

Fashioning a French renaissance

A PROFILE OF NICOLAS SARKOZY

PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FRANCE

His ability to implement radical change and to retain support of the broad consensus will determine the content and pace of his agenda

From the very outset of last year's French presidential campaign, Nicolas Sarkozy positioned himself as the candidate of change: a man of action who would push through social and political reforms that many, both inside and outside of France, thought were long overdue. He called for a 'rupture with a certain style of politics' in order to open the way to greater social mobility and a less dominant, more effective public sector. His reputation as a tough, 'no-nonsense' Minister of the Interior lent credence to his programme for change, and he was elected President by a substantial majority. Moreover the victory of his party, the neo-Gaullist UMP (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire), in subsequent parliamentary elections has produced an overall majority in the legislature. As a result of which, President Sarkozy enjoys a stronger political platform than most of his predecessors and, despite his party losing ground in recent municipal elections, a strong mandate for reform. While numerous initiatives have been launched during his first year in office, questions remain over both the extent and pace of changes still to be introduced, especially given the difficulties that the global economy is currently experiencing.

There is much in Sarkozy's personal background to suggest that his desire to make a clean break with the past has deep roots. He is the first president of the Fifth Republic to be the son of an immigrant, his father being a Hungarian of noble descent who fled the troubles in his country, while his French mother's family are of Greek Jewish background. And while his father founded a successful advertising agency in Paris, Nicolas Sarkozy remembers how he was made to feel an outsider at school in a wealthy Parisian district. Herein might lie the roots of his determination to combat intolerance, including racism, while at the same time encouraging immigrants to integrate more fully in French society.

Likewise, the young Sarkozy's education differed from the fast-track progress from Grande Lycée through Grande École to that forcing ground of technocrats, ENA (École Nationale d'Administration), that was typical of France's political-industrial elite. Never a dazzling student, Nicolas Sarkozy was sent to a private Catholic school and studied law at the Université de Paris X at Nanterre, one of the hotbeds of revolutionary ideology during the 1968 student uprising and still a leftist stronghold. Sarkozy himself had been raised in

a Catholic household with staunchly Gaullist political values. Again, being an outsider in a leftist university may have strengthened Sarkozy's political inheritance derived from his family. Certainly, he has ascribed many of the weaknesses of contemporary French society to a series of wrong turns that began with May 1968.

As a young Gaullist activist he was elected to his first public office, as town councillor of the affluent Parisian suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine, in 1977, progressing to become mayor six years later – a position which he held, winning successive local elections, until 2002. First elected as a deputy to the National Assembly in 1988, he was entrusted with a succession of government posts before being appointed Minister of the Interior, Internal Security and Local freedoms in the government of Jean-Pierre Raffarin in 2004.

Later that year Nicolas Sarkozy was elected the UMP's party chairman, a strong platform from which to launch his own bid to become a presidential candidate. But it was his performance as Minister of the Interior in the face of unrest in the suburbs around Paris and other major French cities that transformed popularity within the UMP into broader recognition and confidence among the electorate as a whole.

Following a hard-fought presidential campaign, Nicolas Sarkozy comprehensively defeated his Socialist rival Ségolène Royal. In his victory speech the president-elect declared that 'the French people have chosen change', and 'this change I will put into action, because of the mandate I have received and because France needs it.' At the same time, he affirmed (as is customary) that he would be an inclusive 'president of all Frenchmen'. It depends on how successfully the new president can balance these two commitments – to implement radical change while not seeming so overtly partisan that he loses the broader consensus support, that is likely to determine both the content and the pace of his government's reform agenda.

Certainly there have been changes of emphasis in foreign policy, most notably the distinctly warmer relations with the United States. While some see the French President as embracing Atlantacist values by placing 'France clearly and distinctly within its family, the West', he does not see any conflict with his assertion of France's independence as an ally nor his support of a European Defence force, while at the same time seeking 'more constructive participation in NATO'. The French

The French people have chosen change

president argues that we have now entered a multipolar world which calls for 'a new concert of great powers' and the admission of the fast-growing economies to the G8 and an expansion of UN Security Council membership to include those not represented.

Within this new multipolar world, Sarkozy believes that 'the European Union could become one of the most active poles, if it has the will to do so.'

An ardent European throughout his political career, Sarkozy sees the EU as having a protective role – whether that be in constraining mass immigration or unfair competition. At the same time he is an advocate of a new Mediterranean Union, embracing all nations from this ancient cradle of civilization, and has bought forward a twin summit in Paris this summer encompassing both potential members of this new Union and EU Member States. In this, the French President is seen by Germany and some other EU members as creating a framework outside of the Barcelona Process, as the existing process for strengthening relations with non-EU members is known. On the other hand, Sarkozy is the first French president to indicate a willingness to reform the Common Agricultural Policy, a process which is set to commence when France assumes the presidency of the European Council this summer.

Nicolas Sarkozy is well known for having a more accommodating approach to liberal capitalism (often criticised in France as being too individualistic and 'Anglo-Saxon', and therefore ill-adapted for a country which stresses social cohesion and the European model of social democracy). At the same time, he has followed in the footsteps of his predecessors by arguing that the European Central Bank (ECB) should focus more on stimulating growth rather than simply using interest rate and monetary policy to restrain inflation – comments which have been interpreted in some quarters as an attack on the ECB's independence. And while the president is seen as being more 'pro-business' than his predecessors, having already implemented some 15 billion euros of tax cuts intended to stimulate enterprise and thereby domestic economic growth, his decision to postpone France's commitment to balance its budget by 2010 has raised questions among its Eurozone partners, and especially Germany, over the Sarkozy government's commitment to fiscal responsibility and taking its share of the 'common burden'.

President Sarkozy is convinced that France must continue to foster, and when necessary, protect its leading industrial companies rather than accepting that, as an advanced economy, it will inevitably become more focused on services. As

a minister in the previous government, he played a leading part in saving the engineering group Alstom, and more recently he applauded the success of the EADS partnership in winning a US Army contract for refuelling tanker aircraft. At the same time he is taking a lead role in efforts to reduce global warming. At the G8 summit last summer in Heiligendamm, he declared the goal of reducing France's carbon dioxide emissions by 50 per cent before 2050. He is a strong advocate of France's nuclear power industry, which he sees as playing a crucial role in reducing carbon emissions in the near term, and the transference of clean technologies to developing nations.

Nicholas Sarkozy sees the old world as standing in need of a 'Renaissance', a renewal of both values that are more in tune with today's realities, and of the institutions and political processes that turn those values into reality. Moreover, he is determined that 'France be the soul of this Renaissance'. It is a broad and ambitious vision; but since becoming president last summer he has already set France on the road to achieving those goals. **F**

