

The French Left in Crisis – The French Socialist Party Needs More than a Facelift

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A year before the presidential elections of April-May 2007, several national opinion polls seemed to agree that Ségolène Royal was in the best position, among a list of a dozen potential candidates, to become France's first female president¹. She was not yet the official candidate of the Socialist party (PS), the main opposition party, but there was already little doubt that she would eventually be designated as such. At the same time, it also appeared that Nicolas Sarkozy, the most likely candidate from the conservative governing majority (Union for a Popular Movement – UMP), and the other most serious contender, was facing a difficult challenge. He was trailing Royal in a significant number of polls and, as current Minister of the Interior, he suffered from the negative effects of being part of a government which looked increasingly unpopular, dysfunctional, and often incompetent.

At the time, the country was still entangled in a series of serious crises and unfortunate mishaps which had tarnished its image, both internationally and domestically. The negative outcome of the unnecessary and clumsy referendum on the treaty establishing a constitution for the European Union of May 29, 2005 had projected a dismal image of a country fearful of change, of globalization and of the future in general². The rejection of the Paris bid for the 2012 Olympic Games a few weeks later appeared in the eyes of many as a sign that France was not trusted in its ability to open itself to the world³.

Domestically, the riots in the suburbs of October-November 2005 revealed the racial tensions which had been festering for years in the housing projects of many troubled urban areas. Concurrently they highlighted the government's failure to handle the persisting problem of high unemployment and consequent social inequalities. Calm had hardly come back to the suburbs when the Outreau scandal exposed the abysmal dysfunctions of the judiciary system⁴. Then came the government's attempt at reforming employment procedures for young people. The bill to implement a new "first job contract" was imposed by the governing majority prematurely and hastily, without parliamentary approval, and provoked an explosion of popular anger⁵. Confronted with riots beyond its control, the government had no choice but to withdraw the bill and abort the project. Meanwhile the promised and long-awaited education reform was going nowhere and the budget deficit was increasing to the point of choking the economy. Needless to say, all these factors combined did not reflect well on the governing majority and its ability to address the main challenges facing the nation and to initiate a real program of reforms. The president himself, increasingly accused of being passive, looked tired, aloof, distant and out of touch with mainstream France.

In this context, it is quite understandable that the perspective of the Socialist party appointing, as its candidate, a modern-looking, seemingly approachable and friendly woman, uninvolved in and unscathed by the old dealings and quarrels of the party's leadership, looked extremely appealing. Indeed, by the end of spring, the polls showed that the vast majority of French citizens wanted change, a president and a political class that would listen to them, and be in touch with their concerns. And, after 12 disappointing years of Chirac, many expected that the change would come from the Left. The candidacy of Ségolène Royal looked most welcome against a conservative Nicolas Sarkozy whose frequently abrasive language⁶ and agitated

demeanor appeared either too brutal or too aloof to many. And yet, only ten months later, a strong and dynamic Sarkozy won convincingly against a lackluster, unimaginative and uncharismatic Royal. What had happened to the former appeal of the opposition candidate and to her party?

The pre-campaign started well. The Socialist party showed it was sensitive to popular demands for more democracy, transparency and proximity and decided to innovate by giving its militants the opportunity to choose the party's candidate. By tradition the first secretary of the party would automatically be appointed as candidate. For the first time, "primaries" were organized with Ségolène Royal the overwhelming favorite. It looked good for the party. For the first time a woman had a realistic chance of being president, she belonged to a younger generation, looked charismatic and projected a modern image. The militants felt she was the most likely to defeat Sarkozy and initiate changes in the French political landscape. For a party that looked a bit old and stiff, the facelift was impressive but, strangely enough, this marked the moment when trouble started.

