

French municipal elections expose crisis of the political establishment

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The approach of the municipal elections in France, due to take place March 9 and 16, presents a picture of deep crisis of the entire political establishment.

The Socialist Party and its allies in the former Plural Left government have not recovered from their defeats in the 2002 and 2007 national elections. They are unpopular, deeply divided amongst themselves and paralysed by continuous infighting. President Nicolas Sarkozy, on the other hand, is rapidly losing support. Just nine months after taking office, his ratings are in free-fall. As a result, divisions are emerging in the ruling UMP (Union for a Popular Movement), and sections of the party are challenging Sarkozy's authority.

The municipal elections are developing into a testing ground for new political combinations and alliances. As class tensions are mounting, the ruling elite is moving closer together and the political distinctions between "far" left, left, centre and right are increasingly blurred.

A number of factors have contributed to the collapse of President Sarkozy's approval rating to 39 percent. First, there is the failure of his government to deliver on his electoral promises of enabling people to raise their living standards by their own efforts—"work more to earn more." As energy and food prices rise steeply, living standards are rapidly declining.

After the strikes of public sector workers in defence of pensions, purchasing power and jobs in the last three months of 2007, air transport workers, broadcasting employees and highly exploited workers in the retail industry have struck in 2008. After the first-ever national strike of retail workers on February 1, workers at the Carrefour hypermarket in Marseilles remained on strike for two weeks, and walkouts have taken place at 17 McDonald's restaurants in France's second largest city.

Inside the UMP, Sarkozy's arrogant style of leadership, concentrating all decision making into his own hands, has provoked growing dissent in the party's ranks. And his recruitment of high-profile Socialist Party figures for government positions has created a lot of resentments amongst those who were passed over for the jobs.

Most emblematic of the fissures in the party is the fiasco of the town hall candidate lists for Neuilly, the wealthiest municipality in France, where Sarkozy was mayor for many years. He decided to place his Elysée Palace spokesman, David Martinon, at the head of the UMP slate for the town and provoked a rebellion from the local party branch, supported by his own 21-year-old son, Jean Sarkozy. After much undignified manoeuvrings, a list headed by non-UMP right-winger Jean-Christophe Fromantin is being supported by the UMP national leadership, while the candidate of the local UMP, Arnaud Teullé, has been expelled from the party for insisting on presenting a rival local UMP slate.

Headlines have proclaimed that Sarkozy "is losing control." A roundup of the provincial press gives a flavour of the deflated image of the president: "the preposterous goings-on in Neuilly, the most bling-bling [conspicuously wealthy] municipality in France," "Comic opera coup," etc.

Sarkozy's public display of his love affair with model and singer Carla

Bruni was the last straw. In a country where the office of president has traditionally been identified with all the pomp and dignity of an absolute monarch, an aging president displayed on the front page of every celebrity magazine in his bathing trunks flirting with a scantily clad model was too much for the conservative, and to a large extent Catholic, grass roots of the UMP.

Jean-Louis Debray, president of the National Assembly and a member of the Gaullist old guard, has publicly condemned the ostentatious display of the president's private life. The ruling elites fear that Sarkozy will undermine the credibility of the French state and its most powerful institution, the presidency.

The Socialist Party has come forward as its most staunch defender. Ségolène Royal, the SP presidential candidate in 2007, concerned for the image of the head of state, said: "We expect of him good behaviour, distance, a certain bearing.... When a head of state diminishes our country's prestige to a certain extent, this means economic damage." Royal did not call for Sarkozy's resignation but admonished him in the fashion of a schoolmarm: "As he has still four years to go, I hope for the sake of the country that he will pull his socks up." SP first secretary François Hollande commented: "As one could imagine, it isn't as funny any more; the presidency of the Republic is discredited."

The press is well aware of the crisis that has gripped the presidency. *Le Monde* February 12 commented: "Nicolas Sarkozy made known his intention to get involved and make these [municipal] elections into a national event, before changing his mind on account of the bad opinion poll results. The tactical retreat of the president was approved by the outgoing UMP mayors, worried lest his growing unpopularity should taint their campaigns. But his omnipresence, the focus of attention around him, has nevertheless transformed these municipal elections into a personal test."

Opinion polls suggest that a majority of UMP mayoral hopefuls will fail to win these lucrative and influential posts.

While Sarkozy's own egomaniac behaviour has played a role in undermining his authority and credibility, there are much deeper roots to the present crisis.

The political and economic weight of French imperialism has been in decline for more than a century. However, in the period after the Second World War, France was still a major European power dominating the European Economic Community in close alliance with Germany. German unification and the expansion of the EU to 27 members have undermined France's weight in Europe. And the aggressive foreign policy of US imperialism, the rise of China and the resurgence of Russia have weakened France's international standing.

Sarkozy has tried to overcome these problems by pursuing an activist and often erratic foreign policy. But rather than solving the problems, his actions have served to underline them. Selling Airbus planes and nuclear plants to Libyan leader Gaddafi, saving a corrupt regime in Chad, freeing hostages in Colombia in collaboration with Venezuelan leader Chavez or

setting up a navy base in Abu Dhabi cannot reverse a deeply rooted historical trend.

The problems of France, aggravated by the world financial and banking crisis, cannot be resolved without accelerating the erosion of the living standards and social rights of the mass of the people. French big business is acutely aware that Sarkozy is far from having finished the job. The crisis facing the French economy can best be gauged by the following figures: Germany achieved a trade surplus of €199 billion in 2007 and has reduced its budget deficit from 3.3 percent of the GNP in 2005 to 0.6 percent, while France chalked up a trade deficit of nearly €40 billion in 2007 and a budget deficit of over €38 billion, 2.1 percent of the GNP.

