

France's UMP changes name to "The Republicans" in run-up to 2017 elections

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On Saturday, ex-President Nicolas Sarkozy organized a national meeting in Paris to officially change the name of the right-wing Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) to Les Républicains (LR, The Republicans). In the days before the Paris meeting, UMP members voted on the change via the Internet; 83 percent voted for it, and 96 percent voted for the new statutes. Less than half of UMP members actually voted, however, and only Sarkozy's supporters campaigned.

While the name change seeks to provide the UMP with a democratic veneer, it reflects the accelerating anti-democratic turn of the entire political establishment, symbolized by the normalization of the neo-fascist National Front (FN) of Marine Le Pen in the French ruling elite.

A key purpose of the name change was to stop the FN from lumping together and denouncing both the UMP and the ruling Socialist Party (PS) under the term "UMPS." The term has become symbolic of popular anger with the reactionary policies of austerity and war advanced by both the UMP and the PS, which are largely indistinguishable from the standpoint of working people.

Le Monde cited Sarkozy: "'There is no way we're using the word party and even less an acronym, in order to stop the FN denouncing the UMPS ... I'm fed up of using acronyms which don't mean anything and allow themselves to be caricatured', thunders the ex-president."

The FN's growing media and political presence has led to widespread discussion of a "tripolarization" of French official politics, long polarized between the PS and UMP. The FN has made electoral gains based on the widespread rejection of austerity policies of first Sarkozy's UMP government (2007-2012) and now the PS government of President François Hollande. In the

latest local elections in France, the FN polled over 30 percent of the vote. The UMP name change is a belated reaction to these events.

Sarkozy ran his presidential campaigns and his 2007-2012 presidency based on chauvinist, law-and-order appeals to FN voters, to divert popular opposition by stimulating nationalism and racism. The other main factions in the UMP/LR, led by ex-prime ministers Alain Juppé and François Fillon, propose in contrast to orient to "center right" parties like Union of Democrats and Independents (UDI), and possibly the PS beyond.

With the name change, Sarkozy is trying to re-establish his hold on his fractious and deeply divided party. During the Paris meeting, Juppé and Fillon faced organized whistling and booing by Sarkozy supporters when they spoke on the platform.

Juppé has demanded that the presidential primaries of the right be open to the right-center parties like the UDI, otherwise he will not participate. "If they will be primaries of 'The Republicans,' I will refuse to participate. They must be the Primaries of the right and the center..." Juppé wants a vote of "two, three, four million Frenchmen, as the Socialist Party had" in 2011, before the 2012 presidential elections. The press is now speculating that Juppé could run as an independent candidate; he has a 72 percent popularity rating in the opinion polls.

Since Sarkozy was elected president of the party, he has maintained a joint leadership with representatives of the other tendencies of the UMP/LR, including Juppé and Fillon. However, there have been many well publicized confrontations, divisions and battles taking place in the leading committees of the party.

Disagreements over the party's attitude to the FN have become ever more acrimonious as the FN's electoral support has grown, and the party is mired in

countless financing and corruption scandals related to Sarkozy's 2012 presidential election campaign and his role in the 2011 Libya war. (See also: Scandals grow in wiretapping of ex-French President Sarkozy)

Only hours after the Paris meeting, Sarkozy announced an abrupt change of course, reorganizing the leading committees to form a closely-knit leadership and prepare for the 2017 presidential elections. *Le Monde* reported: "We have to rework the party organization", said Mr. Sarkozy to a friend. 'We have modified the name and the logo thus we cannot just carry on with the same team', explained his collaborators."

While the factional struggle inside the UMP/LR is increasingly bitter, this does not reflect greater support for democratic rights from Juppé, Fillon, or any other faction of the ruling establishment. The entire ruling elite is moving ever more towards anti-democratic forms of rule. Both the PS and the UMP/LR have taken up law-and-order themes classically associated to the FN, including the ethnic cleansing of the Roma, bans on Muslim religious clothing such as the burqa, and the mounting presence of police and the army across France.

Hollande has used the terrorist attack on *Charlie Hebdo* to deploy tens of thousands of troops onto the streets of France. The government has passed laws to retroactively legalize illegal NSA-style mass spying on the population. While various factions of the political establishment posture as more democratic by criticizing the FN, the ruling class as a whole is building up the infrastructure of a police state behind the backs of the workers.

The divisions inside the political establishment are increasingly over how best to brand the banks' agenda without provoking an explosion of discontent in the working class. Despite his monumental unpopularity, President Hollande is trying to win support from the ruling elite for another term, and arguing that, were he to be re-elected, Sarkozy would provoke as much anger as he did in the final months of his 2007-2012 term.

In a recent interview, PS leader Jean-Christophe Cambadélis argued that "François Hollande can bring people together better than Nicolas Sarkozy, this will be his strength as a candidate in 2017. His is a better president in troubled times than Mr. Sarkozy. ... He has always attempted to find a way that leads neither to

social protests nor to punishment from the financial markets."

For Cambadélis, Hollande's merit compared to Sarkozy is that he works better with the unions and pseudo-left parties like the New Anti-capitalist Party to halt strikes, stifle popular opposition, and continue imposing policies of austerity and war demanded by the financial markets.



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