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**The King is Dead; Long Live the King:
The French Presidential Elections**
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In an interview a few weeks ago, Nicolas Sarkozy, playing on the statement often attributed to Louis XV, said that he didn't expect a deluge to come after him. To judge by the election results, it seems that the French electorate shared his assessment and decided to entrust its future for the next five years to socialist François Hollande. Sarkozy thus joins a long line of heads of state in the EU who, since the start of the economic-financial crisis, have failed to be reelected to a second term. The reasons for Sarkozy's failure were not only his leadership, personality, and lifestyle, which infuriated many, but more particularly his inability to implement even a fraction of his economic program. His successor now faces the difficult mission of extricating France from the crisis.

Is Hollande's program, based on increasing government expenditures and raising taxes in order to stimulate growth, what the situation calls for? The current assessment is that it is not enough, and that he will have to make drastic cuts to government expenses, improve tax collection, and implement structural reforms. Hollande will need help from the EU, especially Angela Merkel, who has already made it clear that some of his suggestions, such as reconsidering agreements signed in the context of the EU designed to cut budget deficits and institute budgetary discipline that would be anchored in national legislation, are not acceptable.

As a direct result of the economic crisis, which has made the French public anxious and uncertain about its socioeconomic future, the question of Muslim immigration and integration was brought to the fore, as was the discussion of French identity popularized by Sarkozy. The constraint that dictated the handling of these issues (in addition to the Toulouse terrorist attack) was the rising support for Marine Le Pen's far right party, which fed on the anxieties of the public looking for scapegoats for the deteriorating economic situation. Le Pen's successes indicate a public willingness to support populist solutions, a growing worrisome trend among other European nations.

During his presidency Sarkozy also tried to leave his stamp on security and foreign affairs (which were largely pushed aside in the election campaign). In terms of continuity in several issues (the nuclear policy, the Mediterranean dimension, and relations with the Arab world, for example), Sarkozy responded to certain situations and adapted policies to changing circumstances, leaving behind an impression of opportunism and improvisation. For example:

- Returning France (2009) to NATO's military (from which France was absent since de Gaulle's decision in 1966). Sarkozy's step was necessary in light of the changes in the threat scenario at the end of the Cold War and French budget constraints, constraints that made maintaining France's "independence" too costly a burden. This set of considerations was joined by the understanding that even if the security dimension of the EU comes into being, this army will at most be able to fulfill regional missions. Global missions will remain in the hands of NATO, where France will be given a function that matches its status.
- Withdrawing French forces from Afghanistan by 2013, i.e., before the target date of 2014 set by NATO members (the surprising decision announced by Sarkozy at the beginning of the year was likely a step designed to improve his electoral appeal).
- The initiative to establish the Mediterranean Union. Established in 2008, the framework was designed to secure France's premier status in the region and Sarkozy's own position as leader of the highest order. Beyond the lofty notions on which the initiative was founded, the group was supposed to regulate the EU's relations with Turkey, whose inclusion in the EU Sarkozy opposed. The new forum, meant to include Mediterranean nations that are not EU members, was in practice supposed to replace the Barcelona process, which failed to live up to its expectation, in part because disagreements between Israel and the Arab nations prevented progress. It seems that the new forum is doomed a similar fate.
- The "Arab Spring": the events in Tunisia and Egypt took France by surprise and caused it no small amount of consternation. Until then, French presidents had maintained close relations with leaders of the *ancien régime* who helped France realize its interests. After the events, Sarkozy announced a change in policy – from an emphasis on the need to maintain stability, he urged encouragement of liberty and democracy (as part of the effort to improve image and credibility, Alain Marie Juppé was appointed Foreign Minister instead of Michèle Alliot-Marie whose connection with the deposed Tunisian ruler had become a burden). Taking charge of the international diplomatic (the Security Council resolution) and military (NATO) effort to get rid of the tainted ally (Qaddafi), and the strict line

towards Assad must be seen as part of Sarkozy's attempt to gain legitimacy among the elected governments and the Arab street for France's new policy (as well as a desire to improve his lower ratings).

- Iran: Sarkozy led a tough line against Iran's intentions to acquire nuclear weapons as manifested by support for Security Council sanctions and complementary EU sanctions. During his term in office, there was closer cooperation between France and the United States and Israel on the issue.
- Israel: Sarkozy's election sparked hope for the start of a new era in French-Israeli relations. By the end of his presidency, it seems that no new era came into being. Still, alongside disagreements and sharp personal criticism of Prime Minister Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Lieberman in particular, and of the Israeli government's conduct with regard to the Palestinian issue in general, there was closer economic and strategic cooperation (which started before Sarkozy came into office, thanks to the closer cooperation between the two countries' security forces) than in the past.

The 80 percent of respondents in a May 2011 public opinion poll who said that France's international standing had been weakened, and the May 2011 letter by a group of diplomats to a French newspaper about the disappearing voice of France, claiming that improvisation was dictating French policy, reflect Sarkozy's failure in security and foreign affairs. At the same time, it is doubtful if any other policy could have reclaimed the lost French influence in the international arena.

An examination of the president-elect's statements and platform show that any change expected in foreign relations will be in style more than in content. Regarding Iran, for example, Hollande has made it clear that alongside negotiations with the international community Iran must be made to understand, via sanctions, that France is opposed to Iran attaining nuclear weapons. Hollande expressed opposition to a military operation. In terms of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Hollande (who is considered pro-Israel) expressed support for Israel's security and the two-state solution. The pro-Palestinian bias in the socialist party will hopefully not affect the ongoing trend of separating disagreements on the conflict (disagreements that will not be resolved) from expanding bilateral relations.

More than Hollande having won the election, it was Sarkozy who lost his bid to provide the French public with a sense of socioeconomic security and hope for a better future. It is doubtful whether at a time of economic crisis and growing unemployment Hollande will get the one hundred days of grace accorded most new leaders. The urgent task that will determine his political fate will be to extricate France from the economic-financial crisis in which it now founders.