The fact that there was never any doubt that Royal was the militants' overwhelming favorite over the traditional male and supposedly more "politically experienced" leaders created deep resentment. Lionel Jospin, the former first secretary of the party and a former Prime minister, who as of the month of June had been contemplating a come-back, tried publicly to cast doubts over her ability to run a campaign. When he realized he was going nowhere in the polls, he wisely decided not to enter the primaries. He withdrew from the race, but remained sour and did not give Royal the support she needed⁷. François Hollande, the first secretary of the party and Royal's companion in life, was obviously in an awkward position. He could not openly

deny her his support but he had a difficult time hiding his own disappointment for not being appointed as the candidate. As a result his enthusiasm and leadership during the rest of the campaign remained lukewarm at best. At the time of the primaries, only two other contenders remained and they were two heavyweights: Laurent Fabius, a former Prime minister, and Dominique Strauss-Kahn, a former Finance minister. Aware of Royal's popularity with the militants of the party, they both tried to undermine her image. They insisted that there be six debates in the hope that their smooth and confident style and their superior experience would prevail over what they perceived to be a vulnerable opponent with less experience.

After the second debate, opinion polls still showed that Royal's popularity with the militants had not faded; the two men joined forces against her and their attacks became more vicious. Six debates turned out to be too many. By the time the militants were asked to cast their votes on November 16, too much dirty laundry had been exposed. Unsurprisingly, Ségolène Royal still won with 60.62% of the votes, against 20.83% for Dominique Strauss-Kahn and 18.54% for Laurent Fabius. The fact that those numbers were very similar to what the polls had predicted all along showed that the debates had hardly changed the opinion of the militants, but the "family" quarrels had affected public opinion. It is indeed interesting to notice that Royal's popularity started fading as soon as the official campaign was launched.

Whereas Sarkozy's campaign started very strongly, with the quasi unanimous support of the UMP, Royal was never able to impose a credible discipline in the Socialist ranks. The "elephants" were still resentful and made no secret of it. They rallied behind her, but reluctantly, out of necessity and under pressure from the militants. Unable to federate all the opinions within her party, Royal focused on trying to avoid conflicts as best as she could. She first tried to

comply with everybody's ideas and avoided bringing up issues that might have exacerbated tensions. As a result, she was never in a position to come up with a convincing and credible program of her own. Her 100 proposal-presidential Pact, unveiled on February 11, was too long, too vague and too confusing to be convincing and its financing was too unclear to be credible. Too often, she gave the impression that those proposals were not made out of personal convictions but rather under pressure from her party. She had to defend the 35-hour working week as it was in spite of the fact that she would have liked to make it more flexible. She also had to publicly support the party's project to increase the minimum wage to 1,500 euro by 2012 even though it did not square well with the necessity to reduce public spending. While personally praising the Scandinavian type of social democracy, she still had to promise to follow faithfully the so-called "socialist project", which sounded quite unimaginative and had nothing "social democrat" about it.

Even though a good deal of her appeal came from her promise to give to the Left a new social image at a time when social issues seemed to be the dominant preoccupations of the voters, she never managed to open a real debate on any major social and/or economic issue. She tried to please by promising repeatedly to be a president close to the people but her intentions remained unclear and her campaign rather dull. While Sarkozy was conducting his campaign in a dynamic, even aggressive way, portraying himself as a decisive, innovative and active (not to say hyperactive) leader, she too often gave the impression of being short of ideas and of hiding her indecisiveness behind her smile and a few lyrical appeals. Calls such as "Give me your ideas" or "Your ideas are mine", or even the famous "Aimons-nous les uns les autres" ("Let's love one another") during a campaign speech in Charléty stadium in Paris⁸ were seriously void of political conviction and did not convey too many promises of reforms. In this context, it was

easy for her opponents, and especially Sarkozy and the UMP, to argue that she had no vision and no program.

There is no doubt that Royal bears some of the responsibility for never being able to present an appealing program, but it can also be argued that the Socialist party never placed her in an advantageous position. On the contrary, as mentioned earlier, she was never given the freedom to express her views independently of the party. Yet, she tried. During the month of March, she gradually ignored the criticisms of her party and introduced more personal comments into her official campaign speeches. It was too late. In spite of all her efforts, she never succeeded in dispelling the impression that she, and her campaign, were short of ideas. To blame her for the defeat however is wrong. The Socialist party in particular and the Left in general, are more to blame for the uninspiring campaign.

