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France : Post-electoral *tristesse*

By Keith Spicer

PARIS. Beach-bound or dawdling at home, the French slowly recover from late spring's presidential and legislative elections. These handed power to the Ritalin president, Nicolas Sarkozy [*Ritalin: "a medication prescribed for individuals (usually children) who have attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)*]. Bouncing from topic to event to photo-op to mini-crisis, "Sarko" is racing to change everything in France that's not nailed down -- if possible, the day before yesterday. May and June were electoral climaxes. Now many, even winners, suffer post-electoral *tristesse*.

Saddest are the leftists. The main-opposition Socialists gained ground -- to a larger minority of 186 seats in the June 17 National Assembly runoff for 577 seats. Having blown three presidential elections in a row, they resemble a zoo: their own shorthand terms Socialist clans elephants, gazelles and young lions. Their internal fights sound theological: how many capitalists can you count on a pin-head? Their second-round legislative bounce-back resembles George Bush's surge in Iraq: bankrupt PR masking a disaster.

Two tell-all books now detail how tensions in Socialist presidential candidate Ségolène Royal's private life spurred political rivalry with her long-time lover, Socialist Party chief François Hollande. "This is straight out of vaudeville," mutters a party executive, "it's too weird to believe." Metaphorically, "Ségo" kicked Hollande out of her bed on live TV: the cad got caught sleeping with a young female journalist, while "Ségo" ran her wild-card campaign for the Élysée Palace.

Now Ségo guns for his job -- and a pre-emptive crack at the 2012 presidency. Hollande and his fellow elephants block her at every turn. Humiliated and embittered, she alienates allies. She parades her love-and-politics wounds in declarations ricocheting from bizarre to tragic. The party limps on, unreformed and irrelevant, floating between Marx's class war and Tony Blair's whatever-works capitalism with a social-democratic face. Each option, with a dozen variations, veils somebody's personal ambition.

Even more adrift are the rich fauna of far-left ideologues. Several flavours of extremists -- replaying Trotsky's permanent-revolution dissent from Stalin 85 years ago -- wallow impotent in their rage against the "wishy-washy" Communist Party. Decimated Communists flounder on the fringes, a shell of their powerful Cold-War party. Their *L'Humanité* newspaper, like the party itself, is broke.

Communists' biggest thrill remains the *Fête de l'Huma*, a September garden-party renowned for its tasty regional *saucissons*, cheap red wine, old-comrade back-slapping and ear-splitting rock music. Among this year's stars: Detroit's *Iggy Pop and the Stooges*. Capitalist stooges, one presumes.

Almost as iconic of archeo-politics, Jean-Marie Le Pen's neo-fascist *Front National* stews on in abject failure with zero Assembly seats. The 79-year-old patriarch keeps his title as the most grammatically correct of all candidates. But mocking Jews, blacks and Arabs, he is not exactly politically correct. His handsome blonde daughter Marine tried hard to make daddy look respectable. Now, sad-eyed, she strains to keep his dream of a white, flag-waving France alive. Gamely, she claims the Front's "comeback" has begun.

Sadness dwells too – and widely – in Sarkozy's own camp. After siphoning off votes from the law-and-order right, he reached left for ideas and people. He exalted leftist heroes. He named six admired leftists to high posts. Star catch: Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, a Socialist long voted the second most popular man in France for his humanitarian crusades (e.g. Doctors Without Borders). Heavyweight Socialist Dominique Strauss-Kahn won Sarko's backing to run the International Monetary Fund. Seducing other top Socialists with advisory jobs, Sarkozy has decapitated his opposition

But this poaching on the left has infuriated many of Sarkozy's 313 UMP members of parliament. "We won," grump many members. "So why is Sarko giving all these juicy jobs to the people who fought us?" Unless Sarkozy unloads some of his leftist "traitors" after a decent interval, his own passed-over loyalists will prove less *sarkozystes*.

Moreover, three key ministers have already let him down. Ecology Minister Alain Juppé, bungling his Assembly campaign, had to resign after a month. Jean-Louis Borloo, a dilettante as finance minister now moved to Juppé's job, is blamed for losing the UMP 60 seats. Clumsily, he blurted before the final Assembly round that he might raise France's sales tax by five percent. Prime Minister François Fillon, instead of dismissing the indiscretion, defended it.

Looking ahead to fall, the man really kicking himself may be Sarko. Believing the polls assured a UMP *tsunami*, he took a rest before the legislative second round -- leaving his Assembly campaign in less skillful hands. The left leapt on Borloo's sales-tax gaffe, a godsend. Winning extra seats, they rained on Sarkozy's parade just before he rams five key reforms through a summer-session Assembly.

So what? Well, some of Sarkozy's reforms may demand parliamentary changes to the constitution. With their extra seats, Socialists might help block the 60 percent majority he needs for this. No Ritalin then for hyper-agitated Sarko. Maybe Prozac?