France: Sarkozy concentrates power in his own hands

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Newly elected French president Nicolas Sarkozy has used the first days in office to concentrate a broad range of power in his hands comparable only to that possessed by former French leader Gen. Charles de Gaulle. Even prior to the parliamentary elections in June, Sarkozy is undertaking a series of initiatives which will allow him to govern without any effective external control. To this end he is exploiting the constitution of the Fifth Republic to its limits—and beyond.

The current French constitution was tailored to suit the needs of its author, Gen. de Gaulle. Upon assuming power in 1958 at the height of the Algerian crisis, de Gaulle imposed a constitution which awarded huge authority to the president and severely limited the power of the National Assembly. The president not only appoints the head of government and presides over weekly cabinet meetings, he can also dissolve parliament at any time and thereby has powerful leverage over the elected representatives of the people.

There have been numerous changes in the way the constitution has been implemented since de Gaulle's resignation in 1969. In particular during periods of so-called "cohabitation," when the president and parliamentary majority have come from opposed political camps, the president has been forced to accommodate himself to the parliamentary majority, refrained from interference in domestic policy and concentrated on the prerogative of a French president—foreign policy.

Sarkozy has made clear that he now intends to fully exploit the authority of the presidential office and determine government policy down to the last detail. He has appointed one of his closest political allies, François Fillon, as head of government. Although the appointment of individual ministers is normally the task of the head of the government and not the president, Sarkozy's office has appointed all of the government ministers and presented them to the public. Even before effectively taking office, Fillon has been exposed as a mere instrument of the president.

Sarkozy's autocratic moves are not limited to controlling the machinery of government. He is also seeking to free himself from any control from within his own political camp, which is split into several opposing fractions. In so doing he is using the classic techniques of Bonapartist rule. He is seeking to create greater manoeuvring space for himself by navigating between the various parties and playing off one against the other, combined with demagogic, supra-class appeals to the "people."

This is what lies behind his stance of "opening up"—i.e., admitting members of other parties and humanitarian organizations into the government. His various initiatives—filling half the ministerial positions with women, appointing a cabinet minister of North African descent, attempting to integrate the trade union bureaucracy into the work of the government—all serve this purpose. Far from signalling a readiness to compromise, Sarkozy is providing himself the room he thinks he needs to implement a right-wing program. To date, any attempts to carry out such a program have been met with massive popular resistance and consequent crises for the French ruling elite.

In the final analysis Sarkozy's ability to pose as a strong president rests on the submissive attitude of the so-called French "left" and the trade union bureaucracy. Following the election campaign of the Socialist Party candidate, Ségolène Royal, who sought to outdo Sarkozy in terms of nationalism and law-and-order rhetoric, it is only logical that some of her followers have now switched to the camp of the winner.

The most prominent among them is the 67-year-old Bernard Kouchner, who has been appointed foreign minister in the new government. Kouchner is a co-founder of the organisation "Doctors without Borders" and was a member of the French Socialist Party until his latest government appointment. He served as state secretary and as minister under several Socialist Party prime ministers between 1988 and 2002. Between 1999 and 2000 he was the UN special representative in Kosovo.

Kouchner began his political career in the Communist Party before being expelled in 1966. Following a Red Cross deployment in Biafra he turned to humanitarian work, which he completely detached from any examination of the social and political roots of the various disasters. He endorsed the imperialist military interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo and later even supported the Iraq war.

Kouchner is useful for Sarkozy for a number of reasons; first, as a left fig leaf for the latter's right-wing social and domestic policies. Kouchner, for example, will collaborate on a regular basis with the new minister for immigration and national identity—Sarkozy confidante Brice Hortefeux—although Kouchner had described the very creation of such a ministry as a "historically scandalous decline" during the recent election campaign.

Second, Kouchner is useful as an advocate of "humanitarian" military interventions in Africa, which Sarkozy regards as one of the most important spheres of interests for French imperialism. Kouchner is keen to form an international "contact group," which will put pressure—including eventual military intervention—on Sudan because of the Darfur crisis. Kouchner has even endorsed a boycott of the Olympic Games in Peking in order to force China to break its trade relations with Sudan.

Third, Kouchner, along with Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, favours the passing of a pared-down European constitution without resorting to a fresh referendum. Kouchner also

favours improved relations with the US. However, as usual in French politics, the president will determine key questions of foreign policy, rather than his foreign minister.

