

Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy returns to politics

By Alex Lantier and Stéphane Hugues
22 September 2014

Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy gave an hour-long primetime interview on France2 Sunday evening, after announcing Friday in a Facebook post that he is officially returning to political life after his defeat in the 2012 presidential elections.

Sarkozy painted a stark picture of political crisis in France and Europe. In 2014, he warned, “it is the crisis in France that can tip Europe into disaster.”

The winner of the 2012 elections, the Socialist Party (PS) government of President François Hollande, faces explosive popular anger over France’s economic collapse and PS austerity measures and wars. The neo-fascist National Front (FN) is rising in the polls, while Sarkozy’s right-wing Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) is mired in scandal and faction fights.

“I have never seen such despair, such anger, such lack of perspective,” Sarkozy said. Referring to the discrediting of France’s traditional parties of rule, the PS and UMP, and the FN’s rise, he added, “I do not want the only perspectives to be the lamentable spectacle that we have today or total isolation.”

The tone of the interview reflected the escalating fear in the French ruling class that the political situation, both internationally and inside France, is rapidly escaping its control. Sarkozy was asked if he believed Hollande would have to resign early—in what would be only the second time a French president resigned since the office was created in 1958, after Charles de Gaulle resigned in 1969, a year after the 1968 general strike.

Sarkozy replied, “I naturally want him to finish his term. I hope he will, because we live in a Republic.” He added that he feared “violence” and “anger.”

France2 presenter Laurent Delahousse then asked, “Are we in a pre-insurrectionary climate in France? Could France collapse into violence?”

Sarkozy replied that he was worried that people were only thinking “in caricatures” and said that he wanted to bring people together from the left and the right. He said, “The division between left and right is threadbare like a three-century old carpet.”

Delahousse also raised France’s relations with Germany—Europe’s leading economic power, which is now moving to re-militarize its foreign policy and against which France has fought in two world wars. These ties are increasingly fraught, with elements of the ruling PS attacking economic policies Hollande has worked out together with Berlin. FN leader Marine Le Pen has called for a French withdrawal from the euro currency and the European Union.

Noting that a country cannot “change its address,” Sarkozy said that for France, “Germany is not a choice, it is a fact. I do not see France as a country at the back of the pack. We must go forward together. The euro zone cannot work without growth. We must create growth.”

Despite his catastrophic account of the political situation facing French capitalism, Sarkozy also made clear that he has no substantially different policies from the wars and austerity measures of his unpopular 2007-2012 term in office. Asked what he had concluded from his defeat in 2012, he replied with empty generalities about delegating authority more and speaking politely “so as not to radicalize people.”

Sarkozy also indicated that he would continue to make the right-wing appeals to the FN voter base that were a key feature of his presidency. “I want to convince these Frenchmen again ... We have disappointed them, I want to re-convince them,” he said, adding that he wanted to abolish the Schengen accords that allow for freedom of movement among 26 European countries, including Germany and France.

The FN has attacked the Schengen accord, as it allows immigrants who arrive in other European countries to travel to France.

As his comments about uniting the right and the bourgeois “left” make clear, Sarkozy is also considering again recruiting elements in the PS and its political periphery to support him. When he took office in 2007, Sarkozy named a number of PS figures—including Bernard Kouchner, Eric Besson, Martin Hirsch, and Fadela Amara—to high-ranking posts.

Sarkozy’s return to public life demonstrates the bankruptcy of the French political establishment. Despite the discrediting of the PS and its pseudo-left supporters Sarkozy remains a deeply unpopular figure, with 63 percent of the population opposing his return to politics, according to recent polls. Nonetheless, powerful sections of the French financial establishment and political elite have clearly backed him in a bid to stabilize the UMP and prepare a 2017 presidential bid.

Principal responsibility for this lies with the reactionary policies of the PS and its pseudo-left supporters, such as the Left Front and the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA). They supported the election of Hollande, who came to power on the basis of a few tepid criticisms of Sarkozy and then pushed even greater wars and more draconian austerity measures than his predecessor. With Hollande even more unpopular than Sarkozy, they have created conditions for Sarkozy to pose as the providential man poised to return to save France.

The NPA responded to Sarkozy’s announcement with a brief and cynical note, titled “Sarkozy coming back? No need, his politics are still here.” It said, “Sarkozy is launching his campaign of promotion. He is announcing his return. But why? In 2012 his disastrous policies were rejected and he had to leave. Unfortunately he left us with his policies, his program, that Hollande and [current Prime Minister Manuel] Valls were quick to take over as their own.”

The cynicism of this comment is staggering. The PS indeed adopted Sarkozy’s policies and pushed them further to the right, and they did so while enjoying the NPA’s support. The NPA’s 2012 presidential candidate, Philippe Poutou, called for a Hollande vote in the second round: “On May 6, we will accompany those who want to prevent Nicolas Sarkozy from

having a second term. We say clearly, we must throw out Sarkozy and his whole gang by voting against him.”

While Sarkozy enjoys the advantage that his opponents in the bourgeois “left” are politically corrupt and bankrupt, his return still faces substantial obstacles, above all the numerous court cases facing him and the UMP. These cases include:

- The Bygmalion scandal: UMP leader Jean-François Copé was forced to resign after evidence emerged that the UMP fraudulently paid half of the bills of Sarkozy’s 2012 election campaign, so Sarkozy could claim his campaign remained under the constitutional limit of €22 million.
- The Bettencourt/Azibert scandal: Wiretaps of Sarkozy’s conversations revealed evidence suggesting that he corrupted a high-ranking magistrate, Gilbert Azibert, offering him a promotion in exchange for inside information on the investigation into whether Sarkozy improperly received campaign finance funds from billionaire Liliane Bettencourt.
- The Lagarde-Tapie scandal: Sarkozy is suspected of pressuring his economy minister Christine Lagarde to favor Sarkozy’s friend, Bernard Tapie, in a case that led to a €405 million compensation package for LCL Bank’s sale of Tapie’s company, Adidas.
- The Gaddafi scandal: Sarkozy is suspected of receiving €50 million from Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi for his successful 2007 presidential election campaign, before turning on Gaddafi in the 2011 NATO war in Libya that resulted in Gaddafi’s murder.

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