

# France: Sarkozy selects Socialist Party's Bernard Kouchner as foreign minister

By Antoine Lerougetel  
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France's new right-wing Gaullist president Nicolas Sarkozy, a victor in the second round run-off May 6 against his Socialist Party opponent Ségolène Royal, has recruited Bernard Kouchner, a member of Royal's presidential campaign team, as foreign minister in his first government. The invitation to Kouchner and his acceptance reveal a great deal about the new regime and the official "left" camp.

Sarkozy officially took over from retiring President Jacques Chirac in an elaborate "coronation" ceremony May 16 at the Elysée Palace. He named his close collaborator in the ruling UMP (Union for a Popular Movement), François Fillon, as prime minister. Sarkozy has made a nod in every possible direction. He conspicuously named seven women, unprecedented in France, to his compact ministerial team of 15, which also includes a member of the centre right UDF (Union for French Democracy), François Bayrou's former party. Another member of Royal's campaign team, Eric Besson, and supposed "left," Martin Hirsch, the president of the late Abbé Pierre's charity Emmaüs, were appointed non-ministerial secretaries of state.

Kouchner's jump—only weeks prior to the two rounds of France's legislative elections (June 10 and 17)—from the Socialist Party (PS) camp to the UMP, following hard on the heels of Besson's defection, reveals the close similarity in the programme and outlook of the country's two leading political parties. PS leader François Hollande may now rail against the "defectors," but he and other prominent figures in the Socialist Party, including Ségolène Royal, made forceful approaches to the anti-welfare state, free-market conservative Bayrou of the UDF during the recent election campaign. Bayrou has been in government and in alliance with Sarkozy and the Gaullists on many occasions, including during the present parliamentary term.

Sarkozy is making a great play of the fact that he is forming a government composed of elements outside the narrow confines of traditional right-wing politics. Apart from giving women parity of representation in his cabinet, including Rachida Dati, a lawyer of North African descent, his inclusion of centrist and left elements is part of an attempt to present himself as representative of the whole French people, above the conflicts between parties and social classes.

Several of Sarkozy's most loyal lieutenants in his long and ruthless climb to France's highest office have been passed over. There is reportedly much "gnashing of teeth" inside the UMP.

One of the new president's first moves, on winning the vote, was to invite the leaders of the five principal trade union confederations (CGT, CFDT, FO, CFTC and CFE-CGC) to meet him individually, even before being officially installed. The union leaders were only too happy to oblige and expressed their satisfaction at being included in consultations in September on Sarkozy's reactionary social policies. The latter's bloc with the unions against Chirac's prime minister, Dominique de Villepin, in opposition to the CPE (First Job Contract) last year, helped clear the way for such cooperation. Sarkozy is attempting to give his regime something of the character of a government of national unity or even a

"Grand Coalition" à la Angela Merkel in Germany.

Sarkozy's immediate task is to win a majority of deputies in the National Assembly, and his "poaching" of a high-profile figure such as Kouchner has deepened the crisis in the demoralized ranks of the Socialist Party. Opinion polls are predicting a landslide for the UMP in the parliamentary contest. A poll by Ipsos/Dell, published May 24, indicated 41.5 percent of voting intentions for the UMP and its allies, as against 29 percent for the Socialist Party.

More fundamentally, Sarkozy's apparently heterogeneous cabinet (including the "three poles" of the right, the centre, and the "left") is intended to broaden his social base and provide him greater political legitimacy for his attacks on the welfare state, public education and union rights. The claim will be made that these reactionary measures are desired by "all the French," which could hardly be farther from the truth.

Furthermore, Sarkozy needs to apply a "humanitarian" gloss to his new, more aggressive foreign policy. This, of course, is where Kouchner comes in.

Sarkozy's speech May 16, on taking office, provides some idea of the role he expects Kouchner to play as foreign minister: he wants him to help pursue an energetic defence of French imperialism's interests in the Arab world and sub-Saharan Africa, where France has numerous military contingents (Lebanon, Gabon—1,000 troops, Djibouti—3,000, Senegal—1,200, Chad—1,100, Togo—300) and desires to shore up or strengthen its position against its rivals, notably the US and the rapidly expanding influence of China and India.

