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Could Sarkozy save the French socialists?

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Three months after its third consecutive defeat and the election of Nicolas Sarkozy, the French left is in disarray. The new president is highly popular and hyperactive. The socialist leadership, meanwhile, is divided, depressed and deprived of any vision or perspective.

Segolene Royal, who has tried to convert her electoral defeat into a bid on the Socialist party, underestimated the stiff resistance to her leadership. She is inclined to pursue the strategy that led her to be chosen as the Socialist presidential candidate: promoting herself to the public while circumventing the party apparatus. But she cannot ignore the rough law of politics: to win elections the support of a strong party is indispensable. For this reason she will probably try to play it both ways: inside and outside the party.

The crisis of leadership is aggravated by two factors. Contrary to what is generally believed, divisions within the Socialist party are blurred. It is not a case of conservatives on one side and modernists on the other. All socialists claim to be "reformists". But this reform agenda is empty, ambiguous, or limited to slogans. It is, for example, striking to hear modernists talking about a social-democratic project in a party that has no historical credentials in social democracy and at a time when social democracy itself is in crisis because of globalisation.

Moreover, alliances within the Socialist party are rarely the product of ideological coalitions. This has two important consequences. It is unlikely that the party can develop a clear ideology because there is no balance of power in favour of reform. This lack of ideology will actually prevent the Socialist party from imploding. But there is an additional complication that was largely unexpected. Most of the Socialist leaders secretly hoped that the new president would behave in a brutal and Thatcherite way, thus enabling them clearly to oppose him. But things did not turn out that way. Mr Sarkozy took the Socialists by surprise, opening up his government to leaders from the left who had lost faith in their party. More importantly, he has followed a reformist agenda that cannot be labelled as neo-liberal.

Mr Sarkozy's agenda combines four elements: a strong law and order agenda aiming at preventing the revival of the rightwing National Front; a cautious deregulation of the labour market; a transfer of resources to the wealthiest through a new fiscal policy; and an appeal to traditional national values.

The law and order agenda is popular within the rank and file of the left, and a growing number of leftwing leaders share Mr Sarkozy's desire to fight urban unrest. The deregulation of the labour market provides more political opportunities for the left in a country where attempts to reduce the number of civil servants are observed with suspicion. But everybody knows that the status quo is unsustainable. If Mr Sarkozy succeeds in deregulating the labour market without strong social opposition, the left will not repeal the new law if it comes back to power. Mr Sarkozy is, above all,

a dealmaker concerned with results. The way the reform of universities has been conducted illustrates his method: strong on principles but pragmatic on implementation. His capacity to compromise is unlimited as long as he looks like the winner.

It would be a mistake to draw hasty conclusions about the future of the left. The French left is not in the same situation as the British Labour party at the end of the 1970s. There is still a strong leftwing electorate. The crisis of the left is more ideological than sociological. But the combination of strong support at the local level and weak leadership at the national one may have mixed implications. Why change if the left is capable of winning more cities? Why change if local leaders are indifferent to ideological issues?

Since its conception in 1905, the Socialist party has cultivated what is called "municipal socialism". Things have changed. The aspiration to national power is now part of the Socialist agenda. But in the present situation, the chances of an ideological big bang are limited. The Socialist party is not weak enough to revise in depth its attitudes towards the market, globalisation and individualism. But it is not strong enough to represent a credible alternative to Mr Sarkozy. In any case, it would be unlikely to reverse his reforms if and when it came to power. In this way, if Mr Sarkozy succeeds in modernising France, he may help the Socialist party to modernise itself. But when? In 10 years?

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