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## *The Ascendance of Nicolas Sarkozy:* **A Sixth Republic?**

By K.A. Dilday

AUGUST 2007

PARIS—It was one of the highest turnouts in France's recent history followed by one of the lowest turnouts in recent history. Perhaps it's because the battle for the identity of modern France was at stake in the country's Spring-2007 presidential election that so many cast ballots. The parliamentary election that drew such a low turnout a month later was largely a codicil to that primary battle for identity. In essence, the presidential candidates had to answer a fundamental question: could the republic continue much as it had, with the belief that France had gotten it right 50 years ago when Charles de Gaulle shaped it? In electing Nicolas Sarkozy, the people agreed that it could not.

In the two months since Nicolas Sarkozy became president with the support of almost half of the French electorate, he has wowed France and the rest of the world. (Mr. Sarkozy won just over 53 percent of the vote with an 85 percent voter turnout. Thus, 45 percent of France's eligible voters selected him.) His ferocious pace of activity is something new for France, but the rainbow, bipartisan cabinet he selected is extraordinary in the world. By contrast, a month after Mr. Sarkozy unveiled his cabinet, Gordon Brown, his newly ascendant counterpart in Britain, selected his senior team and did not include any people of color.

Mr. Sarkozy's wide net has caused angry ripples in both the left and his own party, the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP). Unnamed UMP members grumbled to the press about Mr. Sarkozy bypassing the party's old guard and bright young things to choose newcomers and outsiders. Socialist party members howled because he cherry-picked the party's superstars, further hobbling the already struggling party. Yet Mr. Sarkozy's actions have compelled many people to take a second look at a man they once reviled. His consideration of race, religion and sex in compiling his streamlined cabinet — it is half the size of former president Jacques Chirac's team — is his clear signal that something is amiss in the basic foundations of the Fifth Republic, which holds as one of its bedrock principles a systemic ignorance of the race, religion or sex of its citizens.

Five years earlier, when the far-right candidate, Jean Marie le Pen of the National Front, polled ahead of the Socialist candidate in the first round of the 2002 presidential elections, it became clear that France was longing for a change in status quo. Yet their derring-do in putting le Pen one round away from the presidency scared most of France. Although the incumbent president, Jacques Chirac, the center right UMP party candidate was unpopular, the French rushed to the polls to vote for him to affirm that they were not a far-right nation. But French people still want change. The country is undulating wildly within its current parameters. Few agree how to address the pulsations. All agree that the pangs are painful. But will they be debilitating or growing pains?

In a reversal of traditional ideas about liberals and conservatives, the establishment left, in the form of the Socialist Party, clung most strongly to the status quo during the election season. Their candidate, Segolene Royal, campaigned as

guardian of France's traditional values, among them: big government, worker's rights, and systemic blindness to race and religion. Nicolas Sarkozy ran and won as the 21<sup>st</sup>-century candidate, promising all manner of change to sclerotic labor rules, tax laws, hiring practices, immigration laws and judicial practices. In short, he promised to remake the country.

On the day the presidency was decided, May 6, I spent the morning at a polling station in the 18<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, a mixed quarter, went on to one in Aubervilliers, a banlieue with large number of people of immigrant origin, and finished the evening at Mr. Sarkozy's victory celebration at *Place de la Concorde* in France's wealthy 8<sup>th</sup> arrondissement at 8:15 p.m. That was just after the 8:00 closing time for the polls, which is also the moment when the election authorities announce the projected winner.

At 9 a.m. in the 18<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, a slow but steady trickle of people made their way into the polling station. The 18<sup>th</sup> precinct has a diverse socio-economic mix. It has the trendy popular quarter Montmartre, now always advertised as "Amelie's neighborhood" as well as Chateau Rouge, which is known as "little Africa" for its number of immigrants from Northern and sub-Saharan Africa.

Voting day in France is always a Sunday morning. At 9:30 the first trickle of people were elderly, men and women on their own, walking slowly but determinedly toward the polls. A goodly number of those who followed were fairly young though, people in their 20s and early 30s. I talked to a range of people; only two said they had voted for Mr. Sarkozy. Surprisingly, they were also the youngest people I talked to, women of 20 and 22. They had come together and they didn't want to give their names but told me they voted for Mr. Sarkozy because he would best represent France in the international arena. "She can't connect," they said about Ms. Royal.

The people who voted for Segolene Royal expressed strong opinions about Mr. Sarkozy and their dislike of him or his party but spoke mostly of Sarkozy or seemed to have supported Ms. Royal reflexively because they had always voted Socialist. None of the people I spoke to expressed a reason for voting for Segolene Royal that had anything to do with her political position or qualifications. "She's a woman," two people gave as a reason. Most people spoke in generalities. "It's time for a change," one man told me. "I'm tired of the right — they've been in too long." A Tunis-born man, who moved to France 13 years earlier, told me he voted for Segolene in both rounds and admitted that he didn't really know why. The ballots are collected by hand — people are given two slips of paper, each has a candidate's name on it. Then they put their selected candidates name in the box. A Togo-born woman who showed me the ripped, crumpled-up ballot for Sarkozy told me she voted for Segolene Royal because "we must have a change." Michel, a 50-year-old man born in Con-

go gave the strongest reason for supporting Ms. Royal saying that she, "had a rapport with the people," but he reserved most of his words for Sarkozy, "He's too brutal, too radical and too sectarian." Marithe, a 40-year-old biracial French woman in trendy glasses, arrived on a bicycle to help count ballots (the right of any citizen). "I don't like Sarkozy," she said. "Segolene is a woman. She has power but remains human."

