

France votes for Sarkozy's reforms

France looks ahead to an era of economic and political reform today after electing conservative Nicolas Sarkozy president, on a platform of change, after the stagnation that marked Jacques Chirac's presidency.

Sarkozy received 53.06% of the votes in yesterday's run-off, against 46.94% for Socialist Segolene Royal, winning a mandate for his vision of a hardworking France despite leftist accusations he would prove a divisive and dangerous leader.

Sporadic violence flared in a number of French cities after his decisive victory, but a conciliatory Sarkozy immediately reached out to his beaten foes, promising to be president of the entire nation.

Sarkozy's campaign chief, Claude Gueant, said the president-elect would take a few days off to rest, then put together a compact cabinet of 15 ministers before starting his five-year term on May 16.

"We have to act, the French people expect it. They have given him a real mandate - it's not just an authorisation to implement his programme," Gueant said.

He said Francois Fillon, campaign director, was the favourite to be named prime minister, and was "among the very few who could be given that task".

Markets reacted calmly to the result. The CAC-40 share index opened up 0.1%, having already factored in a Sarkozy win.

"By putting Nicolas Sarkozy in the Elysee Palace, the French have made a powerful and conscious choice for France to change profoundly," the business daily La Tribune wrote.

The left-wing daily Liberation summed up the losing camp's mood: "It's tough, but that's the people's will. A Thatcher without petticoats? Get ready for it."

Turnout was almost 84%, the highest since 1988, giving Sarkozy's victory a strong legitimacy and extending the right's 12-year grip on power after Chirac's two successive terms.

The son of a Hungarian immigrant, the president-elect has made clear he wants to be a more proactive and radical leader than Chirac, promising to loosen rigid labour laws, trim fat from the public service, cut taxes and wage war on unemployment.

"The French people ... have chosen to break with the ideas and habits of the past.

"I will thus rehabilitate work, authority, morality, respect, merit," said Sarkozy, a former interior minister with a hardline reputation.

At the same time, the winner reached out in his first comments after the election to "those who have been worn down by life" and promised to be "the president of all the French".

Sarkozy is promising a deluge of reforms in his first 100 days, including plans to undermine the 35-hour work week by cutting taxes on overtime, curbing union powers and tightening sentencing for repeat offenders.

Union leaders have denounced his proposals and France could face crippling strikes in the autumn, of the sort that tripped Chirac when he took office in 1995 and tried to impose change.

A poll late yesterday for the parliamentary election in June that will decide the shape of the next national assembly, showed Sarkozy's Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party ahead of the Socialists, with 34% to their 29%.

The defeated Socialists face a period of bitter infighting after their third straight presidential defeat. Francois Hollande, the Socialist Party boss and Royal's partner, acknowledged that mistakes had been made but warned the party against tearing itself apart.

Hollande said the party had to mobilise for parliamentary polls in June and then rebuild for the future by forging alliances with the far left and with the centrist supporters of third-placed Francois Bayrou. - Reuters

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