
FRANCE SARKOZY: EX-PRESIDENT EXITS AFTER DEFEAT

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BBC

French ex-President Nicolas Sarkozy has been knocked out of the contest for a centre-right presidential candidate and signalled his withdrawal from politics.

Admitting defeat, Mr Sarkozy endorsed Francois Fillon, a free-market liberal who won Sunday's first round with 44% of the vote.

Alain Juppe, who like Mr Fillon is an ex-prime minister, finished second.

They will face each other in a run-off next Sunday. The winner will compete in next year's presidential election.

The winner of the Republican primary is likely to make the presidential run-off, where he or she will probably face far-right leader Marine Le Pen.

Le Pen stalks French centre-right contest

Macron joins presidential race to 'unblock France'

Le Pen: Trump win boosts my chances

With the governing socialists unpopular and divided, it seems unlikely that any left-wing candidate will survive the first round in April.

[Francois Fillon] Image copyrightREUTERS

Image captionMr Fillon ran on a centrist platform advocating market reforms

More than four million people turned out to vote in Sunday's primary, a far higher number than expected. Polls suggest that the centre-right candidate will win the second round in May.

In his concession speech, Mr Sarkozy, 61, said: "I have no bitterness, I have no sadness, and I wish the best for my country."

Announcing that he would step back from politics, he added he would now "embark on a life with more private passions and fewer public passions".

Mr Sarkozy retreated from public life after he lost the presidency in 2012 but staged a comeback in 2014 to lead a revamped centre right.

He told reporters he now supported Mr Fillon, 62, whose "political choices" he said were closer to

his own than Mr Juppe's.

Mr Fillon served as Mr Sarkozy's prime minister during the latter's presidency between 2007 and 2012.

Challenging Le Pen - by Lucy Williamson, BBC Paris Correspondent

Since his return to politics two years ago, Mr Sarkozy has seen his dominance of the centre-right leach steadily to his rivals. He banked on a hard-right agenda, sailing close to the policies of far-right leader Marine Le Pen on issues like security, immigration and French identity.

Whether it is his policies that have apparently alienated France, his previous record as president, or the scandals that have dogged him since he left, Mr Sarkozy is out of next year's presidential race before it has truly begun.

With approval ratings for France's Socialist president at historic lows, this primary contest is seen by some as an unofficial first round in France's presidential election, as whoever wins the centre-right nomination is expected to battle far-right leader Marine Le Pen in the run-off for the Elysee Palace next year.

Mr Fillon, an anglophile whose wife is Welsh and who admires Margaret Thatcher, said the result showed a strong movement of hope was under way.

He had promised deep market reforms and was initially not seen as the top contender. However he has enjoyed a late surge in polls.

"Defeat must not humiliate anyone because we will need everyone," he said. "I spare a thought particularly for Nicolas Sarkozy, France's former president."

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