

Europe after Sarkozy

EMILE CHABAL

François Hollande is France's first socialist president since François Mitterrand left office in 1995 but he comes to power at a time of renewed challenge for France and the European project as a whole. Even with the best of intentions, it seems unlikely that he will be able to match his supporters' expectations.

It is a common misconception that the French are a naturally left-leaning people. To outsiders, it seems self-evident that the country that bequeathed the French Revolution, the Paris Commune and the intellectual engagement of Jean-Paul Sartre to the world must be a crucible of left-wing values. The contemporary image of France as a land of inveterate and cantankerous trade unionists has merely reinforced such an interpretation.

On closer inspection, however, much of this haze melts away. It is true that France has always had what the historian Tony Judt called "a culture of the left" but it is one that has long been marginalised politically and rejected by the majority of the French population. Even the apparent potency of the trade union movement is a myth: France has one of the lowest rates of trade union membership in Europe. The bitterness of French strikes and the anger of their rhetoric is a consequence of weakness rather than strength.

This reality has been reflected in French voting patterns. In the 54 years since the beginning of the Fifth Republic in 1958, there has been a left-wing majority in parliament for 15 years and a left-wing president – the elusive François Mitterrand – for only 14. More worryingly still, of the three left-wing governing coalitions in parliament, none has been re-elected. Mitterrand himself only managed to persuade voters to give him a second term in 1988 by pushing questions of ideology as far into the background as possible. He knew that to draw too heavily on the culture of the left was to court disaster.

It was a lesson he had learned as leader of the non-communist left in 1968 when the parliamentary elections that were held immediately after the "events" of May 1968 – the biggest student and labour protests in post-war France – resulted in a crushing victory for the right. Even though they were not in power at the time,

both the communist and non-communist left were obliterated from the electoral map. It took a decade to recover the deficit and 15 years before the left tasted power. The dissatisfaction with President Charles de Gaulle and the critique of French conservatism that permeated the 1968 movement did not translate into a vote for the left. As 19th century republicans had always suspected, the French were a people of order and not revolution.

More than anything, then, it was this weighty history of defeat and marginalisation that made François Hollande's victory noteworthy. At a stroke, the self-styled "Mr Normal" wiped away the humiliations of past electoral failures. He gave hope that the Socialist Party might finally emerge from the relative obscurity of local politics (where, in contrast, it has done well in the past 20 years) into the national spotlight. A good proportion of the crowd that greeted the newly-elected president on the Place de la Bastille in Paris on the evening of 6 May would not have remembered the last time France was governed by a left-wing president. But they were willing to take a jump into the unknown.

Sarkozy's Loss

Why this sudden change of heart? The first reason was the unpopularity of Nicolas Sarkozy. This was a constant refrain during the campaign. The man who seemed to embody an irresistible dynamism in 2007 looked drawn and defeated in the traditional presidential debate between the first and second round of the election. Neither his abrasive tone, which had so pleased his right-wing supporters, nor his openness to the private sector, which had endeared him to an increasingly liberal professional middle-class, seemed like assets. The "hyperactive" president had become a liability.

The paradox is that Sarkozy was genuinely something new. His frenetic, ideologically-charged yet inconsistent presidential style fitted none of the classic models. He did not have the invincible gravitas of de Gaulle; he could not be the intellectual "father of the nation" like Mitterrand; and he failed to claim the mantle of his immediate predecessor, Jacques Chirac, who frequently played

Emile Chabal (emile.chabal@history.ox.ac.uk) is faculty of history, Balliol College, Oxford.

the card of national unity. The one president with whom he might be compared is the ill-fated Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who ruled from 1974 to 1981. The parallels are striking. Giscard d'Estaing also began his presidency by promising a "liberal" break with the past but ended it embroiled in scandal and courting the right-wing vote. And, like Sarkozy, he failed to win a second term.

The Extreme Right

Of course, a key difference is that, in 1981, the extreme-right was a negligible political force. This is no longer true today. In fact, if there was one winner in this election, it was the leader of the Front National, Marine Le Pen. With 17.9% of the vote in the first round, she did better than her father when he squeezed through to the second round in 2002 (16.8%). Moreover, Le Pen's success was in an election for which there was a very high turnout (79.5%). After the first round, she could boast of having received the support of almost 6.5 million French voters.