As I walked the streets of Aubervilliers in the early evening *en route* to a polling station, I passed desolate courtyards of large housing complexes and a Chinese couple who stopped their car and angrily stalked around looking to see who had thrown something — a bottle perhaps — at their car. I passed women in full djellaba and burkas, phalanxes of police vans waiting in case of riots (a predicted outcome by Segolene Royal if Mr. Sarkozy won) until I finally found the polling station I'd picked out. It's a marked difference from Paris, which is small and vibrant. But in the suburbs, just a few miles out, I've learned that routes that look easily walkable on a map often involve long, barren stretches. Desolate streets are common, and the polling station I picked required that I walk a long, sparsely populated one. I mention this not because it was difficult or frightening, but because the contrast between the two environments is so stark. Aubervilliers is still urban. But movement, for a youth, or anyone, from one part of the neighborhood to another or to inner Paris, isn't easy.

The trickle of people at the poll though was the same in Aubervilliers as in the 18<sup>th</sup> arrondissement: slow but steady. As I was leaving Paris for Aubervilliers, a Belgian television station was reporting that Mr. Sarkozy had won. But the people still came to vote; one woman screeched up in a car, parked illegally and ran in to cast her ballot. When the trickle slowed to an infrequent drip, I walked back past the police vans poised for riots and took the metro to *Place de la Concorde* for president-elect Nicolas Sarkozy's victory celebration. At 8:00, the hour the polls close, elections authorities announced the projected winner. French polling authorities rely on key polling stations to decipher, with near certainty, the victor.

At 8:15 the *Place de la Concorde* was just beginning to fill. Mr. Sarkozy was speaking from the UMP party headquarters. His face was broadcast on huge screens to

*Harry Roselmack, the first black anchor of French network news, reports from the Sarkozy's victory celebration, Place de la Concorde*





*At the National Front Rally a few days before the election: Skin heads and “proud” French*

the gathering crowd. I was surprised at the diversity of the crowd, all of France’s hues seemed to be represented: small groups of beurs, 20-ish young white people in Sarkozy t-shirts, a man who appeared to be of North African origin walking alone with his little girl on his shoulders.

In earlier years, Mr. Sarkozy’s support for positive discrimination and his active involvement in organizing the Muslim council had won him supporters in the black and beur communities. That changed drastically at the end of 2005 when in a fit of anger people threw bottles at him in the suburbs. He resolved to clean the streets of “*racaille*,” a word that means something between rabble and scum. His popularity continued to decline when he introduced tougher immigration policies, specifically targeted at family reunification rights.

But even in Seine St. Denis where the young beur anti-Sarkozy forces mobilized the youth, Mr. Sarkozy still received 35 percent of the vote. A French journalist friend said that many women whom he spoke to in Clichy Sous Bois, told him they were planning to vote for Sarkozy. “They wanted order,” he said. His encounters were very different from mine. No one in the banlieue had ever admitted support for Sarkozy to me. I had come to believe that the legend of significant support for Mr. Sarkozy among black and brown voters was a mirage created by the party, like the ads the Nationalist Front Party ran showing brown and black supporters this election season. At the mass National Front rally I went to in central Paris a week or so before the election, there were no people of color. There were hundreds of skinheads, some lean goth-looking men, well-decorated older veterans and young families. I finally spied a black man and then noticed that, like me, he carried a pad and pen — he was a journalist on fellowship from the Congo. “Have you seen any black people?” I asked. “No,” he said. At the rally Mr. Le Pen angrily told his supporters to abstain from voting. He had not made it into the second round and he believed Mr. Sarkozy had stolen some of his best moves with his tough stance on immigration and crime.

But National Front-borrowed moves or not, Mr. Sarkozy’s rally was a different color. When I arrived people were just beginning to fill the square. I met three young

men who had come in from Cergy, two had Moroccan-born parents, one’s parents were from Algeria. At their feet was a half-closed backpack with a bottle of alcohol and a bottle of soda. “Did you vote for Sarkozy?” I asked them. “He did,” two said pointing at their third, who then took out his voter’s card to show me that he had voted in both rounds.

“Why Sarkozy?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he answered.

“Why are you here at the celebration?” I asked them.

“This is our future,” they said.

Two other brown men used almost exactly those words to me, after first refusing to talk. As I walked away they stopped me. “We’re here because this is France.”

As the square filled it became impossible to hear anyone. I walked toward the exit and watched an orderly trickle of people being admitted to the VIP section, where presumably Mr. Sarkozy would meet his supporters. The people filing in there were all white and if they carried anything, carried bottles of champagne and not in rucksacks.

