

# *Why I Choose Nicolas Sarkozy*

**André Glucksmann**

The big surprise of this presidential campaign has already happened. In advance of the vote, the French are undergoing a change in their mentality. Opinion polls vary, and the outcome is anybody's guess, but noticeable everywhere is the rejection of a France trapped in a decrepit sanatorium, susceptible to the same old hospital-acquired infections: self-interest, discrimination, rage, and depression.

Aside from their age, Ségolène Royal and Nicolas Sarkozy have little in common. Both, however, were selected thanks to a current of opinion amongst their respective supporters that rebelled against traditional structures and outmoded doctrines. Voters are no longer simply socialists or Gaullists: these days, you vote for some kind of tough awakening (the so called 'rupture').

During every winter for the last twenty-five years, the homeless people of Paris have frozen. They suddenly appear, their tents blight our gaze, public opinion gets involved and the government does something. But why doesn't it do anything beforehand? Just as in February 1954, the French sense that time is running out. De Gaulle once said that 'it only needed the extraordinary actions of one man for the French to go out onto the streets, but the cold was also necessary. Without the cold, there would have been no Abbé Pierre! ... When France feels the cold, I'll be able to act, too.' A lucid France is feeling cold again: the country is experiencing a Gaullist moment where daring to think (even if it means reconsidering one's own assumptions) and then daring to act is the proper thing to do.

The ideological battle is done. Curiously, it took place on the right. More than a clash of egos, the Sarkozy – Villepin debate was indicative of two visions of France and of the world. In confronting the conservatives, Sarkozy made a clear break from the vacuous part of the right that is so accustomed to hiding behind pious concepts. To take a case in point, he advocates positive discrimination, flouting abstract 'Égalité' in order to stamp out real inequalities deriving from people's skin colour, socio-economic background, or country of origin. Another example: he sets aside public money for building mosques, so adherents of the second biggest religion in France don't have to worship in cellars or in buildings purchased for them by rich fundamentalists. Even if it means offending an established conception

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of the separation of church and state, remember that in 1905, France, with its tens of thousands of bell towers, knew nothing of minarets. Demand has changed, but supply remains the same. As society evolves, its principles must evolve in tandem.

The rupture on the right has had no less of an effect on the international political scene than it has had on domestic politics. Conservative fetishists promote a curious Gaullist relic: the primacy of state sovereignty, no matter what sort of state it is. This 'realpolitik' sacrifices our history and influence in favour of short-sighted interests, whether in arm sales or oil deals. When the Berlin Wall fell, our leaders were unemotional, then gave support to genocidal allies in Rwanda and decorated Vladimir Putin with the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honour. A strange evolution has turned the birthplace of human rights into an apostle of the established order.

But a large-hearted France has never forgotten the oppressed. Vietnamese boatpeople fleeing communism, the embattled Trade Unionists of Solidarity, those who suffered under Argentinean fascism, Algerians confronted by terrorism, victims of torture in Chile, Russian dissidents, Bosnians, Kosovans, Chechens... In no other country were these barbarities and the resistance to them discussed so much. Our ability to open our hearts to our brothers worldwide is etched into our cultural heritage – witness Montaigne, Victor Hugo, the 'French doctors' and those who would emulate them.

Nicolas Sarkozy is the only candidate today to place himself in this large-hearted French tradition. He deplores the sacrifice of the Bulgarian nurses condemned to death in Libya, he denounces massacres in Darfur and the murder of journalists, and then states a principle of governance far removed from that of Jacques Chirac: 'I don't believe in what people call 'realpolitik,' which rejects values and still doesn't win any deals. I don't accept what's going on in Chechnya, since 250,000 dead or persecuted Chechens are more than a detail of world history. Because General de Gaulle wanted freedom for everyone, the right to liberty is theirs, too. To be silent is to be an accomplice, and I don't want to be any dictator's accomplice' (14/1/2007).

How does the left respond? With few words, unfortunately. And what's happened to the battle of ideas that for so long was its prerogative? Where has it mislaid the banner of international solidarity, once the pride of French socialism? I wish in no way to denounce Royal, a candidate whom I respect – even if I can't swallow her opinions about the exemplary speed of the Chinese justice system. But the left finds itself grappling with a fissure bigger than itself, unhappy with those commentators

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and envious people who criticise its intellect or personality. The experience of April 2002 has not brought about any conceptual renewal within the Socialist Party.

The official left believes itself to be morally infallible and mentally untouchable. It embodies both the revolution and the republic as a whole. That was relatively true up to 1945. The left had dared to put everything in question and lead the struggles from whence our secularist social democracy was born. But since 1945, after Vichy had buried the thoughtfulness of the right, the professional left sat on its laurels. It misunderstood the discussions in Germany (regarding Bad Godesberg) and in England (about New Labour), it knew nothing of the spiritual explosion of dissidence in Eastern Europe, it didn't give a damn about the Velvet Revolutions, from Prague to Kiev and Tbilisi.

Wallowing in its narcissism, the left found itself badly wanting when Nicolas Sarkozy broke with every tradition of the right and claimed to stand for the rebels and the oppressed, as well as the young communist agitator Guy Môquet, martyred Muslim women, Simone Veil (who eradicated the suffering caused by clandestine abortions), Brother Christian à Tibhirine, and the Spanish Republicans. Instead of bemoaning the way he has appropriated the socialist legacy, allow me to rejoice. When I recognise Victor Hugo, Jean Jaurès, Georges Mandel, Jacques Chaban-Delmas and Albert Camus in this candidate's speeches, I feel somewhat at home.

In a presidential campaign it's useful to ruthlessly emphasise differences. It's also normal to point out candidates' shortcomings. But this should be on condition that we don't eliminate our opponents by questioning their nationality, like the socialist politician who inveighed against the 'American neoconservative with a French passport.' Exiling people, and stigmatising them as anti-French, was for a long time the prerogative of a right which could come up with few answers to the successes of Léon Blum or Roger Salengro. The left deserves better than that.

Never in the course of a long public life have I declared publicly in favour of one candidate, except for Chirac against Le Pen in the second round election of May 2002. A son of Austrian Jews who fought the Nazis in France, this is my chosen country, and the left my political home. It was for the left that I struggled for forty years against its ideological ossification (a critic of blinkered Marxists, I was a supporter of Solzhenitsyn and of antitotalitarian dissidents in the East).

I have long dreamt of a Bernard Kouchner candidacy, which would restore to the

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French left its missing international dimension. But the Socialist Party always vetoes him, frightened by the courage of this free radical. I would have loved a Sarkozy-Kouchner ticket. Now, in coming out in favour of the former, I will lose friends. My decision, born of old pains and new perspectives, is a qualified one. I don't share all the ideas of the UMP candidate. For example, in the case of illegal immigrants I would rather see more thoroughgoing regulation based on stronger humanitarian principles. To vote is not to become an adherent of a religion: it's simply to choose a vision that fits most closely with one's own convictions.

The humanism of the twenty-first century holds back from imposing a perfect idea of mankind. A safeguard against the inhumanity that lies both within us and around us, it cannot be satisfied with merely lamenting victims and counting the dead and impoverished. Challenging culpable indifference and doctrinaire obsessions, the humanist perseveres – as part of a continually renewed struggle – in 'hindering man's stupidity whilst refusing to allow himself to be dragged along by it,' as Sarkozy put it on January 14 2007. The 'whispering of innocent souls' that the UMP candidate perceived in Yad Vashem informs this definition of politics. It is this whispering that has always been at the base of my own philosophy.

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