

France: political crisis destabilizes Sarkozy

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10 March 2008

Barely nine months into a five-year term, French President Nicolas Sarkozy is encountering widespread opposition that threatens to grow into a full-scale crisis. His approval rating is collapsing, amid the discrediting of his campaign promises and growing popular resentment of his policies, as well as his ostentatious personal style. Bourgeois politicians and the press are increasingly criticizing his demeanor and questioning his fitness to rule.

Whatever popular appeal Sarkozy initially had as president — which was his largely by default, through the rottenness and conservatism of the Socialist Party and the official French left — has been shattered. He has not, of course, been able to deliver on his promise to increase workers' purchasing power by jump-starting the French economy with pro-business policies; the global economy has seen to that. His openly anti-democratic appeals to religion or law and order, are provoking increasing hostility.

According to a CSA poll released on February 29, Sarkozy's approval rating stands at 33 percent, with 61 percent disapproving of his performance; 56 percent of those polled said that Sarkozy "does not represent the office of president well." For 65 percent of those polled, Sarkozy "is not doing what he should to unify the French people."

In a further sign of the political crisis in France, a full 75 percent of those polled thought the Socialist Party — the main left opposition party in France — would do no better than Sarkozy at governing the country.

Sarkozy was elected on the basis of a pledge to the French bourgeoisie to deal decisively with the social welfare protections enjoyed by the French working class. This was somewhat hidden from the French masses, however, to whom he presented the slogan: "Work more to earn more." Bitter experience has now shown that Sarkozy's promises to increase purchasing power and employment were largely smoke and mirrors.

Price inflation has skyrocketed for many food items and has been widely reported in the French press. Among the largest increases between November 2007 and January 2008 were, according to a survey by the magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur*, yogurt (up 17-40 percent), milk (20-37 percent), pasta (44-45 percent), rice (10-18 percent), camembert cheese (12-32 percent), butter (19-26 percent), breakfast cereal (14-24 percent), white breads (6-22 percent) and ham (18-44 percent).

At the same time, European Union (EU) Economic and Monetary Affairs Commissioner Joaquín Almunia recently lowered his predictions for 2008 euro-zone economic growth from 2.4 to 1.8 percent, with France's economic growth estimated at 1.5 to 1.7 percent. Almunia cited the US credit crisis as a major factor

in the downgrade.

As the economy increasingly cuts into purchasing power, however, Sarkozy finds himself in the uncomfortable position of having awoken expectations in the working masses that he is in no position to meet. As leader of the French state, he has little influence over many of the causes of the inflationary and recessionary tendencies in the global economy — for instance, the explosion of world oil and natural gas prices, which is pumping inflation into all parts of the world economy, and the rapidly developing US subprime and credit crises.

There are growing signs of a shift of mood in the French working class. Particularly noteworthy, in addition to continued demonstrations against Sarkozy's social austerity politics, has been the outbreak of several highly unusual, large-scale strikes in the private retail sector.

French political circles also fear that Sarkozy's uncouth style and lack of decorum threaten to discredit the presidency. In a widely reported incident at the February 23 Agriculture Exposition in Paris, a man refused to shake hands with Sarkozy, telling him that it would "make me dirty." Sarkozy responded with crude slang and an obscenity, prompting widespread condemnation in the press.

The center-left daily *Le Monde* commented in its February 25 editorial: "The head of State has confirmed the impression that he does not exercise sufficient control over his impulses to represent a serene and self-controlled presidency."

In a round-up of 15 negative press commentaries on the incident, *Le Nouvel Observateur* quoted *La République des Pyrénées*: "[Former Presidents] De Gaulle, Pompidou, Giscard, Mitterrand, and Chirac had to, more than once, deal with public insults, or even spittle on their suit. But each found a way to dominate his emotions and to face his critic with the sovereign indifference that befits the head of State. ... Nicolas Sarkozy is not of that caliber."

Sarkozy's ostentatious public relationship with former supermodel and songwriter Carla Bruni — with whom he traveled over Christmas in financier Vincent Bolloré's private jet to luxury quarters in Luxor, Egypt — has further alienated the population. Sarkozy married Bruni, his third wife, on February 2.

The relationship has also contributed to the failure of Sarkozy's clumsy attempts to woo the religious right. This contradiction was perhaps best expressed by his December 20, 2007, speech to the Lateran Palace in Rome. Press coverage in the lead-up to the event was dominated by speculation as to whether the twice-divorced Sarkozy would dare bring his girl-friend with him as he spoke to the Catholic hierarchy.

