

Nicolas Sarkozy's striking test

By Patrice de Beer,
Created 2007-11-30 10:51

The nine-day transport strike had just ended on 23 November 2007 when French president Nicolas Sarkozy was confronted with a new upsurge of violence in Paris's *banlieues* (suburbs). Two years after the violent riots of [November 2005](#) [0] - in which the then interior minister's rhetoric played an inflammatory part - hardly anything has changed in the *banlieues* for the better. Villiers-le-Bel, where the latest riots [started](#) [1] on the night of 25 November after an incident where two young men died in a collision with a police car, is still waiting for a police station; more generally, yet another "Marshall Plan for the *banlieues*" remains more of a slogan than a reality, as a great deal of the money promised has still not been [delivered](#) [2].

November's high-profile war-dance between the [president](#) [3] and the trade unions has been read in at least five different ways:

- * as the old left's losing fight against modernisation and globalisation (the most favoured explanation, inside and outside France)
- * as a watershed triumph for Sarkozy's self-proclaimed crusade for long overdue economic and social "reforms"
- * as part of the French public's slow shift towards a common-sense outlook, after having so many times shown their opposition to the government of the day by going on strike
- * as a stalemate, a compromise between government and unions
- * as the first hiccup in the most media-friendly presidency in French political history.

Rhetoric and reality

To come to an independent view of Nicholas Sarkozy's [policies](#) [3] or action is a challenge, as his main strategy is so media-saturated: evident in both his almost daily initiatives or speeches, and his efforts to pamper or coerce the media into silencing conflicting opinions. Most prominent newspapers, magazines and TV channels are owned or controlled by friends of the Elysée presidential palace; in mid-November, Sarkozy even leaked to journalists of the business daily [Les Echos](#) [4] - who had been strongly opposed to the *Financial Times's* sale of their paper to the tycoon Bernard Arnault - the name of their new editor.

In addition, Sarkozy has not abandoned his strategy of flattering his conservative - and extreme-right - supporters by making bold and even provocative promises. These include, for instance, supporting [DNA tests](#) [5] for immigrant families (usually non-white) who are applying for a visa; even though the

Patrice de Beer is former London and Washington correspondent for *Le Monde*.

Among Patrice de Beer's

president knows full well that such measures would be reduced to insignificance by parliament or the constitutional council.

But in reading between the lines of this constant media barrage, it seems clear that the transport strike can also be seen as "Sarko's" first stumble since he moved into the Elysée in May 2007 [6]. True, in opposing the strike he could count on support [7] from a public resentful of the workers' modest pension privileges in the name of equality, and unhappy at being forced to walk to the office for nine days; union members from the private sector also wanted to end the public-sector's entrenched favours. But Sarkozy's tactics - proclaiming, Thatcher-style, that he would hold firm on his reforming path, that nothing and no one would be able to stop him, before making concessions [8] to the unions to convince them to negotiate - hardly square with the swashbuckling image he likes to project.

The strike ended [9], as trade-union leaders knew it had to, with a compromise [10]. But these leaders have learned a valuable lesson: if the president's strategy of negotiating in front of TV cameras is a key to his popularity, the fact that he cannot afford to fail in front of the same TV cameras creates a weakness - and a pressure on him to concede ground. The same process was apparent when fishermen, strangled by the ever-rising cost of oil, threatened to block harbours if they didn't receive a financial lifebuoy. Sarkozy stopped over in Brittany *en route* to visit George W Bush in Washington [11] intending to give fishermen a 10 million euro handout; he ended by promising thirty.

The outcome of the transport strike was less advantageous than the president's rhetoric might have suggested. The state transport corporations might even have to pay more in the end than the government will ever save as a result of the deal: a sum of 100 million euro per year for fifteen years has been mentioned. The unions' power has not been broken and the public-service pension system remains different from that of the private sector. All this did not stop Sarkozy - after a near- fortnight of embarrassing silence, the longest such period since his election - grabbing a microphone and claiming victory.

A presidency in question

France is beset by economic problems. Around 7 million people live below the poverty line, more students are queuing in food banks, wages are low and unemployment - especially for younger and older workers - is among the highest in the European Union, while the budget deficit remains over 3% and the trade deficit is soaring. Sarkozy's electoral promises of "working more to earn more" and of being "the purchasing power president" were very popular and helped him to get the support of the working and middle classes. But the time of promises is slowly giving way to hard realities [12]. In opinion polls, three of every five French citizens say their standard of living has decreased in the last twelve months.

This is why some analysts see the transport strike as the first crack [13] in Sarkozy's shining armour. His hectic presidential activism is in danger of conflicting with the evidence of voters' [14] own eyes. They see the cost of living, housing, and petrol soaring while perks have been piling up for the well-off: parliament has voted in favour of tax rebates valued in billions of euros, as well as (during the strike) to abolish the tax on stock-exchange transactions.

Among the strikes and the riots [15], three questions remain:

* behind the hyperactive president's rhetoric, will the fundamental reforms France needs and Nicolas Sarkozy has promised truly be carried out - in a country where the word "reform" means having to tighten one's belt again and again - or will they be watered down behind a disguise of voluntarism?

* does Sarkozy want to be active or merely to look active, to concentrate his mind on crucial issues or to rule his government as a one-man orchestra where he can write, play and conduct the music all by himself - at the risk of losing long-term momentum for the sake of day-to-day popularity?

* is he more concerned with his own image or with the long- term image of France?

The jury is still out.

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/globalisation/institutions_government/sarkozy_strikes

Links:

[1] <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article2951485.ece>

[2] http://www.economist.com/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=10105050

[3] http://www.elysee.fr/elysee/elysee.fr/anglais/nicolas_sarkozy/biography/biography.78177.html

[4] <http://www.lesechos.fr/>

[5] <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/11/world/europe/11france.html?partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>

[6] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/6660277.stm>

[7] <http://voanews.com/english/2007-11-23-voa19.cfm>

[8] http://www.upi.com/International_Security/Emerging_Threats/Analysis/2007/11/26/walkers_world_sarkos_semi-victory/8658/

[9] <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a27fbaaa-9a2d-11dc-ad70-0000779fd2ac.html>

[10] http://ap.google.com/article/ALEqM5iA9xbOvCPNBuaPgXjj8_apj09GqAD8T20UJO4

[11] <http://www.voanews.com/english/2007-11-07-voa49.cfm>

[12] <http://www.economist.com/countries/France/profile.cfm?folder=Profile-FactSheet&CFID=22764073&CFTOKEN=82925761>

[13] http://www.economist.com/world/europe/displaystory.cfm?story_id=10204344

[14] http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/view/29111/top_politicians_losing_favour_in_france

[15] <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20071129.wfrance29/BNStory/International/home>



This article is published by Patrice de Beer, , and openDemocracy.net under a Creative Commons licence. You may republish it free of charge with attribution for non-commercial purposes following these guidelines. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Commercial media must contact us for permission and fees. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.