This is the sordid colonialist reality that lies behind Sarkozy's grandiloquent appeal to spread "throughout the world the universal values of France" and pledge to fight for "the union of the Mediterranean and the development of Africa." He continued: "I will make the defence of human rights and the struggle against global warming the priorities of France's diplomatic action in the world."

His reference to global warming has won him a good deal of support from Green personalities.

As foreign minister, Kouchner will also have the task of imposing a substitute for the European constitution, rejected by the population in referendums in France and Holland.

Sarkozy has called for "A Europe which protects," another expression for "community preference"—phrases which have been interpreted in Germany and other capitals as an intention to aggressively defend France's business interests against its European competitors.

Bernard Kouchner's political biography is revealing and speaks to the evolution of an entire social layer. Born in 1939 to a Jewish father and a protestant mother, he began his political career as a member of the French Communist Party, from which he was excluded in 1966. He led a strike of medical students in 1968. The same year he left the political ferment in France of that period and went to work as a doctor for the Red Cross in Biafra (during the brutal Nigerian Civil War).

As a result of frustration in Biafra, along with a number of others, he

helped launch the so-called movement of “French Doctors,” non-governmental organizations that provide humanitarian relief, including *Médecins sans frontières* (Doctors without Borders), founded in 1971, and *Médecins du monde* (Doctors of the World).

Kouchner was one of many ex-Stalinists, ex-Maoists and other radicals who found themselves at loose ends or worse in the aftermath of the great French general strike in May-June 1968. The central question that arose out of that betrayed revolutionary opportunity was the need to politically demolish the influence of the Stalinist Communist Party in the working class. These individuals were either overwhelmed by that task or hostile to it. They sought ‘alternative employment.’

The year 1971, in addition to Doctors Without Borders, saw the birth of *Libération*, the daily newspaper founded by former Maoists, and the first environmentalist party in France.

Kouchner is one of many. Régis Debray joined Che Guevara in a guerrilla adventure in Bolivia and went on to become a close advisor of President François Mitterrand. Daniel Cohn-Bendit, “Danny the Red” in 1968, has become a respected bourgeois Green politician in Germany and has been a prime advisor to Ségolène Royal in encouraging her to make alliances with the centrist UDF, most of whose deputies have now joined Sarkozy.

Many of the former leftists, who have grown wealthier and become alienated from broad layers of the population, identify with Sarkozy’s authoritarianism. Max Gallo, the historian and novelist, was also once a member of the Communist Party and later a collaborator of Mitterrand and Hollande. Gallo now openly embraces Sarkozy’s authoritarianism. He admires Napoleon for abjuring both revolution and aristocratic reaction and being “purely national.” Gallo comments: “This is the source of Bonapartism, which has not yet run dry, as a political current, and Sarkozy appears to be its heir.”

The ex-leftists view the French population, which has rebelled time and time again during the past decade or more against the austerity policies of successive left and right governments, with deep antipathy. They sincerely hope that Sarkozy’s regime will be able to repress the social revolts that this system provokes. They justify their defection to the status quo by rabid anticommunism and appeal to imperialism to intervene all over the globe in the name of “human rights.” (See “Prominent French intellectuals rally to presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy”)

Kouchner is a particular specialist in the latter arena. As French minister of state for humanitarian action in the 1980s he was dubbed “the minister of indignation.”

It was during the period of his work with the “French Doctors” organizations in the 1970s and 1980s that Kouchner developed the concept of “humanitarian intervention” (*ingérence humanitaire*).

This notion was adopted by a layer of intellectuals who rejected a class analysis of the present system. Certain social emergencies were so severe, they claimed, that they trumped any concern for national sovereignty and the relationships between oppressed and oppressor nations. Abstracting events from their historical and social context, which generally meant ignoring the terrible legacy of colonialism, Kouchner and others like him called on the great powers to intervene in various parts of the globe, in a new, postmodern version of the “white man’s burden.”

That such interventions usually coincided with somewhat less selfless projects, in particular the pursuit of valuable natural resources or the establishment of military beachheads in strategically important locales, received little treatment in the glowing tributes to the new humanitarians.

