

Will an Indian PM ever go jogging and shed the weight of the government?

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The quinquennial electoral exercise which saw the election of a new President and a new lower house in France ended recently. The second round of the legislative elections confirmed the trend of the presidential vote with Nicolas Sarkozy's rightist UMP party winning 325 seats on a 577 Assembly. I was particularly lucky to land in Paris on the day of the first round results of the French presidential election, which saw record voter participation. A whopping 84 percent of the registered voters cast their votes in favour of one of the 12 candidates hoping to qualify for the May 6 final.

From an Indian perspective, it is difficult to imagine that the election of an executive President could raise so much passion. France was deeply split into two camps, Sarko(zy) and Ségo(lène), the two final candidates, represented two opposite visions for France's future. The main plank of Mr Sarkozy was a liberal economy and a tougher approach towards criminality while Ms Royal was a proponent of a socialist welfare state and a 'more just' approach in which the Government plays a major role.

The extraordinary interest generated by the presidential election probably reflected the deep uneasiness of a nation at a crossroad. It was a positive feature that both candidates swore by their eagerness to undertake deep transformation in a system which has proved obsolete. They seemed to have realised that France had to find new ways if it desired to remain a nation that counts in the 21st century. Even after the results of the election were declared, France remained divided into two camps. While millions celebrated the victory of Sarkozy, the son of a Hungarian immigrant, Royal's 'defeat' seemed to deprive other millions of the hope of a better tomorrow.

A remarkable fact was that the main candidates were all in their fifties; Sarkozy (52), Bayrou (56) and Royal (54). The capacity to dream or envisage changes is increased many fold when one is young (President Kalam is an exception, possibly because he has kept in close touch with the youth of the country). On April 22, French electors went first to the polls to select the two candidates for the May 6 'final' which

decided that Nicolas Sarkozy will occupy the Elysee Palace for the next five years.

On May 16, a few minutes after the oath-taking ceremony, Nicolas Sarkozy was on the move and the same afternoon, he was in Berlin to meet Angela Merkel to start afresh the European process which had been blocked after the 2005 French 'No' to the referendum on a European Constitution. The same evening after 'fruitful' talks with the German Chancellor, he was back in Paris. Because the new President knew that he had to initiate deep changes in the political habits of the French if he wanted the necessary majority in the lower house (National Assembly) during the legislative elections held on June 10 and 17, he did not stop 'moving', spending a few hours in a country, the next afternoon in another and jogging in the Elysee gardens on his return. Though many consider this 'jogging' exercise more a publicity gimmick than a sign of real change, some of Sarkozy's first decisions are thought-provoking not only for France, but could be emulated by other nations and may be by India one day.

Take for example his Cabinet of Ministers. He has fixed the total number of ministries to 15. Can we dream of a Cabinet in Delhi with only 15 ministers instead of some 70 odd berths? Of course, a handful of Ministers of State will assist the main ministers, but the remarkably small size of the Cabinet certainly implies a saving for the exchequer; less governmental intervention (it would be an attractive proposal in India where less bureaucracy, the more ebullient the economy) and a more coordinated approach towards difficult issues (Pranab Mukherjee is heading more than 50 GoMs to coordinate 'differences' between ministries). It can be argued that France does not have to satisfy the appetite for power from regional parties as well as different ST, SC, BC, OBC, and other lobbies. But should this last forever?

Other innovation: the French President has decided to keep gender parity in the ministry (8 men and 7 women). In India one still hopes to see the 33% reservation for women introduced one day in the Lok Sabha. It may take a few more decades.

A novelty is the fact that the Minister ranking No 2 in the Cabinet (after the Prime Minister) is the Environment Minister. Most of the presidential candidates had signed 'The Ecological Pact' of Nicolas Hulot, a TV anchor running a program on nature, agreeing "to place environment at the heart of the political debate". Alain Juppé, a former Prime Minister will look after Environment, Sustainable Development, Energy and Transport, all closely interlinked subjects. By the way, who

knows the name of the Environment Minister in India? Another idea is to have 'temporary' Ministers of State who will be given a specific mission and once their job is completed, will quit.

Whatever administrative changes have been undertaken, the new President will need help from all the sections of society to solve some trickier problems. President Sarkozy has promised to make the French work more, thereby creating more wealth and consequently solving the problem of chronic unemployment, slow growth (hardly two percent), as well as related problems of deficit in the social security budget. It is easier said than done.

From our side of the planet, it is not difficult to grasp why France cannot compete with countries like China or India, which work much more for much less. Globalisation and delocalisation are here to stay and the Western society has no choice but to adapt itself to this new paradigm. However some of the President's first reforms are nevertheless worth looking at by India too.