

French parliamentary elections: The collapse of the ‘left’

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With two days to go before the first round of French parliamentary elections, a landslide victory for the Gaullist Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), the party of President Nicolas Sarkozy, seems to be a foregone conclusion. Opinion polls vary, but they all predict that the UMP will win between 400 and 460 out of 577 seats in the National Assembly. Presently, the party has a total of 359 deputies.

The main opposition party, the Socialist Party (SP), is not even claiming to be seriously challenging a UMP victory. Its secretary, François Hollande, announced that the party is aiming to win more than the “symbolic amount” of 120 seats.

“Achieving this level would be considered respectable by many Socialists,” Hollande said.

The Communist Party, a long-time ally of the SP, is teetering on the brink of disaster. It is expected to hold onto between 4 and 12 of its current total of 21 seats. It will almost certainly lose the privileges and funding that go to an official parliamentary group (which requires a minimum of 20 deputies). Already in financial difficulties, the Communist Party is rumoured to be contemplating selling paintings by Pablo Picasso and Fernand Léger, or even its Paris headquarters in the Place du Colonel Fabien.

The attempt by François Bayrou to set up a new bourgeois centre party, the Democratic Movement (MoDem), has faltered. Forecasts predict that his party will obtain only 2 to 6 seats. Almost all deputies of Bayrou’s former party, the Union for French Democracy (UDF), have defected to Sarkozy’s UMP.

The extreme-right National Front is also losing voters to Sarkozy. According to opinion polls, with around 6 percent support the party of Jean-Marie Le Pen stands to obtain its worst result since the 1980s.

The French majority voting system vastly distorts the real relation of forces. With a predicted 41 percent of the vote, the UMP would be able to win three quarters of the seats in the National Assembly, while the SP, with a predicted 29 percent, would win less than one quarter of the seats.

The system is constituency-based. In the first round on June 10 any number of candidates can run. In the second round on June 17, only candidates who won the votes of 12.5 percent of the electorate (not 12.5 percent of the actual vote) in the first round remain on the ballot. This produces a certain number of “triangulaires,” where three candidates are in contention.

Despite this, a political explanation must be given for the likely landslide victory of the UMP. After all, with 53 percent of the popular vote, Sarkozy’s victory in the presidential election on May 6 was comfortable, but not overwhelming.

Why is this man—who is deeply hated amongst large sections of youth and workers, who is notorious as a political polarizer and promoter of right-wing policies on issues such as immigration, labour laws and “law-and-order,” and whose close ties to the super-rich are public knowledge—is a position to base his presidency on a huge parliamentary majority?

The daily *libération*, which supported Socialist Party candidate

Ségolène Royal in the presidential race and expresses the outlook of the liberal middle class, already writes as though it were mesmerized by Sarkozy and suffering a kind of political paralysis. An editorial on Wednesday was entitled “Sarkozyraptor” and ascribed to Sarkozy the “jaws of a political velociraptor.”

Using the term “tsunami” to describe the inevitability of a UMP victory, *libération* warned: “The omnipotence of Sarkozy is a threat, even for the right, which will be tempted by a fatal *hubris*. If the left does not wake up, if the voter is not on guard, we risk five years of unitary rule. Dangerous ...”

The same fright and awe are expressed by the Socialist Party, which also prefers the term “tsunami”—a natural disaster—to justify its own impotence and cowardice in face of an impending UMP victory.

In fact, the secret of Sarkozy’s success is not difficult to understand. He is not the all-powerful figure, the “Sarkozyraptor” described by *libération*. Rather, his essential strength is the complete absence of any real political opposition. To put it more bluntly, the Socialist Party as well as the other sections of the misnamed “left” agree with him on all fundamental issues.

This was already clear in the presidential campaign, in which Ségolène Royal competed with Sarkozy on such standard right-wing themes as nationalism and “law and order.” It became even more obvious after the election, when Sarkozy started to recruit leading representatives of the “left” into his government.

Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, co-founder of *Médecins Sans Frontières* and long-standing Socialist Party member, is only the most outstanding example. There are many more, among them Martin Hirsch, the president of the charity *Emmaüs* of the late Abbé Pierre, and Jacques Attali, long a close advisor and confidante of former Socialist Party President François Mitterrand and author of a recent biography of Karl Marx, who has accepted the role of carrying out special missions abroad for the new president.

Some leaders of the Socialist Party may disagree with Kouchner’s decision to join Sarkozy’s government. But these are tactical differences; their political outlook is basically the same as Kouchner’s. Royal, who has emerged as the leading campaigner for the Socialist Party in the parliamentary elections, has already indicated her own readiness to collaborate with Sarkozy.

She stated that the Socialist Party deputies in the National Assembly would not mount a serious opposition to the UMP majority, whose victory she regards as a foregone conclusion. She told the press June 4, “I no longer agree at all with the theory of frontal opposition. French people no longer want to hear ‘we’ll repeal everything.’”

Referring to Sarkozy’s “opening up” to former Socialist politicians such as Kouchner, she asserted, “The right now speaks differently... If we display frontal opposition too much, we won’t be credible any more.”

Sarkozy’s prime minister, François Fillon, speaks of the Socialist Party with undisguised contempt, eschewing the usual diplomatic courtesy to parliamentary opponents observed by French bourgeois politicians. He

condemns its “moral imposture,” that of “lofty arid souls, who practice social justice like people squeamishly proffering a squashy toffee to people leaving a Sunday charity fair.” In comparison with the ruthless determination of the Sarkozy camp, the characterization is accurate.

