

French presidential election 2017

## Right-wing candidates' debate advocates austerity, police-state measures

Kumaran Ira  
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On October 13, TF1 television held a first debate between presidential candidates of the right-wing Les Républicains (LR) party participating in the party's November 20-27 primaries. The debate—the first major event of the French 2017 presidential campaign, watched by 5 million viewers—confirmed that the entire ruling class intends for incitement of anti-Muslim sentiment and police-state forms of rule to become permanent features of political life.

The candidates, while carefully avoiding mention of the Syrian war and the rising danger of a NATO war with Russia over Syria, unanimously supported deep attacks on workers' social rights and police-state measures such as the current French state of emergency.

The seven candidates included the front-runner, former Prime Minister Alain Juppé, former President Nicolas Sarkozy, and other, more minor candidates who trail them in the polls.

In an initial statement explaining why he is running, Juppé declared, "I want first to restore the authority of the state and the dignity of the presidential office." He called for "a strong state against terrorism and illegal immigration, eliminating the scourge of unemployment, eliminating obstacles to job creation and profoundly renovating our training system."

This amounts essentially to continuing the police-state build-up, austerity measures, and handouts to big business carried out by the current, discredited Socialist Party (PS) government. Juppé called for up to €100 billion in budget cuts, raising the retirement age from 62 to 65, €28 billion in corporate tax cuts, cuts to family benefits, eliminating 250,000 public sector jobs, and strengthening security services including the police

and *gendarmerie*.

Juppé's reactionary economic proposals are barely distinguishable from those of Sarkozy, who has built his campaign around appeals to French ethnic identity and appeals to neo-fascistic sentiment. Sarkozy is pledging to eliminate outright the wealth tax on individuals whose net worth is over €1.3 million, and to cut 300,000 public sector jobs.

Juppé also wants to give extraordinary power to the police authorities. He supports Sarkozy's calls for the internment of individuals with "S" files, that is, whom the intelligence services have classified as threats to French national security, based on judicial review. They both advocate harsh measures to block immigrants coming to France and to expel undocumented immigrants.

The debate largely focussed on stigmatizing Muslims. Candidate Bruno Le Maire called for a "fight against political Islam," insisting that wearing a burqa should be a crime.

Sarkozy, who introduced the burqa ban while in power, wants to extend the ban on the Muslim veil in schools to universities, hospitals and all public institutions.

Juppé has at times expressed concerns over the domination of the presidential election campaign by anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim agitation, making mild criticisms of his rivals. However, he continues to back measures targeting Muslims and immigrants.

Juppé is positioning himself to profit from a collapse of the PS in the elections due to its unpopularity. It is expected that the PS will be eliminated in the first round, and the neo-fascist National Front (FN) would qualify easily to the second round, facing a right-wing

candidate. Juppé is presenting himself as a more “moderate” candidate who can rally disappointed PS voters as well as right-wing voters against Marine Le Pen of the neo-fascist National Front (FN) in the run-off.

He appeals to voters disappointed by PS President François Hollande with vague calls to build “a path of hope.” This has become the basis for an international media campaign to present Juppé as somehow a palatable alternative to LR’s turn far to the right.

After the debate, Germany’s *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* wrote, “No, not all the LR candidates are going along with this march to the right. Alain Juppé, the liberal conservative front-runner in the primary, somewhat opposes Sarkozy’s excesses. He warns of ‘civil war’ and does not want to collectively exclude all Muslims.”

Yves-Marie Cann of political consulting firm Elabe, told BFM: “Alain Juppé, because of his statements and his campaigning style, seems more moderate than a Nicolas Sarkozy, who deals in invective and makes caricatured statements. Juppé seems to appeal more to reason and has a far more balanced posture in what he shows to the broader public.”

The notion that Juppé is a “moderate” alternative to Sarkozy is a political illusion. To be sure, amid the emergence of a three-party electoral system in France—between PS, LR, and FN voters—he is orienting more to winning PS votes, while Sarkozy is more obviously seeking FN votes. However, on the fundamental issues of war, austerity and attacks on democratic rights facing workers in France and across Europe, the differences between all three of the major parties are minimal.

The PS has stoked up anti-Muslim, law-and-order hysteria after the Paris terrorist attacks carried out by Islamist networks used by the NATO powers in their regime-change war in Syria. Hollande has taken over much of the FN’s programme—imposing a state of emergency, forming a National Guard, and trying to legitimate the Nazi Occupation-era policy of deprivation of nationality—as he sought to fashion a political base to impose unpopular wars and austerity measures.

Sarkozy and Juppé both ran discredited governments that carried out deep attacks on the working class. If elected, both would immediately move to impose wars, austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights.

As a former prime minister under then President Jacques Chirac, Juppé introduced free-market reforms attacking the social security system, which provoked the railroad strikes of November-December 1995.

As president from 2007 to 2012, Sarkozy imposed a series of austerity measures during the 2008 global economic crisis, shut down many plants, and introduced pro-business reforms including pension reform, provoking the 2010 oil strike. As foreign minister under Sarkozy, Juppé played a key role in launching Sarkozy’s war in Libya, under the fraudulent cover of protecting Libyan civilians’ human rights.



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