This was more than a protest vote. The Front National has succeeded in implanting itself firmly in the French electoral landscape. Until now, the two-round structure of the legislative elections has mostly kept it out of parliament, but, in many French regions, the Front National regularly receives more than 20% of the vote. It is surely only a matter of time before the party will be large enough to create a bloc in parliament, especially if the centre-right disintegrates and former centre-right candidates are drawn into local electoral alliances with the far-right.

Dealing with the extreme-right is likely to be one of Hollande's main challenges. Its electorate is a fickle but potent combination of far-right extremists, rural conservatives, deindustrialised and unemployed workers, and descendants of the *pièdes-noirs* (the French settlers who were forced to leave Algeria at independence in 1962). This odd conglomerate of post-industrial and postcolonial France has come to view political machinations in Paris with deep hostility. And they will almost certainly turn on the new socialist president if he is "soft" on crime or

immigrants. Given that one of the key pieces of legislation proposed by Hollande is the right to vote in local elections for non-European Union (EU) nationals, the Front National already has a ready-made campaign.

But the extreme-right is a reminder of an even more troubling reality: unemployment. For structural reasons that long predate the recent economic crisis, France has had chronically high unemployment since the 1980s, especially amongst its young population. This has combined with high rates of urban class segregation and a notoriously rigid education system to create long-term social exclusion. In his rhetoric at least, Hollande has recognised the need to refocus attention on France's youth. Indeed, this was one of the few discernible ideological differences between the two candidates. It was a tactic that the Socialist candidate in 2007 – Ségolène Royal – had also tried and failed. Now Hollande has a real chance to implement imaginative policies to tackle the roots of youth unemployment.

Hollande's Challenges

Unfortunately, he is likely to be hampered by two things: his reliance on the public sector vote and the omnipresence of austerity. The former is a reality for all

Socialist candidates. Their core support base resides overwhelmingly in France's vast public sector. Any attempts to change school curricula or employment legislation will be met with bitter opposition. Sarkozy's pension reforms in 2010 were, for his supporters, one of his crowning achievements, but they permanently alienated the public sector and no doubt contributed to his defeat. How Hollande manages the expectations of this group will be crucial to his survival: the French may lean to the right but they are also deeply attached to their sprawling and interventionist state.

The challenge of austerity will be the most urgent. Hollande has come to power at a time of acute political and economic tension in Europe. Any false move and he will be punished by an electorate both fearful of and hostile to the politics of austerity. He must secure France's relationship with Germany and defend a European model to a French electorate that has seen an unprecedented rise in Euroscepticism since the "no" to the referendum on the European constitution in 2005.

If there is one saving grace, it is that the responsibility for the future of Europe will not rest on Hollande's shoulders alone. The question is: who will he have left to work with? Sarkozy's presidency

V.V.Giri National Labour Institute

Training Programme on Migration and Development: Issues and Perspectives

V.V. Giri National Labour Institute is organising a Training Programme on Migration and Development: Issues and Perspectives during July 2-5, 2012 at the Institute's campus. The programme aims at developing the capacities of researchers and policy makers towards explicating the emerging issues in migration, especially in terms of research and policy concerns. The programme is meant for policy makers and researchers dealing with internal and international migration issues. The Institute would meet boarding and lodging expenses of the participants and also defray travel costs limited to rail fare (sleeper class). Programme details are available on Institute's website: vvgnli.org. Those interested may forward their application to: sasikumarsk2@gmail.com/rakkeethimothy@gmail.com before **June 20, 2012**.

was defined by two unusually close relationships. The first was the battle with the former Italian prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, for Europe's "hardline". While the latter's penchant for "bling-bling" outshone anything Sarkozy could come up with, the two leaders nevertheless shared a common platform. They both built their appeal on an accommodation between right-wing populism and big business. But Berlusconi's fall from grace last year was a sign that this compromise had grown increasingly stale. In the end, it was moral outrage as much as political disagreement that precipitated Sarkozy's demise.

