

France: Political fallout from troop deployment to Afghanistan

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President Nicolas Sarkozy's decision to send more troops to bolster the US-led occupation of Afghanistan has become the subject of heated debate in French political circles. The main subject of contention is not support for the occupation, which is unanimous inside the French ruling class. Rather, the French bourgeoisie worries that, coming on the heels of the government's defeat in the March 16 local elections, its open contempt for democratic procedures in sealing a closer alliance with crisis-ridden Anglo-American militarism risks further destabilising internal French politics.

Sarkozy first announced the deployment to eastern Afghanistan of another battalion of ground troops—roughly 700-1,000 men, according to various press reports—in a March 26 speech to the British Parliament, during his state visit to the UK. The initial announcement was confirmed in his April 3 speech at the NATO summit in Bucharest, at which Sarkozy added that France would plan on rejoining NATO's military command structure in 2009, which France left in 1966 at the initiative of then-President Charles de Gaulle.

The deployment to Afghanistan, which would place the new troops near already deployed French forces in the Afghan capital, Kabul, would release US Marines to reinforce Canadian troops in the most violent southern provinces, Kandahar and Helmand. France currently has 1,600 troops, 280 military trainers and six fighter jets in Afghanistan. It also has three ships in the US-led fleet in the Indian Ocean, south of Afghanistan.

Sarkozy is sending troops to Afghanistan with total disregard for the wishes of the French people. According to a BVA poll carried out for *Sud-Ouest*, 68 percent of the population disapproves of the troop deployment, with only 15 percent supporting it. The poll found 65 percent opposition to the US-led occupation.

The government, recently weakened by its defeat in the March 16 municipal elections, decided to push the deployment through without a parliamentary vote. The task of defending this unconstitutional and antidemocratic decision fell to Prime Minister François Fillon, in an April 1 speech to the National Assembly, asserting unlimited executive power.

Fillon said: “[Parliament] does not share responsibility for engaging our armed forces. One reason explains this. The

Constitution of the Fifth Republic does not require it. Its Article 35 (“the declaration of war is authorised by parliament”) has today fallen into disuse. Modern forms of war have taken us away from this article. The engaging of military forces depends on executive authority and notably on the President of the Republic, who leads the armed forces.”

Fillon noted that this violation of the Constitution relied on precedents set by the Socialist Party (PS), the main opposition party to Sarkozy's conservative UMP (Union for a Popular Movement). In particular, he cited the 2001 decision by then-Prime Minister Lionel Jospin of the PS, in collaboration with the conservative parties led by then-President Jacques Chirac, to participate in the initial US deployment to Afghanistan without a parliamentary vote.

The PS responded by preparing a formal motion of censure against the government to be submitted before the National Assembly—a move calculated to provide a simulacrum of real debate over government policy, and to trap working-class opposition behind the PS.

It immediately split over the content of the motion, with PS General Secretary François Hollande initially proposing a general criticism of the government's social and foreign policies. Ultimately, former Prime Minister Laurent Fabius carried the day with a proposal to focus only on criticising Sarkozy's rapprochement with Washington and his plan to send troops to Afghanistan. According to the conservative daily *Le Figaro*, a PS deputy quoted Fabius as saying, “This will allow us to split the majority by ‘tickling’ old-fashioned Gaullists and nationalists hostile to NATO.”

The PS was careful to emphasise its continued support for the occupation of Afghanistan. Jean-Marc Ayrault, leader of the PS group in the National Assembly, said, “Let's not make any false accusations: we are not trying to abandon Afghanistan.” Various PS figures, including former Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, added that they were merely opposed to sending more French troops to Afghanistan.

The PS submitted the motion of censure to the National Assembly on April 3, citing Sarkozy's departure from established French foreign policy and his lack of consultation with the National Assembly before announcing the Afghan troop deployment. The debate and vote will take place on April

8. At the request of Bernard Accoyer, head of the UMP group in the National Assembly, the debate will be broadcast on national television.