Ultimately, Sarkozy left Bruni behind. He then delivered an

almost comically bizarre speech, in which he staked a claim to a special French relationship with the Church rooted in the Christian conversion of the late 5th-century Germanic chieftain Clovis, who ruled large parts of what is today France — as well as on a tententious list of Catholic French artists.

Sarkozy's latest move towards the religious right, sending public greetings on February 24 to the ordaining of four ultra-traditionalist ("Lefebvrist") deacons who insist on celebrating Mass in Latin, was widely criticized in the press. In an article pointing out that Lefebvrists are engaged in technically illegal occupations of churches in France, the daily *Libération* quoted Catholic journalist Christian Terras: "In Nicolas Sarkozy's mental architecture, there is no secular Republic that can exist in a higher sense. The higher sense, for him, is religion. ... In the current context where he is falling in the polls, religion is a refuge for him."

The Teaching League (Ligue de l'enseignement) has launched a petition, titled "Protect the Republic's secularism," which has garnered 100,000 signatures over the past month.

Sarkozy has advanced a new law proposing that criminals after serving 15-year sentences or more may not be released and be held indefinitely in preventive detention. The Constitutional Council, while not opposing this serious incursion of the state into civil liberties, balked at it being applied retroactively to those sentenced before the measure had become law. A fundamental tenet of the rule of law (*l'état de droit*). Thus, it would not come into effect for at least 15 years.

Sarkozy tried to circumvent the decision of the Constitutional Council on the principle of non-retroactivity. He wrote a letter to Vincent Lamanda, president of the First Appeals Court, asking him if it were possible to "adapt our law," posing as a defender of the victims of violent crime: "Behind these dry legal facts, we're dealing with human dramas."

Sarkozy's proposal was itself unconstitutional, as Article 62 of the French Constitution specifies that one cannot appeal the decisions of the Constitutional Council. In response, French legal circles launched a petition, titled "Appeal for a citizen's movement," calling on Sarkozy to "conform" to the Constitution and concluding: "If our complaint is not received, we, sincerely democratic citizens, declare that Mr. Nicolas Sarkozy, President of the Republic, will have then lost all legitimacy, will no longer be able to exercise his supreme duties, and will be responsible for drawing all the necessary conclusions."

The growing crisis of Sarkozy's presidency bears out the *World Socialist Web Site's* appraisal of him when he was elected president: "This pompous, obsessively ambitious and often inept careerist draws his strength from the absence of any independent working class policy. A bold political offensive would rapidly cut him down to size."

For the French bourgeoisie, these developments pose the question: is Sarkozy a reliable guarantor of their profit interests, both in the domestic sphere—in terms of cuts in jobs, living standards, and social welfare—and also on the international stage, where many larger economic problems threatening the French bourgeoisie will be settled? Question marks linger not only over Sarkozy's capabilities to control the French working class, but

also over the viability of his foreign policy.

The rapid rise of the euro against the dollar — and Sarkozy's inability to push the euro lower by overcoming the European Central Bank's hostility to lowering interest rates — increasingly threatens French industry's position on international markets. *Le Monde* published a February 26 article, "The decline of 'Made in France'," noting that in 1978, 25 percent of the French workforce worked in industry and 14 percent in retail; the figures are now reversed. It added that employment would be squeezed as major French manufacturing firms — carmakers Renault and Peugeot-Citroën and the cement firm Lafarge—moved their operations abroad.

Offshoring also requires the French state to develop methods of political or military coercion to control local governments and trade routes. Until now, such measures have not fully born fruit. Sarkozy's plans for a Mediterranean Union, that would give French imperialism better control of and access to cheap labor in North Africa, are running into determined opposition inside the EU, especially from Germany. French proposals to participate in NATO in exchange for control of NATO's Southern Command in Naples, which oversees the Mediterranean, have also fallen through.

Sarkozy's announcement February 28 while in Cape Town, South Africa, of the renegotiation of all French military agreements with African countries raised eyebrows, with *Libération* describing it as a "kick to France's African preserve."

The decision to swing behind US imperialism in the Middle East, while not yet openly contested, has already generated significant controversy. It represents a significant shift in French foreign policy, which opposed the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner's September 16 announcement that the French military was preparing for war with Iran as a US ally provoked enough opposition that Sarkozy ultimately said he would not have used the word "war."



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