

# François Hollande declines to run for re-election as French president

Kumaran Ira  
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On December 1, President François Hollande of the Socialist Party (PS) announced that he would not run for re-election in next year's French presidential election. This is the first time since the creation of the office of the French presidency, at the beginning of the Fifth Republic in 1958, that a president has not sought to win a second term.

In a surprise 10-minute televised speech from the Elysée presidential palace, Hollande said, "I have decided not to run in the presidential elections for my own succession." His decision came as the field was opened for PS presidential candidates to run in the party's primary.

Hollande's decision not to seek a second term had been widely predicted given his status as France's most unpopular president ever. He regularly receives a single-digit approval rating in polls, which have also found that if the election were held today, he would come in fifth in the first round of voting and be eliminated from the runoff.

Hollande also tried to justify his presidency, citing his unpopular budget cuts: "I acted with the governments of [prime ministers] Jean-Marc Ayrault and Manuel Valls to rebuild France and make it fairer. Today, as I speak, the budget has been repaired, Social Security is balanced and the country's debt has been preserved."

After Hollande's announcement, Valls declared his candidacy for the PS primary and resigned as prime minister; he was replaced by former Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve yesterday. Valls said, "I am running because France must use all of its weight in a world that no longer is what it once was: terrorist threats, rise of the far right ... I want a France that is independent and unbending on its values."

For now, polls show Valls is the front-runner among PS presidential candidates, leading former Economy

Minister Arnaud Montebourg.

Valls belongs to the more explicitly right-wing sections of the PS and has repeatedly stated that the PS should remove the word "socialist" from its name, because "it doesn't mean anything anymore." He became prime minister in 2014 after being interior minister, and supported intensified austerity as well as the state of emergency imposed last year. Valls took the unprecedented action of threatening social protests against the PS labour law with a police ban, and repeatedly used article 49.3 of the French constitution to impose the law without a vote in the National Assembly.

Hollande's decision to not seek a second term comes as the PS faces its deepest crisis since its foundation in 1971. The PS expects a major setback in the 2017 presidential elections, in which the neo-fascist National Front (FN) would win the first round, eliminating the PS candidate. It is unclear whether the PS would even be the main opposition party if either the FN or the right-wing *Les Républicains* (LR) wins the elections.

Hollande was therefore prevailed upon to allow Valls to run in the PS primaries, due to take place on January 22-29.

The 2017 French presidential election marks a lurch to the right by the ruling elite, amid growing instability across Europe following the Brexit referendum in June and the election of Donald Trump as the US president in November. Far-right nationalist forces are gaining strength across Europe, exploiting growing social anger against EU austerity measures and diverting it along chauvinist lines. In France, the FN benefiting is from the discrediting of the PS, posing as an alternative to traditional parties of the French establishment, the PS and LR.

The collapse of the PS is the result of deep

disillusionment among the masses with its anti-worker record. Whenever it held office—under François Mitterrand as president (1981-1995), during the Plural Left government led by Prime Minister Lionel Jospin (1997-2002), and under Hollande since 2012—it ditched its electoral promises and attacked the working class.

Hollande came to power in 2012 by criticizing the policy of his predecessor, the unpopular right-wing incumbent Nicolas Sarkozy, declaring that “austerity is not France’s fate.” After his election, however, he embarked on EU-led austerity measures and imperialist interventions in the Middle East and Africa, above all in the former French colonies of Syria and Mali.

Over the last four years, Hollande implemented sweeping austerity measures and pro-business reforms that slashed workers’ living standards and sent unemployment soaring. Under the so-called “Responsibility Pact”, the PS imposed more than €50 billion in social cuts and €40 billion in cuts to corporate taxes. Along with his pro-business spending cuts, Hollande oversaw plant shutdowns including PSA-Aulnay and Goodyear-Amiens, slashing thousands of jobs.

While attacking workers’ social rights, the Hollande government deepened its attack on basic democratic rights, with measures to expel Roma and dismantle their encampments in France, in order to appeal to the FN electorate. The most notorious was the deportation of a 15-year-old Roma schoolgirl, Leonarda Dibrani, who was ordered off a school bus and deported to Kosovo. Thousands of students marched across France, denouncing Hollande’s repression of immigrants.

As his presidency went on, it became ever clearer that Hollande was seeking to sustain his policies of militarism and repudiating all the social gains won by the working class in the 20th century by appealing to far-right and nationalist sentiment and moving towards police-state rule.

Seizing on the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, carried out by Islamist networks mobilized in NATO’s war in Syria, the PS has imposed an indefinitely extendable state of emergency, giving sweeping powers to police and intelligence services supposedly to fight terror. Hollande took 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 austerity and war.

Despite massive opposition and protests against the regressive “El Khomri” labor reform law, the government imposed it without a parliamentary vote, using article 49.3 of French constitution. The unpopular law gives companies more flexibility to fire workers, lengthen the work week and cut wages, and more broadly to negotiate contracts with trade unions that violate France’s Labor Code, effectively scrapping much of the labor protection traditionally enjoyed by French workers.

The emergence of Valls as the currently favored PS candidate is a sign that the PS aims to continue the shift far to the right in bourgeois politics overseen by Hollande.



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