

France: political fall-out from Kouchner's calls for aggression against Iran

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French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner's calls for an aggressive policy against Iran has created anxiety within the French ruling elite, as the popularity of recently elected President Nicolas Sarkozy rapidly falls in opinion polls. Sections of the French bourgeoisie are not only concerned for their huge investments in Iran, but that Sarkozy may undermine his own government by becoming the Bush administration's junior partner in its war crimes.

On the September 16 edition of radio RTL's "Le Grand Jury" show, Kouchner said that it was necessary to prepare for "the worst" in regard to Iran, adding that "the worst, sir, is war." Kouchner revealed that the French general staff was making plans for attacks on Iran and endorsed the action, saying, "It is normal to make plans." Kouchner also said that the French government was discouraging new investment in Iran—even though French companies have already invested US\$30 billion there.

Other government officials later tried to downplay Kouchner's comments. In a televised interview on September 20, Sarkozy said, "I would not have used the word 'war.'" However, his subsequent comments demonstrated that he was mostly concerned that Kouchner had let the cat out of the bag.

Sarkozy added that "Iran is trying to build a nuclear bomb" and branded this as "unacceptable." This followed his August 28 foreign policy speech, in which he declared that should negotiations fail in preventing Iran from building a nuclear weapon, the only alternatives would be "an Iranian bomb or the bombardment of Iran." Sarkozy took up the subject again in his September 25 speech to the UN, saying that Iranian nuclear weapons would be an "unacceptable risk to regional and global stability."

Kouchner also met with US Secretary of State

Condoleezza Rice during a September 19-21 trip to Washington. A French diplomatic dispatch said the "regional situation" in the Middle East and the "Iranian nuclear question" were "at the heart of their meetings." Amid growing indications of impending US military strikes on Iran, Rice stated, "I think there is essentially no difference in the way [Paris and Washington] see the situation in Iran and what the international community must do, and we are going to work toward that."

All these comments have unsettled elements of the French ruling elite, particularly inside the ruling conservative UMP (Union for a Popular Majority), who worry that Sarkozy's unbridled assertion of the French bourgeoisie's interests—through massive social cuts against workers in France and a militarist alliance with US imperialism abroad—will be too transparently obvious to the public.

In an interview on September 23, former UMP prime minister (and Sarkozy rival) Dominique de Villepin said there was a "convergence, even sometimes an alignment on certain matters" between Sarkozy and the Bush administration. He noted that the Bush administration is a "lame duck administration, which has made many errors in foreign policy," citing Iraq.

Villepin had previously taken Sarkozy's government to task for its domestic policy. On September 21, he criticised Prime Minister François Fillon, who had the same day somewhat hysterically claimed that France is "in a state of bankruptcy, financially speaking." While insisting that it was impermissible to "take François Fillon to trial," Villepin noted that the 15 billion euro tax break for the top income bracket had "aggravated the financial situation."

On September 25, another former UMP prime minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, also criticised Fillon's comments, calling them "clumsy and inaccurate."

Citing Finance Minister Christine Lagarde's admission that she would pursue "austerity politics" towards public sector workers, as well as Kouchner's and Fillon's comments, Raffarin said, "Austerity, war, bankruptcy. Frankly, pay attention!"

Nevertheless, the government's admission that it is carrying out policies of austerity, war, and financial recklessness are entirely apt. Neither Raffarin nor Villepin—who both pursued social cuts while in office, leading to large-scale strikes in 2003 against Raffarin's pension reform plans and in 2006 against Villepin's job contract reforms—criticised the basic orientation of Sarkozy's domestic policy.

Significantly, Villepin also dealt with French domestic politics on September 23. On plans to force immigrants applying to rejoin loved ones already in France to submit to DNA testing, Villepin said, "I don't think it's constitutional and above all I don't think it corresponds to the history and state of mind of our country. Look at the other countries [who have DNA testing for immigrants]. The UK does not have our history, it did not go through the round-ups [*les rafles*]."

Villepin's reference to the French Vichy state's collaboration with Nazi Germany, during World War II, in rounding up French Jews for deportation to extermination camps, was a calculated signal to more historically conscious sections of the French elite. In cultivating a free-market style independent of France's existing, largely social-democratic forms of rule, Sarkozy has developed close links to European neo-fascism. He is the first President to invite Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of the neo-fascist Front National, to the Elysée Presidential Palace. He also has warm ties, including literary collaborations, with Italian "post-fascists" such as Gianfranco Fini of the Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance).

These warnings come amid rapid falls in Sarkozy's and Fillon's poll ratings—down 8 and 7 percent to 61 and 56 percent, respectively. The speed of the fall is far more important, moreover, than the fairly high numbers, which reflect the government's ability to falsely present its planned tax breaks and social cuts as somehow necessary and beneficial to all. These numbers are, however, revealed as hollow by strong opposition to key parts of its programme—the "social TVA" (cutting business taxes and financing social

programmes by higher sales taxes), for example, which receives only 30 percent support, reducing the number of public sector workers (opposed by 61 percent) and now war preparations against Iran.

The combination of anti-immigrant policies and increasingly slavish obedience to Washington in fomenting war in the Middle East is particularly explosive in France, which has large Muslim and North African populations. In line with his law-and-order and national-identity-based politics, Sarkozy targeted this population as interior minister under Raffarin and Villepin. Most famously, in November 2005, after two youths were electrocuted while fleeing police, Sarkozy's dismissive and insulting response to the event helped trigger nationwide protests and riots centered in immigrant suburbs.



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