administration.

His nomination as presidential candidate marks a political turning point that can be understood only against the background of the international situation confronting France and its sharp domestic tensions.

For many years, the French business and political establishment has sought to measure up to the challenges posed by globalisation and strengthen the country’s position on the world market by smashing up the social gains of the post-war period and implementing wide-ranging privatisations. On repeated occasions, it has encountered bitter opposition from broad layers of workers and youth.

Since 1995, the country has been repeatedly shaken by mass social movements which often lasted for weeks and could be brought under control only with the help of the trade unions, the official left parties and middle class radical groups. These organisations became increasingly discredited in the course of these struggles, while new social layers and younger generations who had little connection to the traditional parties and trade unions joined the protest movements.

In 2002, the French Socialist Party suffered a debacle when its presidential candidate, Lionel Jospin, lost out in the first round of the election to the right-wing extremist Jean Marie Le Pen. Since then, the Socialist Party—together with its hangers-on in the French Communist Party and radical groups such as Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire and Lutte Ouvrière—has moved sharply to the right. With the selection of Segolène Royal, the Socialist Party has adopted a presidential candidate whose programme rejects any form of liberal social reform and embraces the anti-welfare state, “free market” policies, immigrant bashing and law-and-order demagoguery at the core of Sarkozy’s programme.

Given the failure of past governments, whether headed by the Gaullists or the Socialist Party, to fully carry through the anti-working class measures—privatisation, labour “flexibility,” dismantling of the welfare state, deregulation of business, tax cuts for corporations and

the rich—demanded by the French corporate elite, French ruling circles are exploring new, more direct methods of imposing their dictates.

They are seeking a way out of the social deadlock that has forced them to moderate their attacks on the working class—as was the case last year with the withdrawal by the government of its “first job contract” scheme, the CPE. Hence the growing support within the ruling elite for Sarkozy.

In the past few weeks, prominent UMP figures such as former prime minister Alain Juppé and Defense Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie, a favourite of Chirac, have lined up behind Sarkozy. He also enjoys increasing support from French business circles. Among his sponsors and financial backers are such figures as armaments producer and publisher Arnaud Lagardère, the construction and television tycoon Martin Bouygues, and the head of the luxury group LVMH, Bernard Arnault.

Bonapartist forms of rule have a long tradition in France, from the first and third Napoleons to Sarkozy’s role model, General Charles de Gaulle, who established a regime in 1959 with powerful authoritarian tendencies.

There are fundamental differences, however, between the situation facing France in the 1950s and the present. De Gaulle took power at the peak of the Algerian war, when France was threatened with a collapse into civil war. The economic upswing of the following years, which brought rapid industrialisation and a shift of large layers of the population from the country to the cities, ultimately undermined his rule. One year after the 1968 general strike, De Gaulle was forced to resign.

A bonapartist-type government led by Sarkozy would neither grant social concessions nor increase the standard of living. Its task would be to suppress the resistance of workers and youth with brutal force. The authoritarian and fascist-type characteristics of his rule would emerge ever more clearly.

So far, despite the efforts by Sarkozy and his backers to create the social basis for such a regime, the result has been more apparent than real. The UMP spent no less than €3.5 million to organise its election pageant on January 14 and create the impression of a mass movement.

While the UMP has been able to treble its membership in the recent period, the fact remains that an overwhelming majority of the population, including broad layers of the middle classes, remain hostile to the official political establishment. This has been demonstrated repeatedly by widespread popular support and sympathy for anti-government social movements of students, youth and workers.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to underestimate the danger embodied in Sarkozy’s rise to prominence. His actual strength arises from the role of the so-called “left”—the trade unions and the left parties, including the radical left—which has repeatedly led these social movements into a dead end. The key to defeating the danger represented by Sarkozy is the building of an independent revolutionary party that is able to unite the working class on the basis of an international socialist programme.



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