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**OPINION: FILLON, THE ANTI-TRUMP**

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Francois Fillon clearly won the first round of the France's Republican presidential preliminaries. Its no wonder, for the French conservatives have discovered a worthy candidate again, writes DW's Kersten Knipp.

His internal party opponents, especially supporters of Nicolas Sarkozy, called him "Mr. Nobody." That only proved that they were willing to continue using their leader's arrogant tone. Sarkozy used to refer to him as a "pauvre type" (a poor guy) and during his presidency, Sarkozy took pleasure in calling then prime minister Fillon "mon collaborateur", which would be the equivalent of calling him a "member of staff." But the results of the internal party preliminaries show what many conservatives are now clearly rejecting: Sarkozy's frequent displays of high-handedness. They banished him to third place among the top candidates with a mere 20.6 percent.

At the same time, they showed how glad they were to see a different type of politician as a leader of their country: a reserved and polite Catholic with a fighting spirit. In the past months, Fillon took up the fight against public expectations, and especially against those pundits fond of citing polls. Surveys showed he had the least chances of winning □ if any. On Friday, the opinion polls had him at 30 percent at most. In the end, he won 44 percent.

Conservative, but not reactionary

The French political magazine "L'Express" called him "l'anti-Trump". That just might be Fillon's key to success. He is popular but not a populist. He is conservative but not reactionary. That is what appealed to the sensibilities of the social milieu he comes from - that of conservative Catholics. He knew all too well that he could count on them. In the past months and years, they have seldom made spectacular appearances. But they do exist - and in great numbers.

Kersten Knipp

And this group now has the "Le manif pour tous" movement (the demonstration for everyone) to serve as a platform for its ideas. The movement opposes same-sex marriage and adoption rights for gay couples, as does Fillon.

Fillon is decidedly conservative in other respects as well. A few weeks ago, he published an essay called "Vaincre le totalitarisme islamique" ("Conquering Islamic Totalitarianism"). At the same time, his opinion is nuanced and unlike Sarkozy, he does not strongly criticize symbols of Islamic faith. Fillon finds nothing offensive about public institutions offering cafeteria menus that adhere

to Muslim dietary requirements. His reserved manner clearly sets him apart from Trump's rude tone and LePen's harsh statements - and it is perceptible.

#### Threat to both socialists and the Front National

Fillon could become a dangerous adversary for Marine LePen and the Front National (FN) in the presidential elections. He stands for many conservative French people who, despite reservations about some social developments □ above all immigration and integration □ still cannot choose the harsh, rhetorically divisive path of the FN.

But even for current president Francois Hollande - if he decides to run for his party next spring - Fillon may prove to be a tough opponent. When he entered the presidency, Hollande declared that he wanted to be measured by his success in combating unemployment, which at its current 10.5 percent is 1 percent higher than it was when he took office. Fillon represents a clearly business-oriented course, something that would appeal to many French people. The hope among his supporters is that he may even manage to prop up the country's ailing economy.

The insulting remarks made by Jean-Christophe Cambadélis, chairman of the socialist party, cannot spoil Fillon's triumph at the moment. Cambadélis labeled Fillon as "ultraright" and "anti-social". Many French people are likely unimpressed by these comments. Judging from the outcome of the election, they are obviously happy that the conservative camp has once again found a moderate, non-populist voice.

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