

Hyperactive Sarkozy has failed to deliver

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It has been more than **two years** since Nicolas Sarkozy arrived at the head of the French state with an overwhelmingly positive image, both in France and abroad. He won the election with a promise to break the status quo. He claimed he would tackle the traditional blockages of French economy and society: the excessive role of the state, a crushing tax burden, a high number of people on benefits, too much structural unemployment, unrepresentative social and political institutions and a parliament that cannot control the executive.

Has Mr Sarkozy kept his promises? Has there been a break with the past? In short, no.

If there is one area in which Mr Sarkozy has not been a disappointment, it is in his ability to be everywhere and tackle all problems at once. In fact, there is not a single area in European or international economic, social or cultural life that has escaped his activism. He has overhauled the French judicial map, which had not been changed since 1958. The French university system now has a legal framework giving it greater independence. He has started to tackle the delicate issue of **unemployment**. His presidency of the European Union was an undeniable success, as were his international efforts in dealing with the financial crisis.

But this hyperactivity has serious drawbacks. By wanting to act everywhere and all the time, he has elevated action – and how it is perceived by the public – over results. This is to the detriment of in-depth reform.

Mr Sarkozy's ministers live in constant fear of having their performance criticised by the president's entourage, which plays an increasingly disproportionate role in political life.

Mr Sarkozy has rightly undertaken a reform of parliament that gives it greater powers over the executive branch. But this does not settle the basic problem in French politics: that many members of parliament hold other offices such as mayorships, and thus do not have enough time to devote to parliamentary activity. This situation does not occur elsewhere in the world. It can only ever be overcome by a referendum. But Mr Sarkozy is more than reluctant to go down that route.

One of Mr Sarkozy's core campaign slogans was "work more to earn more". The government sought to achieve this goal by eliminating the tax on overtime. The idea was that this would prompt employers to give their employees opportunities to work more. Unfortunately, the tax break is not only hugely costly to the state budget, but it also increases job market imbalances by favouring those who already have jobs over those who do not.

Mr Sarkozy has always believed that one of France's problems is that its citizens do not work hard enough. But the reality is more complex: **youth unemployment** is very high and those over 50 years old leave the job market too early. There again, the reforms under way could easily aggravate the problem rather than alleviate it. By allowing companies to get rid of workers more easily, without altering the labour code, the government is helping to push people nearing retirement out of the job market.

In its fight to boost employment, the government has sought to dismantle regulations curbing the development of discount shops. But the results have been disappointing. Under economic and political pressure, it ended up backpedalling. Rather than break with previous legislation, the law will still protect non-competitive sectors.

This type of reformism, which favours image over substance, has grown worse with the economic crisis. Each policy mistake makes it more difficult for the state to redistribute wealth, and the government is increasingly perceived as socially unjust.

What is more, this reformism of appearances pertains to more than just the economic sphere. Mr Sarkozy was one of the first to point out the limits of a republican model that, on the pretext of making no distinction among its citizens, has in fact led to discrimination against immigrants. But there has been a gulf between talk and action.

Mr Sarkozy's lack of interest in the working-class suburbs is perfectly clear. A law passed in 2006 to enable companies to hire without taking ethnicity into account has not been properly implemented. Promoting diversity has primarily been expressed by filling government slots with media-driven women with limited political experience. In France, it is still nearly impossible to elect a mayor or member of parliament of Arab or African origin.

With foreign policy, too, little has changed. Admittedly, France has re-integrated with **Nato**. But the measure is purely symbolic. As for human rights, which Mr Sarkozy wanted to make the cornerstone of his diplomacy, he has cast them aside in favour of realpolitik.

Actually, Mr Sarkozy's only great strength, aside from his willpower and activism, resides in the incredible weakness of the leftwing opposition, which is not only deeply divided but which no one believes would have done better had it been elected. Not much but then again, something.

The author is a professor at Sciences Po

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