

Voter uncertainty characterises French presidential poll contest

PARIS: France began choosing a new president yesterday in one of its most suspense-filled elections in recent times, after a frenzied campaign by a dozen contenders left voters undecided but eager to have a say.

Only four of the candidates, including conservative front-runner Nicolas Sarkozy and Socialist Segolene Royal, had a real chance of being among the top two scorers who will face each other in a final round of voting on May 6. Francois Bayrou, an MP with farm roots who has become the election's surprise third force, is a wild card in the mix.

The new president will succeed Jacques Chirac, who ends 12 years as head of state at the close of his second mandate, and must revive a large but listless economy and bring alienated young Muslims into French life, among a host of other problems.

All three leading contenders have backgrounds that set them apart from the old guard political elite.

Each has promised a new approach to politics and each, in his or her way, has vowed to change the status quo.

Royal is the first woman to become a serious contender for the French presidency.

The eight other contenders range from the anti-globalisation sheep farmer Jose Bove to Trotskyist Arlette Laguiller.

Turnout, which could prove critical to the outcome - along with voters making last-minute decisions - soared in the first four hours of voting to 31.2% of France's 44.5 million-strong electorate, the Interior Ministry announced.

Voter registration drives added 3.3 million people to the pool this year. Polling firms expected more suspense from at least one-third of the electorate, which has said it is undecided and could skew the contest.

For the first time, voting was staggered, with France's overseas territories going to the polls on Saturday so that votes of French people in the country's far-flung regions would be sure to be counted.

When polling stations threw open their doors in mainland France at 8am, no one could say with certainty whether the nation's voters would give Sarkozy and Royal the top two spots.

Sarkozy, the former Interior minister who has led polls for months, frightens some voters with his tough-talking ways.

Some fear he could barrel France into a full market economy, at the expense of coveted protections in the workplace and other areas of life.

Eliane de Pouzolz, 60, a retired secretary in the poor Paris suburb of Clichy-Sous-Bois, where three weeks of nationwide youth rioting started in 2005, reflected concerns of those voters who despaired that, despite a barrage of promises, France would refuse to change.

"Politicians talk a lot, but nothing ever changes. France is stuck," she said.

The presidential election will be followed by voting for a new legislature in June. - Sapa-AP

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