It is entirely possible to view Royal's defeat as another defeat of the Socialist party and of the Left rather than a defeat of the candidate, or even a victory for the Right. It was the third consecutive time that the Socialist party lost the presidential elections, but the loss compares quite favorably with the one in 2002. In spite of the shortfalls of the campaign, this defeat is far from being catastrophic: with 25.87% of the votes on the first ballot, Royal did far better than Jospin had done in 2002 when he only received 16.18%. If the party wants to make a successful come-back in 2012, it would be well-advised to place the blame on itself rather than on its candidate.

It is clear that there is a major problem with the leadership of the party. François Hollande has not been a successful first secretary. He never convincingly imposed himself as a leader and remained unable to aggregate the various opinions. He even became part of the

problem by often giving the impression of not knowing in which direction he wanted to lead the party. He needs to be replaced but the most popular figures of the party have been cleverly co-opted by the new president. The ever popular Bernard Kouchner seems to be, at least for now, out of the question. He has been expelled from the Socialist party for accepting Sarkozy's offer to appoint him Minister of Foreign Affairs in the new government. Jack Lang, another long-time popular figure of the party, is in a similar position. He is threatened to be expelled if he cooperates with Sarkozy, who recently wanted to appoint him at the head an important commission. Dominique Strauss-Kahn is also out of the picture after his move to Washington D.C. as director of the International Monetary Fund. Of course, there is still Laurent Fabius. But the fact that he only received 18% of the militants' votes during the November primaries shows that his recently adopted hard anti-liberal and anti-European shift to the left of the party is no longer credible.

It is very likely that in spite of her defeat, Ségolène Royal may be the best hope for the party, and should she become the next first secretary, she will have a busy agenda. It will be urgent for the party to put aside its internal quarrels, to regroup its forces and thoroughly reform itself. The conflicting currents and all the tensions they create come from the party's inability and/or unwillingness to evolve and to choose once and for all between a Marxist ideology, as expressed by Fabius' new position and rhetoric, and a social democracy as expressed by Dominique Strauss-Kahn. This inability or refusal to choose has produced the stagnation (Jospin style) and the hesitations (Hollande style) which have been prevailing for the last ten years. No renovation, no reform from within has been effected since the defeat in 2002. Instead the party has believed, and wrongly so, that rejection of liberalism and the European Union policies would bring success. Those ideas have been proven to be quite detrimental because they did not take

global realities into consideration. Globalization and the market economy are here to stay, whether the party likes it or not.

If the Socialists want to have a chance in 2012, they need to initiate changes. First, they need a credible candidate, and Royal has the stature to be such a candidate. In any case the party must provide full and unequivocal support to its candidate. Second, the party will need to show more ambition and create a new image for itself. It must change its rhetoric which has basically remained the same for the last 30 or 40 years. Terms such as “profit”, “small business” “authority” will have to stop being taboo. Third, instead of being critical of the market economy, the socialists will have to learn how to take advantage of the opportunities that globalization offers while finding ways of regulating the market economy on behalf of more social justice. Finally, it will also have to become more efficient. Instead of remaining passive and repetitive, it will have to come up with real projects which convincingly address issues such as retirements, education, immigration, public services, unemployment and living conditions in the suburbs in a new, imaginative and truly reformist way. It is quite astonishing that throughout the campaign the Socialists failed to offer a single concrete proposal to address the social climate in the suburbs and the housing projects.

