

French president lashes out at popular opposition

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French President Nicolas Sarkozy has become embroiled in a controversy after making comments preceding a lengthy television interview on France 3 public television June 30, on the eve of assuming France's presidency of the European Union. The unofficial video of the remarks, made just before Sarkozy was to be interviewed by a panel of journalists, revealed the mutual hostility existing between the president and wide layers of the population.

Having been driven past a crowd of demonstrators protesting his plan to personally nominate the head of public television, Sarkozy said "Hello" to a technician clipping a microphone to his tie and received no reply. The technician's cold shoulder elicited from the president: "It's a question of upbringing ... When one is invited [by France 3], one is entitled to get a 'Hello' at least. Either that or you're not in the public service, you're part of the demonstrators ... It's incredible ... and serious."

Referring to the protest outside the station, Sarkozy quipped, "All that's going to change." The union members involved accuse Sarkozy of wanting to destroy public television and bring back a state-controlled media.

Minutes before going on air, Sarkozy tried to engage one journalist who had been demoted from his position two years earlier. "Good to see you, how long is it since you were suspended? I protested at the time." Then he suggested to his interviewers that they ask him a question about an incident in Carcassonne in which a soldier used live ammunition during a military show and injured 17 civilians. "You don't want to ask a question about Carcassonne?" hinted the president. The question was duly added to the list.

The embarrassing video appeared on the popular news site Rue89, and spread to other web sites. Nearly

one million people had seen the offending footage within hours.

In a statement July 1, France 3 denounced the leaking of the video: "The management has launched an internal investigation and also condemned, in the strongest terms possible, the piracy of images shot during the preparation of the special interview, which was attended by the President of the Republic yesterday."

A day later, France 3 lawyers demanded the withdrawal of the video and its destruction, plus information as to how the video was procured and its source. Rue89 replied, saying, "This is unknown: a section of the media that threatens another to reveal its sources. ... But generally, it's the state that initiates these sorts of steps, which generally arouse, and quite rightly, protests from journalists' organisations." Rue89 refused to acquiesce.

The threat was withdrawn after the head of the France 3 News Service and journalists intervened.

The tensions between Sarkozy and the four public service television channels have come to a head after weeks of criticism by the president of their program quality, but especially his decision to change their status and organisation. From January next year, advertising will be halted on public channels, whose loss of revenue is supposed to be compensated for by a 0.8 percent tax on the turnover of Internet and mobile telephone providers. The dropping of advertising on public television will mean more income for private television stations. The now autonomous parts of public television will be centralised into one company.

This financing is estimated to be totally insufficient, leaving a gap of €300 million a year that the governing body of public television, France Television, fears may result in "a major financial and social crisis." The head

of France Television, Patrick de Carolis, publicly rebuked Sarkozy July 2. “When you say there is no difference between public and private television, I think that’s false, I find that stupid and profoundly unjust. If I see that I do not have the means to do my job ... I will say ‘stop.’”

Financing apart, the announcement a week earlier by Sarkozy that the head of France Television will in future be nominated by himself and the prime minister, and merely confirmed by the public Audiovisual Commission (CSA), has proven immensely unpopular. Previously this nomination was the work of the CSA. Sarkozy’s move is generally seen as an effort to incorporate the media into an obedient element of the state machine, the situation in the 1960s under General Charles de Gaulle. The positions of director general and president of the ORTF television and radio station company were decreed by the government along the lines of the BBC in Britain.

During the June 30 television interview, Sarkozy justified his new policy, saying, “How can you run an organisation, 6,000 [staff members] at France 3 and 11,000 altogether, with presidents who change every three years? We will know who is responsible for the good and bad programs. When the team does its job it will continue, when it doesn’t, it will change.” He continued, “I will not see the public service as a small sect which belongs to a few micro-organisations that go onto the streets [to protest] from time to time.”

A poll conducted after the Sarkozy interview found that 71 percent were against the appointment of the head of France Television by the president.

Nevertheless a spokesman for Sarkozy’s ruling Union for a Popular Movement, Frédéric Lefebvre, called for a public apology from Patrick de Carolis for daring to oppose the president’s plans for public television. He demanded that “Carolus’s team get to work on the content [of programs].”

Minister of Culture Christine Albanel was equally indignant, “It’s not normal to pronounce certain adjectives, like ‘stupid’ or others, it’s not possible, really it’s not possible. You can’t say that of the President of the Republic, of the shareholder who has just expressed himself on France 3 television.”

A poll conducted for *Le Parisien* newspaper on July 2 and 3 indicated that Sarkozy’s approval rating has fallen to its lowest point since his election in May 2007.

Only 36 percent of those questioned supported the president’s policies, down from 39 percent in June. A year ago polls indicated a 65 percent approval rating.

Consumer confidence in France dropped in June to its lowest levels since records began, under the impact of soaring energy and food prices.



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