Le Monde infers that France will have to imitate Germany, where “the reforms were notably imposed on the labour market in order to reestablish the competitiveness of German businesses. The brunt of these measures, aimed at improving competitiveness of German businesses by diminishing the cost of labour, were largely borne by families. By thus creating a competitive deflation in Europe, Germany won enormous market shares over its European partners who did not apply the same policies.”

The political crisis has led to hectic activities in all political camps—UMP groups setting up dissident lists; Socialists moving into the UMP or aligning themselves with François Bayrou’s Democratic Movement (MoDem); “far” lefts allying themselves with the Socialist Party and dropping their identification with Trotskyism; etc.

In Mulhouse, eastern France, whose Socialist Party mayor Jean-Marie Bockel defected to Sarkozy, participating in his government team, most of the Socialist Party group have left the SP and formed the *Gauche Moderne* (Modern Left), which enjoys official UMP support. A UMP councillor is heading a dissident UMP candidate list. In Nice, former UMP mayor Jacques Peyrat heads a list in opposition to the official UMP candidate Christian Estrosi.

The MoDem, which emerged from the right-centrist party of former president Valéry Giscard d’Estaing and was always allied with the Gaullists, is now participating in UMP as well as in Socialist Party lists in different town hall contests. In Bordeaux, it is in an alliance with Alain Juppé, a former Gaullist prime minister. In Dijon, the MoDem has a first-round alliance with SP leader François Rebsamen, in a combined list with the Communist Party. Rebsamen is a supporter of Ségolène Royal, the SP’s 2007 presidential candidate.

The Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR) and Lutte ouvrière (LO) have reacted to the lack of any political representation for the working majority of the population by moving further to the right.

LO, best known for its spokesperson and presidential candidate since 1973, Arlette Laguiller, has made it a principle for more than 30 years not to form any electoral alliance with the Socialist or Communist Party. This year, to the surprise of many commentators, LO has decided to seek electoral alliances with both of them. Under conditions where both the SP and the CP are largely discredited in the working class, LO has decided to embrace them and provide them with a left cover.

In the past, LO has often chided the LCR for its opportunist alliances with these two parties, characterising the latter as defenders of the interests of French imperialism at home and abroad. For example, during the 2001 municipal elections, a statement in LO’s weekly paper criticised the LCR for participating in lists with Plural Left parties: “For our part, we consider that there is an irreconcilable opposition between the governmental left running to the best of their abilities the affairs of the bourgeoisie, that is to say that of the bourgeois parties, and what must be the policy and the course of revolutionaries who claim to act in defence of the political interests of the workers.”

This year, LO is negotiating participation in joint slates with one or both of these “governmental left” parties in more than 50 towns. These include some of France’s major municipalities, several in the Paris region, three in the Marseilles region, and the industrial town of Clermont-Ferrand.

LO has taken disciplinary measures against the minority tendency *Etincelle* (Spark), which refused to accept this course and decided to stand an independent list in one town. *L’Etincelle*, which has existed for more than a decade inside LO, is no longer allowed to publish its own views in the party’s press.

LO’s embrace of the Socialist Party, which is rapidly moving to the right, tells a lot about its social and political orientation. Despite its workerism, which has become Arlette Laguiller’s trademark, it largely identifies the working class with the trade union bureaucracy, particularly that of the Stalinist-dominated CGT (General Confederation of Labour). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the decline of the Communist Party and the loss of membership of the trade unions, LO is utterly pessimistic as to the capacity of the working class to oppose capitalism and embraces the rightward-moving bureaucracies.

LO spokesperson Georges Kaldy justified this about-face: “We are not offering our services to the SP, but where the left might be replaced by the right or could win back a town, we discuss. We do not want the vote for us to give an advantage to the right.... In 2001, we did not want to give support to the left, which was in power. The election of Sarkozy and his general offensive has changed the situation.”

Thus, LO now casts the “left” of Ségolène Royal and Dominique Strauss Kahn, the director general of the International Monetary Fund, and their Stalinist allies as a real alternative to the other capitalist parties.

The LCR has responded to the crisis of all bourgeois parties by proclaiming a new “anti-capitalist party” that casts off all previous reference to Marxism and Trotskyism. The new party will be open for radicals of every description—anarchists, former Stalinists, supporters of Che Guevara, anti-globalisation activists, feminists, ecologists. It rejects any form of political and theoretical commitment.

Such a party serves to fill the void vacated by the SP and the CP and to prevent workers, who no longer believe in a reformist solution to the social crisis, from adopting a Marxist perspective. Unencumbered by any Marxist or Trotskyist pretensions, it can adapt opportunistically to all political forces and circumstances.

The senior leader of the LCR, Alain Krivine, at a public meeting with senior SP leaders at the Théâtre du Rond Point last December, reassured them that the new anti-capitalist party did not involve a fundamental break with the SP. “I must immediately make it clear,” Krivine stated, “that, for me, the enemy is not the SP but Sarkozy and the Medef [employers association].”

Unlike LO, which appears to be on the brink of dissolution, the LCR sees a clear role for itself, which it can only play by appearing to be politically independent of the discredited “governmental left.” This explains its urgent protestations that it will refuse to make any electoral alliances with the SP or the CP. It intends to use the municipal elections as a means of establishing this new party, embracing CP and SP dissidents and other left groupings.

Notwithstanding the LCR’s declarations of independence, there are some joint slates with the SP and the CP. The list for the northern town of St. Quentin comprises the SP, the CP, the LCR, LO and the PT (Workers Party). At La Seyne sur Mer, a town of 60,000 inhabitants in the south, there is a list comprising the LCR, the PT and the CP.



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