

French regional elections: second round confirms rejection of ruling party

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The second round of the regional elections on March 21 confirms the massive rejection, in the first round a week ago, of the austerity policies associated with President Nicolas Sarkozy.

The opposition Parti Socialiste (PS)-led “Union of the Left” coalition won 21 of metropolitan France’s 22 regions. Sarkozy’s UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) only kept control of Alsace, having been ousted from Corsica, which it previously administered.

The PS ran with the environmentalist Europe-Ecologie party, who won an unusually large 12 percent share of the first-round vote, the Stalinist Parti Communiste Français (PCF), and the Left Party of ex-PS minister Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Although these “left parties” stood separately from the Socialist Party in the first round, they had long agreed that they would merge their lists in the second round. This coalition is widely seen as potential vehicle for the PS to return to power in the 2012 presidential elections.

The coalition won 54 percent of the vote nationwide, against 27 percent for Sarkozy’s UMP. Other lists associated to the PS—in regions where it ran outside the “Union of the Left” coalition—won a further 10 percent of the vote. The neo-fascist Front National took 6.5 percent of the vote.

In the 12 regions where Jean-Marie Le Pen’s National Front (FN) had had the required 10 percent of the vote to stand in the second round, it pushed up its share to 17 percent, from an overall vote throughout France of 11.4 percent. Jean-Marie Le Pen’s score in the PACA (Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur) region rose from 22.5 to 24.9 percent. His daughter Marine’s vote, in the de-industrialized working-class heartland of Nord-Pas-de-Calais, went from 18 to 22 percent.

In the overseas territories, a PS-led coalition won 75 percent of the vote in Guadeloupe; the Parti Populiste

Martiniquais won 63 percent of the vote in Martinique. Parties affiliated to the UMP carried Guyana and Réunion.

As in the first round, the vote was marked by large abstention. In all, 49 percent of France’s 44 million registered voters abstained—down slightly from 53 percent in the first round, a record since the founding of the Fifth Republic in 1958.

The press treated the landslide against the UMP as a severe personal set-back for Sarkozy. “Since last night, our hyperpresident has become a hyper-loser,” commented *Le Progrès de Lyon*. The business daily *Les Echos* asked, “Will Nicolas Sarkozy outgrow his self-satisfaction, which he has been arrogantly cultivating until now?”

Associates of ex-Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, Sarkozy’s most visible rival inside the UMP, said Villepin would make an announcement on March 25. Pro-Villepin UMP deputy François Goulard announced that Villepin would found a “movement to serve France,” which would be founded as a political party this June.

Sarkozy announced a cabinet reshuffle yesterday, removing Labor Minister Xavier Darcos, who received only 28 percent of the vote as head of the UMP list in Aquitaine. As Labor Minister, he would have been tasked with carrying out planned pension cuts; he was replaced by Budget Minister Eric Woerth. UMP deputy François Baroin, seen as close to former conservative President Jacques Chirac, will replace Woerth.

The election results underline above all the social gulf between the voters demanding social changes, and a sclerotic political establishment committed to pressing social attacks against the population. They come also amid growing concern in the working class over the austerity packages forced on workers in Greece by the

financial markets and the government of social-democratic Prime Minister Giorgios Papandreou.

The entire political establishment insists that social cuts must continue. In line with EU policy, the government's stability plan aims to cut state expenditure by €100 billion by 2013. The budget deficit stands near 9 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), and the national debt is now moving towards 80 percent of GDP.

For the UMP, a major priority is to continue the negotiations with the trade unions, planned for July, on cutting pensions. Prime Minister François Fillon declared Sunday, "The people are right: our lifestyle is threatened. But it is not threatened by the reforms. It is threatened because, without reforms, we would not be able to finance it anymore."

Jean-François Copé, the head of the UMP group in the National Assembly, insisted that the government had to proceed with "vital reforms" such as pension and budget cuts. He added an anti-democratic call for a "return to the values of the Republic," including a ban on the burqa in France.

The trade unions and the ex-left played the main role in promoting the right-wing PS. The ex-left Nouveau Parti Anti-capitaliste (NPA) national statement elections asserted, "The defeat of the right is good news for those who are suffering from the effort of social demolition being carried out by Sarkozy these last nearly three years."

With boundless hypocrisy, the CGT trade union—as it prepares its recommendations on pension cuts to the government—issued a statement calling for "other orientations on economic and social questions."

In fact, the few frank comments by PS politicians on their program stress that the PS remains committed to bank bailouts and social cuts. In January, PS First Secretary Martine Aubry proposed working with the government to cut the deficit by a 2-year increase in the retirement age.

Jacques Attali, a prominent advisor to President François Mitterrand of the PS, gave an interview on March 20 to the center-left daily *Le Monde*, urging Sarkozy to stand firm: "Of course, he must continue with his reforms.... And to do that he must accept being unpopular provisionally, explain the necessities of long-term reform, as is the case with pensions, dependency and many other issues."

Le Monde economic commentator Antoine Delhommais offered a remarkable comment on the views of leading politicians. He wrote that they "today have only the choice of lying, if only by omission, if they want to guarantee their own survival."

Delhommais painted a not-unfaithful portrait of the opinions of a political class united by its acceptance of the profit principle and of the prerogatives of the financial aristocracy. Were they to tell the truth, Delhommais continued, they would say, "the hardest part is to come. First of all, unemployment is not going to decline.... The only chance for France to improve its competitiveness and to stay in the race, will be to tighten belts hard on wages, as the Germans have been doing for years. You will be earning less, but you will work more and longer, in order to hope to have a barely decent pension. With reduced social security, because the welfare state, given the national debt, is finished. Finished. To reduce our deficits and repay our debts, you will have to pay more taxes too—you, but also your children and grandchildren. That's about the only way of escaping the fate of Greece, and that's not even certain."

Were they to speak honestly, the trade unions and ex-left would add, "We agree, and our empty phrases and occasional one-day demonstrations are meant only to let you blow off a bit of steam, while we arrange the social cuts that will be carried out against you."



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