

French pick conservative Sarkozy as president

Paris - Conservative Nicolas Sarkozy has won France's presidential election, beating Socialist rival Ségolène Royal by a comfortable margin and extending the Right's 12-year grip on power.

Within minutes of polls closing, Royal conceded defeat in a speech to party faithful in the heart of Paris.

"I hope that the next president of the republic fulfils his role in the service of all French people," she said yesterday.

Forecasts by four pollsters showed Sarkozy (52), a hardline former interior minister, won around 53% of the vote in the second-round ballot and will succeed fellow conservative Jacques Chirac, who was president for 12 years. Turnout was predicted at about 85%.

Sarkozy's face flashed up on television screens after polling stations closed at 8pm, signalling his victory and setting off jubilant scenes among his supporters gathered in central Paris.

Across the city at Socialist headquarters there was gloom and sorrow after the party crashed to its third consecutive presidential election defeat. It now faces the prospect of tough internal reform to make itself more appealing to voters.

Although opinion polls regularly suggested voters preferred Royal, who was seeking to become France's first woman head of state, they saw the uncompromising Sarkozy as a more competent leader, with a more convincing economic programme.

Sarkozy, the son of a Hungarian immigrant, presented himself as the "candidate of work", promising to loosen the 35-hour work week by offering tax breaks on overtime and to trim fat from the public service, cut taxes and wage war on unemployment.

He is expected to take office on May 16 or 17 and will be the first French president to be born after World War 2.

The pro-American Sarkozy will then name a new government and immediately launch into campaigning for next month's parliamentary election, where he will seek a clear majority to implement his reform plans.

Royal started the year as favourite, but a string of gaffes over foreign policy raised doubts over her competency. Deep ideological divisions in her own camp meant she could never enjoy unified support from the Socialists.

She served up a gutsy performance in a television debate with Sarkozy last week, but he appeared more precise and controlled, further strengthening his status as front-runner.

Sarkozy's own personality has been questioned. Critics say he is impulsive, authoritarian and likely to exacerbate tensions in the poor, multi-racial suburbs that ring many French cities.

The Socialists accused Sarkozy of fuelling 2005 suburb riots by promising to rid neighbourhoods of what he said were the "scum" responsible for the troubles.

Royal said on Friday that a victory for her rival would fan "violence and brutality". - Reuters

Published on the web by Star on May 6, 2007.

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