The attempt by the PS to appeal to disaffected UMP elements and simulate opposition to Sarkozy's policies comes as the government's popularity is again plunging, after its defeat in the local elections. A CSA poll for *Le Nouvel Observateur* found a further fall in Sarkozy's approval rating, to 30 percent, with 60 percent indicating disapproval of his policies. Significantly, 72 percent thought the PS would do no better or even worse than Sarkozy, were it in power.

The French ruling class fears that an attempt to continue forcing through Sarkozy's unpopular social cuts risks triggering an explosion of resentment in the working class, with unpredictable consequences. Sarkozy's limited ability to appeal to working-class voters on the basis of promises to jump-start the economy with US-style deregulation has evaporated in the face of growing inflation, falling purchasing power, and an economic slowdown tied to the US financial crisis.

The daily *Le Monde* titled its March 28 lead editorial "Social Impasse," noting that with stagnant employment and falling projections for French economic growth, it was difficult to finance certain limited measures—housing subsidies, income supports, etc.—that the government had hoped to propose in order to win working-class acceptance for its anti-social reform programme.

Though the PS's moves are largely designed to draw off popular resentment of the government, they also expose significant divisions inside the French ruling class over how to deal with the increasingly unstable world economic and military situation.

Sarkozy's decision to rejoin the NATO command structure after 40 years is part of an overall strategy to bring France more closely in line with Washington and London, which corresponds to real political challenges facing the French bourgeoisie. On the one hand, France is increasingly unable to compete with Germany inside the EU—with German industrial predominance in cheap-labour countries of eastern Europe, its closer ties to Russia, Europe's main supplier of petrochemicals, and its largely successful campaign to hold down the wages of the German working class.

The French bourgeoisie has proposed a Mediterranean Union, which would help it develop its access to cheap labour in North Africa. It is also aggressively pursuing military basing rights and oil and natural gas contracts in the Middle East, notably in the United Arab Emirates. However, such a policy is predicated on good relations with the US, which is the dominant military power in the region. The current government is, moreover, very aware that the crisis of US imperialism in the Middle East could lead to larger struggles against imperialism that would be extremely damaging to its interests.

As Prime Minister Fillon stated in his July 2007 inaugural address to the National Assembly, "For centuries, France, and a

few other nations, politically and economically dominated the world. This unequaled power allowed us to build a rich and prosperous civilisation. Today, the world is waking and taking its revenge on history. Entire continents seek progress..... This new historical reality, both anguishing and fascinating, has demanded and demands more than ever that France make a long-delayed effort."

Along similar lines, in a September 2007 editorial that cited the changing political climate in Middle Eastern countries, *Le Figaro* claimed that the oil industry's "balance of forces promises to be increasingly unfavorable" to "industrialised democracies like France."

Sarkozy's solution to these growing difficulties has been to attempt to bolster Washington, with various public visits and the current troop deployment. However, there are few illusions in French ruling circles that an extra 1,000 men could really help the US reestablish its position in Afghanistan. US General Dan McNeill, for instance, has repeatedly noted that standard US counterinsurgency doctrine would call for 400,000 troops to pacify Afghanistan—over 300,000 more than the number currently available to him.

The criticism of Sarkozy's foreign policy reflects growing nervousness that, although there is no obvious alternative course, Sarkozy is hitching France to a country whose foreign policy has been disastrously unsuccessful of late. Thus, the PS's Ayrault criticised, in announcing the motion of censure, the risks of "sinking into the quagmire of a conflict with no goals and no end in sight" by sending French troops to Afghanistan to satisfy Sarkozy's "Atlanticist obsession."

The conservative *Le Figaro*'s editorial on Bush's trip to the Bucharest NATO summit was equally cutting: "If the US president is willing to draw up an honest balance sheet of his policies, he will find that he leaves behind a weakened Atlantic alliance, militarily in trouble in Afghanistan, politically divided faced with an increasingly aggressive Russia, and still hesitant about its missions.... This is a sad result for a presidency which was in the beginning placed under the sign of the use of force in the interests of a conquering ideology."



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