Sarkozy's other intimate European relationship was so important that it received its own nickname: "Merkozy". Interestingly, during the election campaign, Sarkozy made relatively little of his supposedly strong ties with the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel. His campaign team preferred to emphasise the potentially disastrous economic consequences of a Socialist victory. Yet the continuing strength of Franco-German cooperation will almost certainly be one of the most positive of Sarkozy's legacies. It may even, in time, be ranked alongside the two other foundational Franco-German partnerships of the post-war era: de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer in the 1960s, and Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl in the 1980s.

The massive bailout at the height of the crisis was a remarkable show of European political strength at a time of economic collapse. It was a sign that the integrity of Europe had become too important to ignore. With Britain choosing to limit its responsibilities – especially under David Cameron's newly-elected Conservative coalition – the burden of responsibility fell to the Franco-German alliance. And Sarkozy, like so many struggling French leaders before him, found solace in European leadership.

But the bailout came at a tremendous cost, not the least of which has been the politics of austerity. Quite apart from its social consequences – with state spending brutally curtailed for the foreseeable future – austerity also threatens the delicate balance of political power in Europe.

With Sarkozy gone, and Merkel's Christian Democrats defeated in recent regional elections in Schleswig-Holstein and Nordrhein-Westfalen, the Franco-German alliance is likely to be fundamentally reshaped in the coming years. Meanwhile, in southern Europe – and, above all, in Greece and Spain – the threat of political implosion is very real. Italy has avoided collapse by choosing a centre-right coalition of technocrats and independent politicians to replace Berlusconi, but, in Greece, the vertiginous rise of the leftist Syriza Party looks likely to send the country into a period of protracted political crisis.

In this deeply unpromising landscape, it is hard to see what Hollande can do. Trained at one of France's most renowned business schools (HEC) and as a civil servant at the prestigious *École Nationale d'Administration*, the new French president hardly has the profile of an anti-austerity firebrand. His proposal for a "growth pact" to be written into European austerity negotiations remains rather mysterious, and his ability to negotiate the Franco-German relationship is by no means certain. He may well find himself reproducing his predecessor's essentially reactive approach, particularly if the economic situation worsens.

Moral and Fiscal Rectitude

There are, however, two areas in which Hollande might make a difference. The first has to do with the morality of public life. The French are no strangers to political corruption; on the contrary, a major corruption scandal has usually been the prerequisite for a successful presidential career. But the conviction last year of Jacques Chirac for embezzlement of public funds while he was mayor of Paris (1977-95) marked a turning point. Chirac was the first former French head of state to be convicted since Marshal Pétain, the leader of the Vichy regime in the second world war. Likewise, the very public outrage in France over the conduct of Dominique Strauss-Kahn suggested that even the private lives of major political figures might come under intense scrutiny.

At a time when political elites across Europe are facing a barrage of criticism

for their profligacy and corruption – whether in the form of the Leveson enquiry into phone-hacking in the UK or the condemnation of Berlusconi's "bunga-bunga" parties – Hollande's emphasis on the need for good conduct provides an important counterpoint. Moral rectitude may even come to be seen as the necessary counterpart to the fiscal rectitude of austerity. It would be a positive change in political values.

The second area over which Hollande may have some control is the language of austerity. The economic realities are likely to remain extremely bleak but it will surely be easier for those countries worst hit by the economic downturn if they are confronted with a sympathetic social-democratic consensus rather than the disapproving admonitions of Merkel and Sarkozy. Such an inflection is crucial if the political dimensions of the European project are to survive intact.

For austerity is not simply an economic fact, it is also a discourse of crisis, reform and change. It has its "winners", "victims" and "losers" – and it certainly has its own values. So far, these have been defined by the centre-right as deficit reduction and cuts in government spending. But, in order to preserve the integrity of Europe, it will become increasingly important to restore a more human dimension to economic policy by stressing the need to reduce inequality as a path to post-austerity renewal. This is where the new French president can make a valuable contribution.

History suggests that Hollande's ability to navigate treacherous European waters will depend, first and foremost, on his successes at home. Still, it is worth remembering that two of Hollande's most important influences – Mitterrand and former head of the European Commission Jacques Delors – were deeply committed Europhiles. They saw in Europe a way to salvage France's state-driven "social model" and restore the prestige of a French socialism that had been battered in the economic downturn of the early 1980s. It is their legacy that has produced today's EU. It will be up to their protégé to hold together a European project that threatens to come apart from above and from below. It is an unenviable task.