The civil wars in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s provided an opportunity for many of the former radicals to join the imperialist camp. Using the depredations of the nationalist Milosevic regime against ethnic minorities as their rationale, the Western powers encouraged the growth of separatist movements in the region as a means of justifying military intervention and even NATO’s “humanitarian bombing” to establish

imperialist hegemony within the Balkans.

Kouchner served as the first UN special representative and head of the United Nations Interim Administration in Kosovo from July 1999 to January 2001, pressing for Kosovo’s autonomy and generally serving the interests of the great powers.

He had meanwhile developed the novel concept of the “humanitarian preemptive strike.” In a *Los Angeles Times* article in October 1999, (“Perspective on World Politics: Establish a Right to Intervene against War”), he asserted: “Now it is necessary to take the further step to stop wars before they start and to stop murderers before they kill.... We knew what was likely to happen in Somalia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo long before they exploded into war. But we didn’t act. If these experiences have taught us anything it is that the time for a decisive evolution in international consciousness has arrived.”

Such reasoning led him to give support to Bush’s preemptive strike against Iraq in 2003 to deal with nonexistent weapons of mass destruction and “free the Iraqi people” from oppression. He is thus an accomplice in the devastation of Iraq brought about by the US, Britain and their allies, including France, and in their attempted piracy of the country’s oil resources as a step toward the re-colonisation of the Middle East.

He increasingly and openly endorsed neo-liberal policies in support of the interests of French capitalism. In 1995, along with former SP prime minister Michel Rocard, he supported the then Gaullist prime minister Alain Juppé’s plan to reduce pension and other social security rights, which provoked mass strikes. He also supported the CPE (First Job Contract) introduced by the government of Dominique de Villepin, which aroused a similar storm of protest in the spring of 2006.

Kouchner’s decision to throw in his lot with Sarkozy is a logical continuation of his rightward drift and the drift of the entire Socialist Party leadership and the official French left. François Hollande recently complained about Sarkozy’s meddling with former PS figures like Kouchner on the grounds that the new president was trying to make people believe that there was “no longer a difference between left and right”! Of course, there isn’t any principled difference between the UMP and PS, but if everyone were to follow Kouchner’s lead, the game would be up.

At the same time, Sarkozy’s bringing Kouchner into his cabinet as foreign minister indicates the instability of the new regime. In Sarkozy’s election campaign he promised all things to all people: higher wages, but also “reformed” labour rights; job security, but also more flexible conditions of employment and better conditions for the enrichment of the ruling elite; better social services, but lower taxes and less civil servants; better schools, but more cuts in education spending. The irreconcilability of these various promises will rapidly make themselves obvious.

Sarkozy’s recognition of the narrowness of his social base has also led him to concentrate power in his own hands to weaken the role of the UMP, which he took over and then utilised to sideline Chirac. The incorporation of Kouchner and Hervé Morin of the centre-right UDF, dependent on the president for their ministerial chairs, also contributes to diminishing the power of the UMP. So too does his shackling of his own party. *Libération* reports: “In the euphoria of the May 6 victory, the former boss of the UMP achieved the following amazing feat at the start of the week! There will no longer be a president of the UMP elected by the members, but a collective leadership under the guidance of a general secretary with increased powers, bound in allegiance to Nicolas Sarkozy.”

Supported by the tiny millionaire elite concentrated in the employers association MEDEF, and drawing in small business layers fearful of globalized competition, as well as confused workers, he knows that landslide electoral victories and large majorities in parliament are no guarantee against social explosion. His new government’s number two man, Juppé, learned this to his cost when he tried to implement cuts in pension rights and social security, only months after taking office as

prime minister in 1995 with a crushing conservative majority. He faced massive strikes and demonstrations, contained only with difficulty by the trade union bureaucracies, but supported by the vast majority of the population. It was the beginning of the end for his government, which fell less than two years later.

The dangers of a Sarkozy administration should not be minimized. He is part of a European-wide offensive aimed at destroying the social gains of the working class and imposing the authoritarian rule necessary to achieve this. The official left parties and the trade unions are active protagonists of the attacks on workers and youth. Until the working class consciously breaks from these agencies of capitalist rule and establishes its political independence in a genuine socialist and internationalist movement, it cannot ward off these dangers nor go onto the offensive for its interests, those of the mass of the population.

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