

Divisions in ruling party

Former Prime Minister de Villepin signs appeal directed against French President Sarkozy

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27 February 2008

With French President Nicolas Sarkozy facing growing opposition from within the political establishment as well as the population at large, the political weekly magazine *Marianne* has published an appeal by leading French politicians of various parties calling for “republican vigilance.”

The appeal, dated February 15, is the first open manifestation of opposition by a significant section of the media and political establishment to the way Sarkozy and his government are handling attacks against the working class and reacting to the economic and political crisis internationally. It comes during the run-up to municipal elections to be held next month.

The list of 17 signatories brings together leading figures of Sarkozy’s own UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) with the leaders of the major opposition parties. Heading the list is 86-year-old Pierre Lefranc, former head of General de Gaulle’s cabinet, followed by Dominique de Villepin, UMP prime minister until 2007, Ségolène Royal, the 2007 presidential candidate of the Socialist Party, and François Bayrou, head of the Democratic Movement (MoDem), a remnant of ex-president Giscard d’Estaing’s Union for French Democracy (UDF).

Also on the list are Jean-Pierre Chevènement of the Citizens Movement and Noël Mamère, a former presidential candidate of the Greens.

The appeal does not directly mention Sarkozy. Instead, the signatories stress that, despite “different sensibilities and very different positions on a number of important political issues, they share a number of common convictions and values they intend to reaffirm.”

These include opposition to personal rule, defence of a free press, defence of secularism, maintenance of

cooperative relations among rival political parties, and fidelity to the main line of French foreign policy over the last 50 years.

Marianne has published the appeal with an introduction that leaves no doubt that it is meant as an attack on President Sarkozy. It reproaches him, amongst other things, for having marginalised the prime minister and his government by imposing decisions taken by his presidential “court” of councillors, and attempting to impose a personalist form of rule which, according to the appeal, “comes close to an elective monarchy.”

Marianne concludes: “If leading political personalities who normally clash on the public stage, and have done so for years, take the risk of placing their names below a common text, only days from an election which the president himself has said will be of critical political importance—an appeal, moreover, that includes the signatures of several men and women of the republican right—then it is because the political context created by eight months of Sarkozyism is a completely unprecedented one.”

The thrust of the appeal is an attack on Sarkozy from the standpoint of defending the traditional forms of rule and institutions of the Fifth Republic, particularly that of the presidency, which, they infer, he has abused.

The reaction of Sarkozy’s camp, which seemed to have been caught wrong-footed, was virulent and vindictive. Not answering the appeal on its content, the government instead called the signatories “a coalition of revanchists” and a collection of “the losers and the embittered.”

On a campaign tour for the municipal election in Brittany, Prime Minister François Fillon launched a bitter tirade against the signatories of the appeal. “This

determination of certain political figures, who have not been elected by the French people ... to attempt to destabilise the president of the republic is, in my view, profoundly shocking and profoundly undemocratic,” he declared.

Fillon was pointing particularly at Bayrou and Royal, Sarkozy’s opponents in the last presidential election, and Villepin, who made a bid against Sarkozy for the presidential nomination of the UMP. Fillon also spoke of a “witch-hunt” against the president.

The appeal reflects sentiments that are widespread within the ruling elite. There are growing differences over basic questions of both foreign and domestic policy.

One of Villepin’s main criticisms of Sarkozy is his repudiation of the old Gaullist doctrine of a France that is not closely aligned with other powers—in particular, with the United States. He shares this concern with sections of the establishment that are perplexed by the economic and political decline of France and demand a more “rational” response to it.

There is a growing sense that the crisis facing the French bourgeoisie cannot be resolved other than through a systematic attack on all social provisions and welfare, and scepticism that Sarkozy is capable of carrying through such an attack.

What is striking is not only the open attack on the head of state, but the fact that politicians from across the French political spectrum have come together and presented a common platform. There had been a general blurring of differences between the parties of the political establishment in recent years, but this is the first time their leading personnel have taken a common initiative.

It is an initiative that could well lead to a realignment of political forces within the French political establishment, one which is perhaps foreshadowed in the campaign for the upcoming municipal elections.

This was acknowledged by Ségolène Royal herself. *Le Monde* reported two days after the publication of the appeal in *Marianne* that “Ms. Royal believes that this appeal reveals ‘convergences.’”

The newspaper went on to quote the former Socialist Party presidential candidate as saying: “It is coherent and continues the values promoted during the election campaign, which allowed a dialogue to begin with François Bayrou. We witness a misappropriation of the fundamental principles of the republic, such as secularism and the impartiality of the state. The solitary method and exercise of power discredits France abroad and prevents, finally, any reform. It is precisely because I am for

reforms that a proper functioning of institutions is indispensable.”

Bayrou said of the appeal: “The multiplication of mishaps is an obstacle to the implementation of necessary reforms. One cannot come across a major official today, except one who is in the government, who is not alarmed.”

Bayrou said he had “absolutely no doubt about the feelings” of other heavyweights in the “republican right” who, according to him, share the criticisms made in the appeal. “If some of them have not signed, it is only for reasons of political expediency.”

The initiative taken by *Marianne* has been hailed by a number of daily papers and political publications. This is not the first time Jean Francois Kahn, the founder of the weekly magazine and ex-publisher of another political magazine, *Evenement du Jeudi*, has organised such a “united platform.”

It was no other than *Marianne* and Kahn who organised the event at the Bataclan Theatre in central Paris in the spring of 2002 that provided a joint platform for almost all parties that had participated in the first round of that year’s presidential election. That vote shocked the political establishment because the incumbent Socialist Party prime minister, Lionel Jospin, came in third behind the neo-fascist candidate Jean Marie Le Pen, setting off a runoff between Le Pen and the incumbent Gaullist president, Jacques Chirac.

All parties across the official political spectrum, including the Communist Party and the Greens, eventually joined by the “far left” Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), gave their support to Chirac, who was depicted as the saviour of the Fifth Republic. The meeting at the Bataclan Theatre kicked off the “rally around Chirac” campaign.

Chirac was re-elected with 82 percent of the vote, and went on to impose a series of attacks on working class wages and social conditions.



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