

Beatrice Gorawantschy: Presidential Elections in France: The Beginning of an Era of Political Upheaval

Since May 6 of this year, Nicolas Sarkozy has been the name of the new President of France. What is remarkable about this election, in which the candidate of the UMP won 53 percent of the vote while his socialist opponent, Ségolène Royal, obtained only 47 percent, is not only the massive election turnout. It is also worth our while to take a look at the characteristics of the election campaign and the reasons for Mr Sarkozy's victory as well as at the current formation of government, the domestic reform projects of the new president, and the principles of his government in foreign and European politics.

One of the special features of the election certainly is the large number of voters, which is due not only to demographic growth in France but also to the fact that the interest in politics of the French expatriates and the people living in the banlieues has increased, causing them to register as voters. With a turnout of 48.6 percent, the first ballot set a record which was almost duplicated in the second. But – how should this election be interpreted, an election in which Mr Sarkozy came off as the clear winner, Mrs Royal fared better than expected, and Mr Bayrou and Mr Le Pen hoped in vain for the electorate to show some sign of protest in their favour?

It became clear in the first ballot that the French would make a choice of direction – 'Sarko versus Ségo', right versus left. In this context, the *vote utile*, a strategy of useful voting, had its effect: It prompted the left-wing voters to vote for Mrs Royal, not because they had been convinced by her but because they believed it necessary to strengthen the left. And it caused the inhabitants of the banlieues to vote for the socialist candidate, not because of her great programme but because they simply did not like Mr Sarkozy.

The run-up to the polls was overshadowed by two election traumas: The presidential elections of 2002, in which Mr Le Pen had reached the run-off, and the French No in the referendum on the draft EU constitution. Maybe this is the reason why the election was highly personalised and less programme-oriented. There was no central political issue; rather, it was an electoral battle *franco-français*.

The decisive factors for Mr Sarkozy's victory were not only his professionally-run election campaign but also his capability to win over those who usually voted for Mr Le Pen as well as, not least, some points of attack offered him by his challenger, Mrs Royal, herself: The socialist candidate was not able to unite her own camp, had no luck in dealing with domestic issues, and committed various faux pas on her trips abroad, damaging her credibility in foreign-policy issues.

The new French government has committed itself to the motto of 'tolerance and opening'. By reducing the number of ministerial posts, increasing the percentage of women in the cabinet, and observing parity in his appointments, Mr Sarkozy, who wanted to be 'president of all the French people' and consciously tried to integrate other political currents in the governmental team, made good on three of his election promises right away. In detail, his cabinet will be organised as follows: François Fillon, one of Mr Sarkozy's companions who voted against the Maastricht Treaty but also supports teaching German as the first foreign language in France, will be the new prime minister. Rachida Dati and Valérie Pécresse, both still unknown, will take over the ministry of justice and the

ministry of higher education and research, respectively. Bernard Kouchner, a popular left-winger, will become foreign minister, and Hervé Morin minister of defence. As 'ministre d'Etat', Alain Juppé will run the super-ministry of sustainable development, energy, transport, and environment. Michèle Alliot-Marie will head the ministry of internal affairs, and Jean-Louis Borloo the ministry of economics, finances, and employment. And finally, Brice Hortefeux, a friend of Mr Sarkozy, will be given the newly-founded ministry of integration and national identity.

The formation of government on May 18 and the composition of the cabinet already indicate a break with the Chirac era. The president accords priority to domestic policy and reform projects, and unlike Mr Chirac, Mr Sarkozy has already announced that he is determined to take an active part in shaping his country's politics, which corresponds perfectly to the ambitious character of the reform agenda as a whole, with focal points in almost every department.

In the field of labour and employment, the primary objective is to reduce unemployment, while in internal security, it is planned to restructure the ministry of internal affairs. In the area of integration and immigration, an independent ministry for immigration, integration, national identity, and development cooperation is to be formed to take on various tasks that have so far been performed by other ministries. In this context, a new immigration law is to make the reunification of families more difficult. The selective immigration law will be tightened, and an annual quota of economic asylum-seekers defined. Another matter of importance is the social reform, which particularly aims at abolishing special agreements in the old-age pension scheme and reforming the standard work contract. In the field of budgetary and fiscal policy, it is seen as essential to reduce public spending and adopt a tax package which, among other things, will include abolishing the tax on overtime pay as well as on legacies and donations. In the area of crime and jurisdiction, introducing minimum penalties for repeat offenders and lowering the age of responsibility under criminal law from 18 to 16 appear on the agenda. The new educational policy aims at increasing the performance of the education system and at upgrading the teaching profession. What is needed in the field of higher education and research is a university reform and the introduction of a selective process comparable to the German *numerus clausus*. At the core of the new start in health care lies the objective of financing the deficit in the health insurance budget. In the field of housing and urban development, the reconstruction programme for socially disadvantaged suburbs is to be promoted, and France's agriculture is to be strengthened within the framework of the CAP. Finally, the reforms in environmental policy provide for the retention of nuclear energy while, at the same time, the proportion of renewable energies is to be increased.

It remains to be seen whether all these goals can be achieved. The fact is that Mr Sarkozy is called the 'ruling president' by the media even today. Mr Sarkozy's foreign and European policy objectives are also clearly defined. Thus, he endeavours to cast off the label of being pro-Atlantic and to champion more European autonomy vis-a-vis the USA. As regards the French presence in Africa, Mr Sarkozy is a multi-lateralist; however, he also seeks to establish a union of the Mediterranean countries, in which France is to represent an 'eminent power'. The French armed forces in Africa are to be subordinated to a UN mandate, and in the future, development aid is to be given to those countries that explicitly try to achieve good governance. After his fellow countrymen voted No in the referendum on the EU constitution, the president favours a 'simplified treaty' at the European level. He strictly opposes any further enlargement of the Union, nor will he stand for Turkey becoming a member of the EU. German-French relations are important to him, although he is no longer prepared to accord them priority. However, the fact that Mr Sarkozy paid his first visit abroad to Berlin suggests that he is aware of the singularity of the German-French friendship.

Mr Sarkozy's position is consolidated, particularly as, after the defeat of Mrs Royal, the French socialists are looking for a new identity, as Mr Bayrou has missed his target of helping the 'third force of the centre ground' to win the election, as the forecasts for the next parliamentary elections on June 17 predict a clear majority for the UMP, and as, according to current public-opinion polls, the president enjoys a popularity among his fellow countrymen which has so far been shown only towards Charles de Gaulle, if at all. All the things Mr Sarkozy strove and fought for have become reality. And the first half of his term of office will show whether he will be able to make the reform objectives he has written on his banner come true as well.