

Conservative Fillon campaign faces collapse in French presidential elections

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The campaign of François Fillon, the right wing Les Républicains' (LR) candidate, is on the verge of collapse, as national financial prosecutors (PNF) prepare initial recommendations in the case of the fictitious employment of his wife Penelope in no-show jobs at the National Assembly.

As popular anger builds over extensively documented allegations that she received about €900,000 for doing virtually no work, the possibility of a collapse of the campaign of one of France's two traditional parties of government is very real. Fillon's response—a press conference in which he defended paying his wife six figures for work that only he could judge—only served to further infuriate voters.

On Friday, an Odoxa poll found that 70 percent of the population wants Fillon to withdraw, and 79 percent were unconvinced by his press conference. Fillon's support is collapsing even in his own constituency, moreover: among LR voters, these figures were 53 and 61 percent, respectively. Three-quarters of the population, and 53 percent of LR voters, said they viewed him negatively.

Local LR politicians are reportedly refusing to meet Fillon at campaign rallies or organize his meetings across France, and his campaign staff is reportedly in deep crisis. While *Le Monde* wrote that, “The political entourage of the candidate [Fillon] is paralyzed and no longer seeks out the media in order to give his positions on current events,” journalist Olivier Mazerolle said that Fillon and his supporters were now “at a loss,” faced with the crisis.

This situation confronts LR, and indeed the entire ruling class, with a quandary. Ex-President Nicolas Sarkozy is under indictment over his 2012 campaign finances, and former Prime Minister Alain Juppé, who was convicted on corruption charges in 2004, refuses to

run after his surprise defeat in the LR primaries last year. Fillon, who ran against his LR rivals pledging to step down if he were taken to court, now faces a real prospect of legal action. It is unclear whom LR would run as a candidate, however, were Fillon to step down.

The collapse of Fillon's candidacy—as President François Hollande languishes at 4 percent approval ratings, and PS officials split their support between PS candidate Benoît Hamon and former investment banker and PS Economy Minister Emmanuel Macron—is part of an international crisis of bourgeois rule.

The discrediting of the PS-LR duopoly, which has ruled France ever since the general strike of May-June 1968, comes amid the election of Donald Trump in the United States, and the discrediting of the European Union (EU) by the Greek debt crisis and Brexit. As Trump's election showed, long-established certainties of bourgeois politics are vanishing into thin air, as election results repeatedly shock pollsters.

Last year, LR was widely supposed to be the odds-on winner in 2017, given overwhelming hostility to the austerity and war agenda of Hollande's Socialist Party (PS) and the still massive unpopularity of Marine Le Pen's neo-fascist National Front (FN). Barely two weeks after the satirical *Canard Enchaîné* weekly first broke the Penelope Fillon scandal, however, it now appears that Fillon will not survive to the second round of the elections in May.

What emerges from the crisis of Fillon's campaign, however, is above all the bankruptcy of France's political establishment. Despite the discrediting of the main right-wing candidate, who called for deep right-wing shock therapy with the cutting of 500,000 public sector jobs and the axing of public health spending, what is emerging is not a field of candidates more favorable to the working class.

Amid spreading protests against Trump in the United States and Europe, what is emerging is a deep, international crisis of bourgeois rule with revolutionary implications.

Fillon voters are expected to react to a withdrawal of their candidate by splitting their votes between the FN and candidates backed by the PS, and either would produce a deepening of the hated austerity, wars and police-state policies carried out both PS and LR. None of the parties—whether the PS, LR, or the FN—would have political legitimacy to continue with this reactionary agenda, however. All would face explosive social opposition.

Despite mounting press speculation about the impact of a collapse of Fillon's campaign, it remains highly unclear where discontented Fillon voters would go, should he actually withdraw.

The most obvious PS-linked beneficiary, Macron, is widely seen as a weak candidate. He is only 39, has never been elected to public office before, and is leading in the polls due to favorable media coverage of his pro-business, pro-EU and pro-NATO program, which he is still yet to release. He is a former investment banker, advisor to the unpopular Hollande government, and author of an unpopular deregulation bill, the Responsibility Pact, imposed by the PS in 2015.

One sign of the uncertainty over Macron is that *Le Monde* speculated whether right winger François Bayrou—one of the few not to join LR's predecessor, the Union for a Popular Majority, founded in 2002 to gather together the right behind Jacques Chirac—might suddenly run. It wrote, "something is still pushing François Bayrou to try his luck in the presidential election. Fillon could be taken to court, the Macron 'bubble' could burst. The left is still in ruins. It's now or never, he thinks."

With Macron stagnating or even falling in polls, at around 21 percent, it appears that Le Pen, the front-runner in the election, is currently the main beneficiary of Fillon's collapse. There are now reports that after the first round of the presidential elections, she could pick up as much as 10 percent of the vote—though this still places her at only 36 percent and a loss in the final round.

In a worried article titled "The French election is now Marine Le Pen vs a collapsing French establishment,"

Britain's right-wing the *Spectator* wrote, "Brexit and Trump have created a sense that the unthinkable is possible, which could further weaken the taboo against voting for her. ... [F]ew now rule out a Le Pen victory completely, and if Macron's campaign runs into serious trouble, all bets are off. Every new scandal or terrorist incident plays into her hands."

Le Pen is however saddled with her endorsement of Trump, who is deeply unpopular in France, and the continued opposition of two-thirds of the population to the FN, as the heir of 20th century fascism. Surveying in its same article the potential consequences of a victory of Le Pen—who has at various points pledged to try to exit the European Union and the euro currency—the *Spectator* gloomily foresaw the eruption of an enormous political crisis in France and across Europe.

"If she did become president," it wrote, "France would face a genuine crisis, the worst for half a century. There would certainly be strikes and violent demonstrations by those who would see themselves as defending the republic against fascism. How she could form a viable government or win a majority in parliament is unclear. We would see a conflict between the Fifth Republic's powerful president and its parliament under a constitutional system that one liberal critic has called dangerous even in the hands of a saint. The consequences for the euro, the EU, western security and Britain's relations with one of its closest allies would be dire."



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