Since his election, Mr. Sarkozy has been moving at such a speedy pace that the French magazine, *Le Point*, asked: “Sarkozy: is he doing too much?” The French intelligentsia often prefers vigorous debate to action. The backlash over the hyperkinetic president’s running start spilled onto his most spectacular hires: the highest ranking woman of African ancestry in his cabinet, justice minister, Rachida Dati, who served as Mr. Sarkozy’s spokesperson during the campaign. A month into her appointment she suffered several blows. The media reported that two of her ten brothers were on trial for drug charges. Three members of the Justice department quit, offering weak reasons for their departure, but privately whispering that she was an authoritarian bully. The whisperers also claimed that she had never passed her exams to be a magistrate. One night on the evening news, Ms. Dati was shown presenting her new law for

tougher penalties for recidivist criminals; the next story showed her brother at his hearing. He was given six months probation and the papers quickly pointed out that under her new law, he would have automatically been imprisoned. Later in the summer I watched a news report that showed brief footage as Mr. Sarkozy and others descended the steps of the Elysee. It seemed to serve no news purpose. However in it, Ms. Dati stumbled awkwardly on the steps. The broadcast proceeded to the next piece without comment. Groups like SOS Racisme have protested her abuse in the media, some UMP politicians have come to her aid and her supporters are dedicated and global. In Morocco, just a few weeks after she was appointed, her appointment was prominently featured in the local press. And even in the remote Atlas Mountains everyone knew her name.

In addition to Ms. Dati, Mr. Sarkozy appointed two other women of African origin to lesser cabinet positions: Fadéla Amara, head of *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* (Neither harlots nor doormats), a rights group for women in the banlieues, and Rama Yade, a Senegal-born 31-year-old who had worked as an administrator to the senate. In KAD-3, I discussed the politics of representation — the focus on the visibility of people who do not fit the old idea of France as a pale-skinned descendant of the Gauls. I thought back to one of my first encounters in France with Messaouda Sassi, a Lyon-based secretary who said that the left had been in power for 20 years and had never appointed a person of color. She was talking about Azouz Begag's appointment as minister of integration. In Dreux this summer, social worker Naima M'Faddel-Ntidam, who immigrated to France from Morocco in 1968 at the age of six, admitted she had been against Mr. Sarkozy before the election. "I thought his policies were bad for France." Now she is very pleased with what she's seen so far. "It's very good for France," she said with visible excitement about Adara, Yade and Dati's appointments.

But also in Dreux, I talked to two young men, neither of whom would give their entire name. In their early 20s, they had left school at age 16. Tech-

nically they were unemployed, but by their covert actions and location — they sat in their car in Les Oriels, a neighborhood known for drug sales — they were most likely dealers. "Politics mean nothing to me. It changes nothing," the most forthcoming, the son of Turkish immigrants, said. I asked what they thought about Rachida Dati's appointment. "Isn't her brother in jail?"

Ms. Dati has assigned people to investigate discrimination in the justice system. Other measures that take note of race are rippling across the government. In the banlieues people are proud that three of their own — Ms. Dati and Ms. Amara, grew up in crowded living situations and Ms. Yade, like so many banlieusards, emigrated from Africa as a child — have made it good. But those who watch Mr. Sarkozy are not surprised at the diversity of his team. More so than other French politicians, he has been willing to address the exclusion of a large segment of France's population in its government. When, as minister of interior, he commented that there were no Muslim prefects (local administrative heads) in the country, President Chirac responded that it was not acceptable to nominate people on the basis of their origin. Ms. M'Faddel-Ntidam, expressing her support for her friend's unofficial application of positive discrimination (France's term for what Americans call affirmative action) in transit authority hiring and elsewhere said, "Isn't it normal for the person selling the tickets at the station to look like the people in the neighborhood?" She also said proudly that at the Dreux Hospital, where her husband works as a surgeon, 30 to 40 percent of the staff has an immigrant background.

Despite his vilification, there is a quiet optimism for Mr. Sarkozy's presidency in the newly politicized neighborhoods. There will always be those like the drug dealers who've given up hope, but the record voter turnout was due mostly to an increase in voting in the depressed banlieues. It indicated that some people do believe they can influence change through the political process. Ms. M'Faddel-Ntidam proudly recounted an anecdote she had read in a Dreux paper. Immediately after the

election, a reporter asked local youth if they might riot out of anger. "We rioted with these," they said, brandishing their voter registration cards. And a record number of Muslim candidates ran for France's lower Parliamentary house — the directly elected 577-person National Assembly. As usual none were elected, but Ms. M'Faddel-Ntidam thinks it's a good start.

In the next months, Mr. Sarkozy is scheduled to announce reforms to the constitution, in a move that hearkens back to General Charles de Gaulle, who made significant changes to the constitution once he was elected, thus creating the Fifth Republic.

France's growing has been painful, but the optimism is palpable. *Les Françaises* of all hues and origin hope that finally change is in the air. □

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