In conclusion, the Socialist party must become more in tune with modern times. It will have to accept the fact that with the inevitable globalization and market economy, many voters have shifted somewhat to the right. The relative success of François Bayrou, (the center-right candidate of the Union for French Democracy - UDF) who gathered slightly over 18.5% of the votes during the first round of the elections proves the point. At one moment or another, and hopefully soon, the Socialist party will have to assume this reality, and will need to re-conquer

some of those lost votes. This is not an impossible task. For a start the party would be well inspired to act the way the German SPD did at its now famous Bad Godesberg Congress in 1959, when it jettisoned its hard Marxist rhetoric and embraced a social democracy stand. It could also find some inspiration in the Spanish Socialist party (PSOE) which still manages to project a modern image and offer a valuable alternative to the conservative Popular Party while keeping its Socialist identity. In fact the PSOE is much closer to the German SPD than the French Socialist party is. For the time being however, the task facing the French Socialist Party is to turn its electoral defeat into an opportunity to reform itself in a modern fashion. It may not even be as difficult as it looked in the aftermath of the presidential elections because the defeat turned out far from being catastrophic. The second round of the legislative elections showed that the Left has the potential to come back⁹, but a face lift cannot and will not be enough. The body has to change.

¹ From March 2006 until May 2006, several opinion polls placed Royal ahead of Sarkozy. Angus Reid Global Scan: Polls and Research of April 30, 2006, gave Royal a six-point victory. During the summer months Royal lost her lead as most opinion polls placed the two candidates neck to neck. Ifop for *Paris Match* on July 6 still predicted a narrow victory for Royal (51% vs. 49%) and so did the *Nouvel Observateur* on August 23, 2006. By October Sarkozy seemed to have taken the lead.

² The French referendum on the treaty establishing a constitution for the European Union took place on May 29, 2005. With a 69% turnout, the resounding victory of the No (55%) sent a shock wave throughout the Union and triggered a crisis within Prime Minister Raffarin's conservative government.

³ The announcement that Paris had lost its bid to London by a vote of 54 to 50 was made from Singapore by the International Olympic Committee on July 6, 2005.

⁴ In Outreau in Northern France, 18 people were accused of pedophilia on the basis of a woman's testimony and went to trial in May 2004. Four of the accused admitted guilt, one committed suicide while in prison and all the others claimed their innocence. Seven of them were acquitted; the other six went to jail. Later the woman who had given the evidence confessed that she had lied and a second trial took place on December 1, 2005. All six

defendants were acquitted. The whole affair made headlines in the national media and raised serious questions as to the way the judicial system operated in the country.

⁵ The First Job Contract (CPE in French – *Contrat Première Embauche*) was a contract, initiated by Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, which allowed employers to fire young workers without a reason or a cause during the first two years of employment. Aimed at facilitating employment for young people, it unleashed their anger. From February to early April, hundred of thousands of students and young workers demonstrated in the cities throughout France. Finally, yielding to the pressure from the street, President Chirac scrapped the First Job Contract, thus discrediting his Prime Minister whom he had previously supported.

⁶ Among Sarkozy's many abrasive remarks, two stand out. In June 2005, after the shooting of a young boy in a housing project in the suburb of La Courneuve, Sarkozy (then Minister of the Interior) promised to clean the housing project with a "Karcher" (brand name of a well-known pressure cleaning equipment). In October of the same year he called the young people of housing projects "voyous" and "racaille" (translation: thugs and scum).

⁷ Lionel Jospin announced in a radio interview that he was withdrawing from the race on September 29, 2006, a few days before the socialist party "primaries" started. A year later, in a book entitled *L'Impasse* (translated as "The Dead End"), he confirmed that the endorsement of Royal as candidate of the party had been a mistake that must not be repeated. He also added that she does not have the "human qualities nor the political capacities" ... to hope to gain the next presidential elections".

⁸ The speech given on May 1, just five days before the second round of voting.

⁹ The legislative elections took place on June 10 and 17, 2007. While results of the first round projected a large majority for Sarkozy's conservative UMP party, the second round showed a much stronger Socialist party the anticipated. The conservative kept their majority but lost 40 seats to the Socialists.