

Sarkozy loses his majority in the French Senate

By Antoine Lerougetel
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President Nicolas Sarkozy's ruling UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) lost control of the French Senate in elections held September 25. Sarkozy's defeat at the hands of the Socialist Party (PS) and its allies has been described by some in the media as "an institutional earthquake." The Socialist Party has never controlled the indirectly elected Senate in the 53-year history of the Fifth Republic.

The vote reveals the extreme fragility of Sarkozy's administration. Deeply unpopular as the result of his attacks on the rights and living standards of the population, with an approval rating of 30 percent, the government has also been beset by corruption scandals involving the president's closest associates. Social tensions are mounting as the country approaches the presidential elections in April-May 2012.

The combined seats of the PS (123) and its allies in the French Communist Party (20), the Greens (10), the Left Party (1) and others (24) give them the majority in the Senate—177 out of 338.

The implications of this blow to Sarkozy's credibility have international implications, as the September 26 *Financial Times* points out: "Troubles are piling up for the incumbent. Mr Sarkozy is in the front line with Germany's chancellor, Angela Merkel, to stem the crisis over eurozone debt. In the absence of a solution markets have focused concern on weaknesses in France's public finances and the perceived vulnerability—vigorously denied by Paris—of French banks."

The *FT* continues: "One effect of the Senate result has been to stymie a measure Mr Sarkozy has pushed at home to underpin France's commitment to fiscal stability. His intention to embed a 'golden rule' in the constitution [like Germany], requiring balanced budgets, is now stalled, as it would require a 60 per

cent majority of a joint session of the Senate and National Assembly."

Unemployment rose over the summer to near 10 percent while economic growth slowed to zero. This has obliged the government to increase austerity measures, including taxes that hit the working class and further weaken consumption.

Allegations of financial and political corruption at the highest levels of government over the past decades are getting closer to Sarkozy with the involvement in the Karachigate affair of his closest associates former Prime Minister Edouard Balladur, the arms dealer Ziad Taddiekine, Thierry Gaubert and numerous others.

Voting intentions for the first round of the elections recorded September 19 and 20 gave Francois Hollande and Martine Aubry, both of the Socialist Party, 28 percent and 27 percent, respectively, and Sarkozy 25 percent. Riding on the scandals and the political bankruptcy of the left and right bourgeois parties and their scapegoating of immigrants and Muslims, the neo-fascist National Front candidate Marine Le Pen polled 19 percent of intentions. In a second round run off Hollande registers 57 percent, Aubry 54 percent and Sarkozy 46 percent, with variations according to polling agencies.

The French Senate is a highly undemocratic institution. It is not elected by universal suffrage but by some 150,000 electors, 95 percent of whom are municipal or communal councilors with a disproportionate number coming from traditionally conservative rural councils.

The result has a good deal to do with the deep unpopularity of Sarkozy's austerity measures, which led to a severe defeat for the UMP in the 2008 local government elections for the municipal councils of France's 36,782 communes.

Nouvel Observateur pointed out that the government's "reform" of local government has starved the municipalities of funds, creating growing social hardship: "France of the localities has taken its revenge ... The government increased the role of the communes without always transferring the concomitant financial resources. Then ... the government and the right have to deal with the financial scandals." (See also, "Bourgi affair exposes French imperialism's criminal activities in Africa")

The senatorial vote does not mean that this electorate of 150,000 local bureaucrats, place seekers, party officials and notables has moved seriously to the left. Many are disgruntled because the reform stepped on bureaucratic prerogatives. Bourgeois left parties gained from the crisis within the UMP camp and the presentation of dissident conservative lists, which drew votes from official UMP candidates.

Foreign Minister Alain Juppé blamed the defeat for his party on division within the UMP's forces. *Le Point* reports: "Already for several weeks anxiety was being felt: 'I'm worried by the amount of dissident lists on the right, which bother me a lot,' admitted even the UMP number one Jean-François Copé."

After the result was announced, Juppé pointed the finger at five or six departments where dissident candidates "cost us seats." Prime Minister François Fillon put it down to "the divisions in the majority."

Many of Sarkozy's early ministerial appointees during his presidency, especially those associated with his "opening to the left" and to ethnic minorities have abandoned him and are standing for office or supporting Sarkozy's rivals on the right: Rachida Dati, Rama Yade, Fadela Amara, Jean-Louis Borloo, Hervé Morin, Patrick Devedjian, Pierre Charon, and Dominique Paillé.

There are reports of increasing agitation within the UMP for Sarkozy not to stand in 2012. Rémy Desserts of *France-Soir* asserted: "True the road is still long from now till the first round. But the number of those in his own camp who secretly hope that the president of the Republic will desist from standing has greatly increased."

Former UMP Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, speaking on TV after the announcement of the results, put it this way: "If he stands, our candidate will be Nicolas Sarkozy." Indeed Raffarin, amongst other

UMP heavyweights, is being mentioned as a possible alternative candidate within that party's leading circles.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, presidential candidate for the Left Front coalition of his Left Party and the Communist Party, declared that the presidential race was off to a start that augurs well. He claimed that "having gone over to the left, the new Senate could ... block Nicolas Sarkozy's political programme up to the presidential election."

The notion that the PS and its allies, including the Left Front, could represent a bulwark against Sarkozy's reactionary policies reveals what Mélenchon and his partners are made of. The Socialist Party has given full support, along with Mélenchon, to Sarkozy's and NATO's neo-colonial military adventure in Libya. The PS supports the reduction of the budget deficit and the priority of paying the bankers. The PS did not oppose the devastating austerity measures tied to the two bailouts of Greece by the "troika" —the European Union, the European Central Bank and the IMF—or the measures imposed on Spain at the behest of the banks.

The predatory, neo-colonial military intervention against the Libyan people, initiated by Sarkozy, is taboo. The entire political establishment from the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) and the Left Front to the UMP right wing support it and fear that if it became an election issue it could provoke opposition, particularly in the socially oppressed immigrant communities.

Also taboo are the crisis of the Euro and sovereign debt in Europe and the world economic crisis, which, if mentioned, are seen as background irritants. Each candidate affirms his or her ability to deal with France's social and economic problems within the nation-state or tinkering with the EU institutions. A *Mediapart* article September 27 lists the large teams of pro-capitalist economics professors and bankers working for the rival Hollande and Aubry camps in their respective bids for the presidential nomination.

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