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France: from Sarkomania to Sarkosis?

By Keith Spicer

PARIS. Will France's jack-in-the-box President Nicolas Sarkozy succeed or fail in 2008? Four events last week, all shaping social peace, hint at a dicey outcome. They included out-of-control car-burning; 314 proposals to inject enterprise and jobs into France's arthritic economy; plans to give hope to youth in riot-prone immigrant *banlieues*; and plummeting polls warning that the fun is going out of the here-there-and-everywhere Sarko Show.

Final figures show French arsonists burning 46,000 cars in 2007. That's *forty-six thousand*, or 126 a day. According to police, owners destroyed between 10 and 30 percent of these to get insurance money. The other cases were 'ordinary' protests. Some by alienated, unemployed, largely immigrant-origin boys. Others by these, plus middle-class boys celebrating New Year's Eve, Bastille Day, or some cocktail of anniversaries, boredom and misdirected testosterone.

Very few arsonists get caught. When they are bagged, they get off with light, often-suspended, sentences: "boys will be boys, many are poor, and besides nobody gets killed." Neither government, police nor media makes a big fuss. Governments and police hate looking helpless (officials declined comment for this column). When "only" 878 vehicles went up in flames last New Year's Eve, ever-upbeat Sarkozy assured that "things went very well." This year things may go even "better."

The second event: an emergency plan to "free French growth." Drafted at Sarkozy's request by left-wing house-intellectual Jacques Attali, it's not quite a free-enterprise manifesto. But it does favour pragmatism over statism and socialist dogma. Sarkozy promises to implement much of it, but unions threaten a fight. His own MPs, offended by too many take-it-or-leave-it Sarkozy reports, grumble they might not adopt it all.

Attali's proposed changes break down into "eight ambitions and 20 fundamental decisions." These are mostly incantations, a motherhood wish-list. Example: the need to prepare youth for a "knowledge economy" and for "taking risks" -- the latter tough in France where polls show three-quarters of youth yearning to become civil servants. And where the education ministry teaches that enterprise is exploitative.

Other airy goals: accept globalization (like the law of gravity?); improve competitiveness; loosen red tape for small business; build "full employment;" fund easier transitions to new jobs; strengthen regional government; reduce the national debt.

The 300-odd smaller "decisions" do describe a more dynamic economy. Some decisions will prove quick to implement. But collectively they can only

make their impact over several years -- an eternity for angry, unemployed *banlieue* boys.

Speaking of whom, the third event was junior minister Fadela Amara's "plan for suburban hope" targeting sensitive immigrant-origin towns. Of Algerian background herself, she is a respected advocate for immigrant groups, especially women. Independent but politically naive – she said she didn't plan to vote for her benefactor Sarkozy – she may get eaten alive in the political rough-and-tumble.

Why? Her "plan" is barely a sketch. And so far she has no assurance of money from a government termed "bankrupt" by its own prime minister. Sarkozy has already weakened his protégée's image by wading into explosive *banlieue* Sartrouville to visit police (thereby stressing repression, not reform), praising only tailored-to-individuals training. On Feb. 8, he'll again eclipse Amara -- by showcasing his own souped-up *banlieues* plan.

Sarkozy is racing to pump up his drooping polls – especially irritating because they show him trailing his low-key prime minister, François Fillon. Aiming to surf on early momentum, he incautiously swore to leap into the March municipal elections to anchor his reforms. Now several national discontents will pursue him there: labor and pension reforms, immigration, law-and-order, "purchasing power" (cost of living).

'Sarkophobes' multiply. Sarkozy's core constituency of seniors is appalled at his trash-magazine adventures with ex-models and free rides on billionaires' airplanes. Secular-minded French despise his praising religion and God George Bush-style. Struggling workers and unemployed find his musings on a "policy of civilization" borderline flaky. Many French are uneasy at his friends – not quite riff-raff, but often close: He took a foul-mouthed, gum-chewing show-biz pal to meet the Pope.

Both ex-wife Cécilia and new fiancé Carla Bruni suggest he needs help to 'look presidential.' He is glued to his cell-phone. He adores glitzy watches. He back-slaps everybody. He dashes, rarely walks. He loves night-clubs and karaoke. His cultural network runs to movie-stars, football-players and recycled rock musicians (closest pal: unsinkable Johnny Hallyday) ..

For all his political brilliance, Sarkozy has always danced on a tightrope between barely-enough and too-much. He has made a dramatic start on invigorating France. But his flashy, upstart style is getting in the way. On his inauguration day, he bowed to de Gaulle's statue on the Champs-Élysées. Now, if he can't learn to convey discipline and the "class" he craves, he will risk coming off as France's Silvio Berlusconi. Leaders need *gravitas*. Becoming a clown could turn all his reforms to ashes – just like those 46,000 cars.