



Split down the middle

May 3, 2007

Claude Arpi explains why the French presidential poll is a close call

By coincidence, I landed in France on the day of the Round I results of the French presidential election, which saw a record voter participation. A whopping 84 per cent of the registered voters cast their votes in favour of one of the 12 candidates, hoping to qualify for the May 6 final. One could hardly imagine from India that the election of an executive President could raise so much passion. Only once before in the history of the French Republic had voters participated so massively; it was in 1965 when Charles de Gaulle became the first President of the Republic elected by universal suffrage.

The results of Round I witnessed other important changes in the French political landscape. The first feature is the marginalisation of smaller and extremist parties. For example, the tally of the candidate of the Communist Party of France was its worst in the last 50 years; the candidate did not cross the two per cent bar; the Green lady candidate had a worse score.

The other big surprise is the poor result of Mr Le Pen, the ultra-nationalist who made it to the Round II in 2002 against President Jacques Chirac. This time, he finished fourth with only 10 per cent of votes, his lowest score ever. Analysts believe that Mr Nicolas Sarkozy, the surveys' favourite for the race to the Elysée Palace and leader of the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (Union for a Popular Movement), has attracted many of Mr Le Pen's electors.

But the major change is the emergence of a third front led by the centrist François Bayrou who suggests a 'national' reconciliation and

believes that the only way, if France wants to tackle the tough issues facing the nation, is to work together.

More than 18 per cent of the electors voted for Mr Bayrou's vision: No single ideology, whether Leftist or Rightist can today solve all the problems. Neighbouring Germany under Ms Angela Merkel has shown the way of 'working together' and is economically recovering remarkably well. Though he did not make it to Round II, Mr Bayrou is today the most wooed citizen of France. Mr Sarkozy (31 per cent) and Ms Ségolène Royal (26 per cent) will oppose each other on May 6, but Mr Bayrou's supporters will arbitrate the final. Interestingly, this huge vote-bank forces both candidates to make 'openings' and 'concessions'; in other words, to change their rigid ideological stand. The question of a vote-bank seems to not be reserved to Indian politics; perhaps, it is an intrinsic factor of democracy forcing hopeful candidates to go fish in other's waters.

The most surprising factor, however, is the extraordinary interest generated by the presidential election. Whether you open a newspaper, listen to FM radio, watch the TV or begin a discussion with friends or by-passers, the theme is invariably Sarko or Ségo, their life, their belief, their chances to make it. Even jokes or deeper thoughts veer around the campaign and the future awaiting the nation if the 'other' becomes the host in the Elysée. It probably reflects the deep uneasiness of a nation caught resting while the world around is changing fast.

Sarko and Ségo, the two remaining candidates, represent two opposite visions for France's future though both swear to bring drastic changes to society. Mr Sarkozy speaks of a liberal economy and a tougher approach towards criminality while Ms Royal is a proponent of a socialist welfare state and a 'more just' approach in which the state will still have an important but reformed place.

One subject reflects perfectly their differences. Ms Royal wants to continue with the 35-hour a week scheme for the French workers, while Mr Sarkozy promises to make the French work more, thereby creating more wealth and consequently solving the problem of chronic unemployment, slow

growth (hardly two per cent), as well as related problems of deficit in the social security budget and the trickier issue of unrest in large city suburbs. Ms Royal believes that reorganising the working hours, redistributing the wealth and providing more training will be enough for the economy to come out of its gloominess.

For an outsider, it is difficult to understand how France can become more competitive than China or India which work much more for much less.

Today France has as many pensioners as working people. It means that 50 per cent of the population works to feed the other 50 per cent. The elected President will have to solve this economic riddle.

Strangely, foreign policy is totally absent from the campaign. And, India is very far away.