Sarkozy has quite skilfully exploited the prostration of the “left” in his election campaign. The defection of Kouchner and others is a major factor in strengthening his electoral fortunes. He employs a huge staff of media experts and professional PR-specialists who proficiently utilize the confusion and demoralisation created by the collapse of the nominal “left” and decades of broken promises and betrayals by left-wing governments.

Sarkozy’s propaganda exploits the disorientation, the fear, the frustration and even the social anger produced by high unemployment, declining living standards and a society in crisis. The son of a Hungarian noble and friend of the rich has presented himself as an outsider, even as an immigrant, who has not passed through the cadre schools of the French establishment.

He has promised that everyone will get a chance, if he is prepared for hard work. He has contrasted the “honest” people to the petty “crooks,” contrasting those who get up early for work to the “lazy” ones who depend on the state. He presents himself as a politician who stands above the squabble between “left” and “right.” He has appealed endlessly to the “greatness of the French nation,” to pride in being French irrespective of one’s ethnic origin or the colour of one’s skin.

This has had a certain effect. Such appeals would have had little impact had the massive social opposition, which has expressed itself again and again in huge strikes and demonstrations over the last decade, found a political expression and a clear orientation. But, given the complete collapse of any meaningful opposition by the official “left,” Sarkozy’s right-wing populism was able to find a certain response among broader social layers.

There is, however, a huge difference between the Kouchners, Attalis, Socialist Party and trade union bureaucrats and environmentalists who are flocking to Sarkozy’s camp and the ordinary middle-class people and workers who vote for him out of exasperation. The former, frightened by the social chasm and mounting political tensions, are looking for a strong state to maintain order and protect their privileges. Kouchner, an early proponent of “humanitarian” neo-colonialism, is typical in this respect. The latter, although confused and disorientated, are looking for a way out of the social impasse.

Sarkozy’s presidency, despite its firm control over the state and its political institutions, is resting upon a society fraught with deep and explosive social divisions. This accounts for the numerous Bonapartist trappings of his regime.

Unlike previous presidents, he maintains strict control over every aspect of the work of the government. Ministers report directly to the presidential palace, and even press conferences on social and interior policy, normally the prerogative of the prime minister’s cabinet, are given by the president.

A massive UMP majority in the National Assembly will give Sarkozy virtually unchallenged power over the legislative and executive branches of the state, overriding a fundamental principle of democratic rule—the separation of powers.

As *libération* writes, “The president is not content to control the functioning of the government hour by hour, while supervising the life of the UMP minute by minute. He wants a deeply and uniformly blue (the colour of the UMP) parliament, giving him the legitimacy needed to implement his program of reforms.”

Sarkozy is deeply aware that the confusion produced by the collapse of the “left” provides him with only a brief time-frame to take the working class by surprise and implement his right-wing policies. This accounts for his widely reported hyperactivity. The social tensions will inevitably burst into the open.

In the 1993 elections, during the final stage of the Mitterrand

presidency, the Gaullist RPR (predecessor of the UMP) and the “free market” liberal UDF won 472 seats in parliament, and the Socialist Party was reduced to 53. But it took only two years for a massive strike movement to erupt, which brought the government of Prime Minister Alain Juppé to its knees. Juppé, by the way, is deputy prime minister in the present government.

The extreme volatility of French society should not be used, however, to suggest that Sarkozy represents no danger. Quite the opposite.

Many previous governments adopted an uncompromising attitude toward social movements, ended up in a deadlock, and were finally forced to concede—as it was the case with last year’s protests against the First Job Contract (CPE) Sarkozy is more flexible, ready to manoeuvre and utilize the support of the trade union bureaucrats and other forces. But there is no doubt that he will react with the utmost brutality should the situation get out of control. He is notorious for his intimate connections to the police and his political overtures to the National Front, which has some influence among the security forces.

Furthermore, Sarkozy has made no secret of the right-wing program he plans to implement in the initial months of his presidency. It is certain that he will use the legitimacy conferred on his administration by a large majority in the National Assembly to make further major inroads against the living standards of workers and their democratic rights.

Sarkozy can count on the support of all the main trade union confederations, which have already met with him twice. They have all agreed to work with the president and expressed the opinion that agreements can be reached on working conditions and pension rights.

Sarkozy has proposed laws that would allow for substantial negotiations between the government and France’s “social partners,” the employers and trade union representatives, allowing for industry-by-industry and sector-by-sector agreements. On the grounds of continuing to provide a certain level of public services, a sort of voluntary limitation on the right to strike is envisaged. This is to maintain conditions in which the union bureaucracies can remain on board to police the working class.

Similarly, ecology activists emerged from a round table discussion with Sarkozy and his senior ministers giving fulsome praise to the president and his elevation of environmental questions. This was followed by a personal visit from Dominique Voynet, presidential candidate of the Greens, with an offer to advise him on these issues.

It is imperative to draw the political lessons from the collapse and utter prostration of the so-called “left.” During the presidential election campaign, the *World Socialist Web Site* opposed all those who called for a vote for Royal to “stop Sarkozy.” This position has been proven to be entirely correct.

As long as workers are under illusions that the misnamed “left” represents a “lesser evil,” or that the Socialist Party can be pressured to act in their interests, Sarkozy and the reactionary forces he represents can have a free hand. The only way to prepare for the coming class confrontations is to build a new political movement of the working class, independent of the entire bourgeois political establishment, including its “left” parties, and based on an international socialist programme.



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