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Sarko v Ségo: France sets up battle of left and right

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Nicolas Sarkozy, France's right-wing former interior minister, on Sunday night stormed to one of the most impressive first-round victories in French presidential history, making him favourite to beat the socialist Ségolène Royal to the Elysée in a fortnight's time.

The head of France's ruling UMP party emerged as the most popular right-wing politician in 30 years after promising to shake France out of its decline with a mixture of free-market reforms, and to restore "authority" with tough law and order measures, clamp down on immigration and instil a sense of "national pride". According to early official counts, he scored 30,5% of the vote.

Addressing a rally of around 2 000 supporters in Paris, Sarkozy said: "I wish only to rally people around a new French dream of a fraternal republic."

He said his vision of France valued work, instilled authority and was a France where people did not fear others. He said he would rally the workers, farmers and all those who had suffered and were "exasperated".

Royal, the first woman with a chance of becoming president, comfortably qualified for the second round run-off on May 6, with an estimated 25,7% of the vote, the highest for a Socialist since Francois Mitterrand in 1988.

She has styled herself the defender of social justice who "listens to the people", challenging Sarkozy indirectly for his "brutal" style, divisiveness and "dangerous" authoritarianism.

On Sunday night at her rural constituency in western France, she appealed for a "republic of respect", promising to put the smile back into a France that was depressed and in decline. In an indirect attack on Sarkozy, she promised to change France without brutality and said she refused to stoke up fear.

France now faces the traditional right-left run-off that it was denied in the last election

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in 2002, when the far-right leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, shocked the country by making it through to the final round. But polling experts predicted a very tight race.

The record 85% turnout in the latest election reflected the huge amount of interest in the race for a new generation of president; 12 years of Jacques Chirac has left the nation struggling with economic stagnation, debt, unemployment, discrimination and simmering unrest on rundown housing estates.

The centrist Francois Bayrou, the dark horse "third man" who had posed a surprise challenge to the frontrunners, took 18,5% of the vote.

Le Pen came fourth with 11,5%, his worst result in a presidential election since he first ran in 1974.

Reacting to his ejection, Le Pen said: "I thought the French were quite unhappy with the fact that we have 7-million poor people, 14-million poor workers, that we have a trade deficit, that we had a debt of €2 500-billion.

"Well, I was wrong. The French are very happy. The proof is that they have just re-elected the parties that have been in power and which are responsible for France's situation. I fear this euphoria will not last for a very long time."

Francois Fillon, of the UMP, widely tipped as Sarkozy's possible future prime minister, said the result was not about "crying victory" but would allow the nation "to choose between two concepts of national identity and two ways of doing politics".

François Hollande, the Socialist party leader, said the choice was now between Sarkozy, who as a former minister represented the outgoing government, and Royal, "the real force of change".

French voters still believe unemployment and spending power in the sluggish economy are their main concerns but both candidates have been keen to promote the question of national identity.

Sarkozy, whose inspirations are Charles de Gaulle and Pope John Paul II, has said France needs "a new Renaissance" and has promised to restore pride in "what it means to be French".

Royal has broken away from the traditional left, styling herself as a mother figure who sings the Marseillaise and calling for everyone to place a French flag in their window.

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