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Cherchez la femme...fatale?

By Keith Spicer

PARIS. Impressed that almost half of French President Nicolas Sarkozy's cabinet is female? France's two most interesting political women are elsewhere. One recently played Joan of Arc, then Alice in Wonderland, and finally – claims the title of a tell-all book just published – *La Femme fatale*. The other played an exotic second wife who humiliated her top-politician husband by running off to New York with her lover.

The second is of course Cécilia Sarkozy, wife of new President of France Nicolas Sarkozy. Cécilia's role in politics – if she stays around – will focus on four roles: giving Sarko the family anchor his hyperkinetic personality needs; influencing personnel decisions; drawing him further into his bad habit of getting powerful media cronies to censor negative coverage of himself and Cécilia; and wearing Prada.

In the end, the Cécilia story will remain palace gossip. Already every glance, every absence, every Sarko caress is analyzed as harbinger of some new, mad Cécilia dash for freedom. The volatile, Spanish-mothered Cécilia is indeed quite a pan of paella. But she is clearly a fragile temperament. Her political impact, even if she again leaves her husband, will prove only indirect, anecdotal and picturesque.

The other lady -- and only political woman in her own right -- is defeated Socialist presidential candidate Ségolène Royal, common-law wife of Socialist Party secretary-general François Hollande. Her campaign promised salvation, then went all fuzzy, ending in recrimination. But psychologically, she is to Cécilia as Margaret Thatcher is to Paris Hilton.

The Royal-Hollande couple – never married, but parents of four children – were university sweethearts. They entered Socialist Party politics together in a Bill-and-Hillary-Clinton pact, coordinating careers but pursuing them separately. Hollande, who passes for a jokey, indecisive apparatchik, whips his party on with a wet noodle. Royal, until her run at the presidency last fall, passed for a lightweight: minister of the environment before that became serious stuff, then of elementary schools, then of family and childhood.

Her sudden sweep of the party's presidential primary left poor Hollande – who wanted the presidency himself – looking even more the hen-pecked loser. *La Femme fatale*, a devastating look at the couple's romantic tensions and political rivalries, is prelude to a June post-electoral party bloodbath.

The issue: Can the Socialist Party finally pry itself loose from lingering Marxist fantasies of class war, and join Europe's Tony-Blair-style social-democratic mainstream?

Six years ago, Royal's defeated prime ministerial boss Lionel Jospin dared to risk this slogan: "Yes to the market economy; no to a market society."

For leftist theologians, this contradicted Marx's theory that economic systems define societies. But Jospin – long a Trotskyite mole within the Socialist Party (deceit considered a mere youthful indiscretion in France) – opened the door a crack to reality. Last fall, to Jospin's anger as a would-be come-back kid, Royal went further. She deadpanned that Blair had decent ideas on youth employment and investment in public services. The furies of French socialist hell descended on her.

Smearred as a "Blairite" by her Marx-nostalgic colleagues, she backed off and never mentioned Tony again. Two clans leapt on her "lapse:" her party's archeo-Marxists, and leadership rivals also seduced by Blair, but lacking her guts even to hint at Blair's merit.

The party's cobwebby ultra-left wing acclaimed former prime minister Laurent Fabius, a rich man no more a socialist than your cat. Secret *blairistes* latched onto former finance minister Dominique Strauss-Kahn. And now – with French voters sending all lefties to a much warmer place – only "DSK" remains standing against Ségo. Both want to "renew" their party. But each as king or queen of the socialist castle.

June elections to the National Assembly are focusing Socialist minds like rope in the home of a man awaiting the noose. To echo Ben Franklin: If Socialists don't hang together, they will hang separately. Winning enough seats might even give them leverage over Sarkozy's budgets, thus policies.

The back-story to all this – well, this is France – is the romantic-professional vortex of the Royal-Hollande duo. In gossipy Paris *dîners en ville* (insiders' dinner-parties) rumours of marital discord abound. Tomorrow's woman vs. yesterday's man? Iron Maiden vs. Milquetoast? Custom, as with Shakespeare's Cleopatra, may not stale Ségo's infinite variety. But for sure François cannot tame her limitless ambition.

Enjoy, then dismiss, the alcove gossip. The big story here is that a woman, with steel for a backbone and grappling with modern dreams, is having a serious go at dragging a major, macho, reactionary French party into the 21st century. Fluffy tales of "French power women," highlighting Ségo's bikinis and Cécilia's runaway lovers, will delight us all. But on May 6 seventeen million French voters (some holding Marxist noses) backed historic change with Ségo – virtually one in two French voters. That ain't society news.

Marx is spinning in his London grave. Ségo: now *there's* a femme fatale.