

Nicolas Sarkozy wins French presidential election

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Nicolas Sarkozy will succeed Jacques Chirac as president of France on May 16. The leader of the right-wing Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), the party founded by Chirac, won yesterday's presidential election with 53 percent of the vote. His opponent, Socialist Party candidate Ségolène Royal, received 47 percent. At 85 percent, voter turnout was amongst the highest ever recorded. It was slightly higher than the 84 percent in the first round of the election two weeks ago.

Sarkozy's ascent to the highest office in the state marks a shift to the right in French domestic and foreign policy. The 52-year-old son of a Hungarian immigrant made a name for himself with his provocative attacks on impoverished youth and immigrants. He campaigned on a platform combining fervent nationalism with calls for law and order and neo-liberal economic policies. An active member of the Gaullist movement for three decades, Sarkozy has occupied ministerial posts for the last five years—first as minister of the interior, then of the economy, and then again of the interior.

Half an hour after the polling stations close on Sunday night, Sarkozy gave a public address. He began by describing his “unspeakable pride to belong to a great, old and beautiful nation.” After paying respect to Madame Royal and assuring her voters that he would be “the President of all French people and speak for all of them,” he interpreted the election results as a mandate for a fundamental shift to the right: “The French people have chosen to break with the habits and the ideals of the past. I will rehabilitate work, authority, morality, respect, merit! I will bring back to the French the pride to be French.”

While foreign policy had not played a major role in the election campaign, Sarkozy devoted a major section of his address to this subject.

First he assured his European partners, “that I have been pro-European all my life, that I believe in the building of Europe and that France is back in Europe this evening.” It was necessary however, he qualified his remarks, to recognise “the anger of the people who perceive the European Union not as a protection but as a Trojan horse for all the dangers that the changes in the world bring with them.” During the campaign Sarkozy insisted that he will never agree to an admission of Turkey into the European Union, even though the EU is presently negotiating a Turkish admission with French consent.

Next Sarkozy launched “an appeal to our American friends in order to tell them that they can count on our friendship ... I want to tell them that France will always be at their side when they need her.”

And finally he called for the building of a “Mediterranean Union” modelled on the European Union and for close collaboration with Africa—indicating the main areas of interest of French imperialism.

Ségolène Royal admitted defeat barely five minutes after the polling stations closed. Happily smiling she thanked her supporters and vowed that she would move the Socialist Party further to the right. “You can count on me on deepening the renewal of the left and in looking for new convergences beyond the present borders. This is the condition for future victories,” she said.

Dominique Strauss-Kahn, one of the heavyweights in the Socialist Party, described the election results—the third defeat in a presidential contest since François Mitterrand left office in 1995—as a disaster, for which the failure of the party to move sufficiently to the right was to blame. It was now high time to renew and open the party and to develop it in a social-democratic

direction, he insisted.

Similar conclusions were drawn by party chairman François Hollande. “We have not sufficiently understood the need to open up, to broaden our base”, he commented on the defeat.

In reality, the exact opposite is the case. The political rise of a right-wing figure like Sarkozy is the result of the shift to the right by the Socialist Party, the Communist Party and the petty-bourgeois left over the last three decades. Royal herself conducted an utterly right-wing campaign, partially modelling herself on British Prime Minister Tony Blair and competing with Sarkozy on nationalism and on being tough on crime.

Sarkozy was able to exploit the confusion and demoralisation this produced. He went out of his way to present himself as a representative of “hard working France,” as a man who rose from humble origins, who is opposed to the traditional political establishment, and who will make sure that work will pay off again.

Already in the last years of the Mitterrand presidency, the National Front of Jean-Marie Le Pen was able to make considerable inroads in poor suburbs with a high percentage of immigrants, exploiting the distress and fears of many of their inhabitants.

It is significant that 62 percent of those who voted for Le Pen in the first round supported Sarkozy in the second- and this despite of the fact that Le Pen himself called for an abstention. Only 12 percent voted for Royal, while the rest abstained.

At present, Sarkozy’s UMP has a huge majority in the National Assembly. This could change however after the elections due in June and July. A poll published on Sunday night sees the UMP gaining 34 percent, the Socialist Party 29 percent, the UDF 12 percent and the National Front 7 percent. The greatest strength of Sarkozy is the utter cowardice and the right-wing character of the misnamed “left.” Its further shift to the right and its refusal to conduct any serious struggle creates the conditions where Sarkozy has a chance of consolidating his parliamentary majority.



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