Another former Socialist Party member, Jean-Pierre Jouyet, has joined the new government as undersecretary of state for European affairs. Unlike Kouchner, Jouyet never played a prominent role in the Socialist Party, but he does have a long career in important government posts—including deputy director of the cabinet of the former prime minister, Lionel Jospin. He maintains a close personal friendship with presidential candidate Royal and her partner, the chairman of the Socialist Party, François Hollande, going all the way back to their student days 30 years ago. Jouyet had already taken up leading posts in the Gaullist government three years ago.

Eric Besson, on the other hand, only broke with the Socialist Party during the election campaign. He was part of Royal's election campaign team as an expert for economic questions, but then attacked her publicly for refusing to explain how she would finance her proposed reforms. He has now been rewarded with the post of an undersecretary of state, with the task of evaluating government policy.

The fourth former "left" in the cabinet is Martin Hirsch, who until now headed the charitable Emmaüs institute for homeless people founded by Abbé Pierre. Hirsch has the pompous title "High Commissioner for Solidarity against Poverty," but lacks his own ministry or any administrative machinery. Formerly, Hirsch had occupied leading posts in the Jospin administrations, including under health minister Kouchner.

Hollande has publicly denounced the rebels as "traitors," while other prominent party members—including Ségolène Royal and former finance minister Dominique Strauss-Kahn—have demonstratively refused to condemn the defectors. They are keeping their options open for the possibility of future cooperation with Sarkozy, while former culture minister Jack Lang (also Socialist Party) has already met with the new president for a discussion.

Sarkozy has filled all the remaining ministerial posts—in particular those responsible for the interior (security), economic and social policy—with either close political allies or heavyweights from his Union for a Popular Movement (UMP).

The only exception is the defence ministry, which has gone to the leader of the parliamentary fraction of the right-wing UDF (Union for French Democracy), Hervé Morin. Morin supported the UDF candidate François Bayrou in the presidential election campaign, but then fully backed Sarkozy in the second ballot—in contrast to Bayrou, who made no endorsement. His appointment as minister is obviously aimed at undermining Bayrou's newly founded "Democratic Movement" in the upcoming legislative elections June 10 and 17.

The deputy head of government, with responsibility for the environment, energy and traffic, is Alain Juppé. Appointed prime minister by Jacques Chirac in 1995, Juppé had to step down in favour of the Socialist Jospin following a strike wave against his pension plans that paralysed the country for weeks. For some time Juppé was considered Chirac's heir-in-waiting, but then had to give up his own presidential ambitions following a corruption scandal.

The new interior minister is former defence minister Michèle Alliot-Marie—also a close confidante of Chirac. Her partner is Patrick Ollier, the UMP president of the National Assembly.

The justice ministry goes to 41-year-old Rachida Dati, daughter of a Moroccan father and an Algerian mother, from a working class family of 12 children. She represents an aggressive new generation of careerists. Her job will be to draw up and help implement Sarkozy's planned drastic tightening of the laws against young offenders.

The spheres of economics, social affairs and finance have been completely restructured by Sarkozy in order to impose his planned "reforms." Three established UMP members have been put in charge: the former social minister Jean-Louis Borloo takes over economics, finance and labour; the former health minister Xavier Bertrand is responsible for social affairs; and former undersecretary of state Eric Woerth is in charge of public finances and administration.

Sarkozy spent a remarkably long time ensuring the support of the French trade unions for his government. In the two days before taking office and appointing the government, he devoted several hours to individual discussions with the chairmen of the six largest union federations—all of whom subsequently declared their willingness to cooperate with his government.

Then Sarkozy's first official trip as president inside the country was to Toulouse, where he spoke to employees of Airbus threatened by mass redundancies. He later shared lunch with them in the canteen. Sarkozy promised to increase the share of the French state in the mother company, EADS, and revise the controversial reconstruction plan Power 8. He also guaranteed that the closure-threatened Méaulte factory in northern France would be kept open.

After the meeting union officials expressed enthusiasm for his visit. They are attracted to the pronounced nationalism that Sarkozy emphasizes in his economic policy. On the other hand, Sarkozy's pronouncement was greeted with alarm by the German government in Berlin, which fears a loss of its own influence in the pan-European aerospace company.

Nobody should deceived by Sarkozy's populist overtures. He is intent on using his presidential powers and the support of the trade unions to carry out the sort of attacks on social gains and democratic rights that have long been demanded by French big business circles and international financial markets.