



France looks at itself

April 23, 2007

*The new President will have to initiate deep societal changes,
says Claude Arpi*

The French presidential election is yet to become big news in Indian media. To be fair, elections in an European country far removed from New Delhi would find it tough to compete with Wedding No 1, the Nandigram massacre or even the Uttar Pradesh election.

Yet, out here in France, people are warming up to the race. On April 22, French electors went to the polls to select two candidates out of 12 contenders for the May 6 'finals' which will decide the fate of the new President of France.

What are the stakes? India, or for that matter its foreign policy is very far removed from the candidates' pre-occupations.

The voters' main concerns are more down-to-earth: Employment and immigration, two closely linked issues, then education, social security and environment are some of the questions motivating the electorate.

I was rather surprised to see the main candidates agreeing on one point: France has to look at itself.

Today, there is a general admission that the new President will have to initiate deep societal changes. The problem is typified by the trans-Channel relations. Several lakhs of French senior executives, bankers, researchers and even ordinary people have migrated to England (and to the US) to find a job. The reason is simple: The employment scene in France is too grim and rigid; it is far easier for a young person ready to take the jump to make a decent living abroad than in France.

On the other hand, hundreds of thousands of British nationals come to settle in France (particularly in the South-West) to enjoy the French bien-être (well-being) and that country's social security.

Each one of the 12 candidates has his or her own solution to this paradox, though not all the candidates are ready to admit that globalisation and delocalisation are here to stay and that society has to adapt itself to this new paradigm; a less 'social' economic system like in the UK or even Germany has undoubtedly fared much better.

The French election is run in such a way that any of its national can be a candidate, provided he or she can collect 500 signatures of elected representatives. As a result, we have today 12 candidates representing not only large political parties but also different lobbies of French society. Apart from the three main contenders, the extremes of the political spectrum will participate. It includes three Trotskyites, a Communist, a Green and an anti-MNCs, a campaigner for hunters' rights, a Catholic nationalist and an ultra-nationalist.

To follow the campaign is bound to enrich your vocabulary. You first learn about the 'vote utile' (the useful vote). To vote for one of these eight 'small' candidates, who are certain to not participate in Round II, is not considered to be 'useful' by the 'big' ones. For the Centrist François Bayrou and the Socialist Ségolène Royal, the 'vote utile' is primordial; they remember the 2002 election when many voters voted in Round I for Jean-Marie Le Pen, the extreme Right candidate, while the socialist votes got dispersed on several candidates resulting in Prime Minister Lionel Jospin not making to Round II.

Another word that you learn and which is perhaps the key to Round I is 'clivage'. It refers to the traditional separation of the electorate by political parties. Historically, the French voters have voted either for the main Rightist party (this time represented by Nicolas Sarkozy) or the main Leftist one (today Royal's Socialists). The great novelty of this election is that the 'clivage' is not the main feature of the election any more. A candidate representing a small centrist party has today serious chance to

make it to Round II. The reason is that people are fed up with traditional politics which have not been able to deliver the goods and solve France's burning issues. The absence of the 'clivage' means that voters may not vote for an ideology, but would prefer to vote for a person in whom they have confidence.

The 'tough guy' image of Mr Sarkozy will probably be enough to take him to Round II, but who will be his opponent in the final? Will it be the pretty but mercurial Royal who believes that her feminine instinct only will help her to sail through or Mr Bayrou, the 'unifier', who has emerged as a serious contender, thanks to the voters' reject of traditional politics?

In any case, on April 23, the two finalists will have to start introspecting if they want to convince the voters that the predominantly morose scenario can be changed. Mr Sarkozy's campaign motto is "together, everything is possible", but can any candidate today bring all the sections of old France together? That is the question!