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Sarkozy entrenches his victory

By Keith Spicer

PARIS. Rocketing around France – and the world – like an unguided missile, French President Nicolas Sarkozy continues to blow up adversaries, startle audiences, and make neck-swiveling journalists earn their keep. A political genius with the stamina of the Energizer Bunny, “Sarko” believes in reforming everything at once, starting yesterday. Between agenda-setting trips to the U.S., Africa, Russia, China and anywhere in Europe you can think of, he did what no predecessor could: cripple France’s leftist street mobs who always “won“ against elected governments. How did he do it?

First, remember how recent French presidents ruled. They collected pay and privileges, pontificated, and did little to improve things. Socialist François Mitterrand played Florentine power games, mishandled the economy, and made appalling foreign policy decisions: abandoning Bosnians and Rwandans to mass murder, opposing German unification, backing old-Soviet putschists against Mikhail Gorbachev.

Jacques Chirac sometimes acted on principle – apologizing to wronged Jews, Algerians and Africans, opposing aggression in Bosnia and Iraq. But he made his job a sinecure. Both Mitterrand and Chirac abused the public purse : Chirac now faces charges from his mayor-of-Paris days. Both were economic illiterates. Both spoke to voters in Delphic gibberish. Both gargled with slippery abstractions like “solidarity.” Chirac promised to repair the “social fracture” – hinting he could abolish the rich-vs.-poor divide.

Rejecting such fuzzy slogans, Sarkozy made scores of specific commitments, swearing he would carry out several key ones within weeks. Examples: allowing employees to work longer than the Alice-in-Wonderland 35-hour week; lowering succession duties; easing house-buying; tightening rules against illegal immigration; toughening sentences for repeat offenders; ending unfair pension privileges of transport, gas, electricity and other public employees.

This last commitment, he knew, would prove the trend-setting crunch – a red-line provocation to transport, gas and electricity unions prone to punishing millions of citizens. In previous strikes the public, romanticizing the rebellious “street,” sided with demonstrators. This time Sarko had won presidential and parliamentary elections on a clear-cut agenda. He reminded unions of this at every turn. He dared them to defy the “democratic majority.”

Cunningly, he flattered some unionists on their “responsibility,” splitting them from hard-liners. He ordered ministers to take an uncompromising stand on his goals -- but allow room for “negotiations” (i.e. face-saving tinkering) on timing and “modalities.” He played on personality, career and ideological differences among union leaders, adroitly seducing the key Communist-affiliated CGT leader. And he kept them all trying to make sense of his whirling-dervish reformist dance. His final device was well-advertised serenity. Even before strikers straggled back to work, he coolly announced a trip to China.

After nine days of punishing strikes that he sapped in good-cop, bad-cop tandem with his smooth prime minister François Fillon, Sarko won: the strikes fizzled. Extremist workers could only splutter. Me-too student unions collapsed in fratricide. In both cases, Sarko kept his team on message: no gloating. For a fleeing enemy, he seemed to say, build a silver bridge.

Is Sarkozy home-free? No. He has broken the back of leftist opposition, both in parliament (by bribing key opponents with cabinet jobs) and the streets (with tough-love sophistication). But three traps await him – the first two potentially lethal.

First, as you saw on TV last month, the immigrant suburbs (*banlieues*) have started burning again, as in 2005. No surprise: last month an authoritative report declared that little has changed to give angry black and Arab-origin young men hope for a decent future. Sarko did break racist tradition by naming three young “immigrant-origin” females to cabinet jobs. A black became junior foreign minister, an Kabyle-background woman got the cities portfolio. Spectacularly, a popular Arab-origin woman, Rachida Dati, an intimate of Sarko and his ex-wife Cécilia, snagged the powerful justice job.

But tokenism at the top is no substitute for sustained, well-managed investment in education, training and housing. Even if Sarkozy presses progress, improvements will take years. The suburban powder-keg awaits new explosive incidents. Sarkozy’s earlier tough-guy language aimed at immigrant–origin youth still rankles. Last week’s *banlieue* explosion petered out quickly. But the danger remains.

Second, France’s crushing national debt and unaddressed budget and social security deficits will drag down Sarko’s economic reforms. His hasty giveaways to middle-class Frenchmen last summer have further limited his elbow-room. And the soaring euro seriously threatens French exports – the boss of Airbus warns of bankruptcy if the trend continues.

Third, Sarkozy’s “omnipresence” – his obsession with dominating every day’s news – may soon tire the French. Last Friday, some journalists tried to organize a no-Sarko news day. Sarkozy venerates de Gaulle. But the general revered poet Alfred de Vigny’s view that “only silence is great, all else being weakness.” Sarko finds 24/7 shock-and-awe irresistible. At his risk.