

France's first revolution of the 21st century

By Dominique Moïsi

Published: June 15 2007 03:00 | Last updated: June 15 2007 03:00

Is France under Nicolas Sarkozy about to experience something radically new for the country - a "pragmatic revolution"? We shall see whether the new president's vision is best understood by a political analogy - perhaps with Margaret Thatcher or Tony Blair - or even one from the business world such as Carlos Ghosn, who sorted out the carmaker Nissan in Japan before becoming head of Renault in France.

Many are making a comparison between the right's triumph today and May 1981, when the left seized power with the election of François Mitterrand. That may be valid in terms of the scale of the victory but does not do justice to the real content and significance of the two events.

For France, 1981 was the last revolution of the century of ideologies, the 20th century. What we are witnessing in 2007 is, by contrast, the first revolution of the 21st century, a century dominated no longer by ideologies but by the quest for identities.

In 1981 the left's seizure of power was, initially at least, highly ideological. It mixed the old socialist elites of the fourth republic with the young *énarques* - graduates of the Ecole nationale d'administration - who had chosen the leftist camp the way investors buy when the market is low.

France's pro-Sarkozy generation is above all pragmatic. It sees in the election of the new president France's last chance to come to terms with modernity. If "London is in Paris" - that is, if France adopts UK-style economic reforms - it will no longer be necessary to go to work in London to find energy and flexibility.

In fact, more than May 1981, May 2007 in France evokes May 1997 in Britain, when Mr Blair was elected. The heavy defeat of the French Socialists is reminiscent of that of the British Conservatives. Mr Sarkozy's choice of new ministerial faces that demonstrate the diversity of the new France - including some female, north African and black - has echoes too of Mr Blair's Britain.

What the new Sarkozy people need to do is to instil hope by their imagination, seriousness and energy. In opposition to them there is nothing. The extreme right of the ageing Jean-Marie Le Pen is no more than a detail of history. The centre has collapsed, a victim of the hubris and miscalculation of the "third man" of the first round of the presidential election, François Bayrou. As for the Socialist party, it must reinvent itself to find new and credible leaders and, above all, new ideas. It is paradoxical to see in France such a radical inversion of traditional images, with the left in the role of the "party of fear" whose only programme is the need to balance Sarkozy, and the right incarnating the "party of hope". From that standpoint the symbol of Mr Sarkozy's pragmatic revolution is Rachida Dati, the young minister for justice, a smiling and strong woman whose Franco-Moroccan origins are a promise of hope for the young people of the poor suburbs. It is a very explicit message: "I did it. You can do it too."

One should not minimise the difficulties Mr Sarkozy will face. The atmosphere evokes the days that followed the victory of the French football team in the 1998 World Cup. It will not last, but this honeymoon could be longer than previous ones, even if its ending may turn out to be more brutal, given the exposed and solitary nature of Mr Sarkozy's position in a truly presidential system.

There are four crucial challenges he has to meet: reform of the education system to restore competitiveness and creativity; reform of labour and social laws to put France back to work; the successful integration of minorities; and whatever contribution he makes to the refashioning of an opposition necessary for democracy. Yet Mr Sarkozy has good cards in his hand.

France's economy is picking up in the context of a more confident European economy. The generation of baby boomers that lay behind the left's victory in 1981 is about to reach retirement age. Above all, a majority of the French are in the mood for change.

But can Mr Sarkozy really do it? The answer, I believe, is a qualified Yes: qualified because France is indeed a difficult country to reform, and there has been no Thatcher figure before him, but ultimately Yes because the right man and the right team may be in place at the right time.

To return to the political and commercial analogies, the country cannot be treated as a company. There is no France Inc, but a "New Britain", with a very strong Latin touch, may be in the making in Mr Sarkozy's France.

The writer is a senior adviser at France's Institute for International Relations

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2007