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THE FAST PRESIDENCY? NICOLAS SARKOZY AND THE POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS OF THE FIFTH REPUBLIC

Alistair Cole

ABSTRACT *This article situates the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy (2007–2012) within the broader context of a framework for evaluating presidential political leadership in France. The analysis reveals a complex interplay between personal styles and role perceptions of the presidential office. The main argument proposed is that Sarkozy over-invested the presidential office with a personal governing style that was widely deemed—by public opinion, as well as elites—to be inappropriate given the role expectations of the French presidency. But the first Sarkozy term also demonstrated how the sixth President of the Fifth Republic worked hard to learn from his predecessors and adapt his behavior in a way broadly deemed appropriate for the office. The article concludes that changing institutional and political contexts and timescales have made it far more difficult for incumbents to combine the key roles that are traditionally ascribed to the French President.*

Keywords: Leadership; France; French President; Sarkozy; "Quinquennat"; Hyper-President.

During the five-year term to which he was elected in 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy has been widely perceived to have invested the presidential office with excessive engagement in the day to day details of governance and a personal style out of keeping with the norms associated with the French head of State. In a previous article, I defined a framework for evaluating presidential political leadership in France as one that admits the contingent, context specific nature

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of leadership, but which allows structural regularities to emerge through comparison of French Presidents over fifty years (Cole 2008). Most models of political leadership involve some combination of the personal qualities of leaders, their positional strengths and weaknesses, and the wider environmental and cultural constraints and opportunities that help shape their political leadership. Logically the model favours three levels of analysis; the individual, the office, the environment. This article evaluates the political institution of the French presidency under Sarkozy by referring to this multi-dimensional framework of analysis. The main argument is that Nicolas Sarkozy over-invested the presidential office with a personal governing style that was widely deemed—by public opinion, as well as elites—to be inappropriate given the role expectations of the French presidency. But the first Sarkozy term also demonstrated how the sixth President of the Fifth Republic worked hard to learn from his predecessors and adapt his behavior in a way broadly deemed appropriate for the office. The analysis reveals a complex interplay between personal styles and role perceptions of the presidential office. The article concludes that changing institutional and political contexts and timescales have made it far more difficult for incumbents to combine the key roles that are traditionally ascribed to the French President.

Persona, role, and style

The presidential office is invested by individuals who bring different styles, visions, sets of beliefs, and capacities to the office. Style is best understood in terms of the complex mix of preferences, beliefs, skills, and values of individual leaders. Presidents of the Fifth Republic are also influenced by role perceptions of appropriate behavior, by past presidential practice, and by understanding the rituals associated with the office. The debate over style and role is embedded in a much broader ontological debate about structure and agency which, if it necessarily falls beyond the scope of this article, underpins the substantive argument presented here. Navigating a credible course between role and style has been the challenge that each of the six Presidents of the Fifth Republic has had to face.

Sarkozy's personal and political style are the subject of heated debate; they can be subjected to rival readings. The prevailing interpretation, at the end of a five-year term in office of unprecedented difficulty and unpopularity, is that of inappropriateness. Nicolas Sarkozy acted in a way, especially during the first eighteen months, that was deemed as unsuitable for the presidential office, tailor-made by de Gaulle and only slightly modified by his successors. The "bling-bling" President engaged in personal excesses in the first few months of his presidency (from the post-election celebration at Fouquet's to the luxury holidays offered by close business allies) that provoked widespread disapproval.

On the other hand, these events celebrating material success and business values are interesting in that they represent the "real" Sarkozy, the former mayor of (rich) Neuilly who values material success and achievement as a badge of esteem (Foessel and Mongin 2007). Sarkozy's unabashed support for "neo-liberal" values and symbols would not be subject to such opprobrium in all political cultures, but they were a far distance from the former Catholic-inspired distrust of material wealth of de Gaulle and Mitterrand, or even the Radical Socialist provincialism of his predecessor Jacques Chirac.

Sarkozy's personal life and changing personal relations were propelled to the heart of his governing style; in an intensely mediatised age, French electors were invited to share his personal misfortunes and joys (his divorce from Cecilia, his marriage to Carla, the birth of their daughter Guilia). There was much less respect than under previous Presidents for the traditional boundary between public and private. While in part a comment on Sarkozy's style, this blurring of public and private can also be read as a sign of the times and of the overwhelming presence of an intrusive media. Herein lay one of the principal paradoxes of the Sarkozy period. On the one hand, there was a tightly planned strategy of media control, evidenced by a far closer intervention into the media than at any period since the 1960s (Kuhn 2010). On the other hand, even the most tightly planned media strategy could not cope with the spontaneity of presidential interventions (such as Sarkozy's "casse-toi pauvre con" outburst at the Paris Agricultural Salon in 2008), which challenged the sense of appropriate behaviour commonly associated with the presidency. There is also room for a less negative reading of Sarkozy's persona. The fascination with successful business people, and with achievers more generally, reflected in part a distrust of traditional modernizing technocratic elites (Foessel and Mongin 2007). A lawyer himself, the President marked his distance from France's traditional elite: there were fewer *énarques*, or *inspecteurs des finances*, and his early governments provided a more accurate reflection of the diversity of French society via the process of "opening up" the parliamentary majority to include representatives of civil society and to ensure parity. On balance, however, the survey evidence suggests strongly that the first eighteen months had a lasting impact, negatively assessed in all opinion polls, on Sarkozy's image (Gerstlé and Francois 2011). More than the government's policy performance (premier Fillon remaining more popular than Sarkozy for most of the five year period), the low poll ratings were a devastating verdict on the President's style of governing.

Nicolas Sarkozy's election as President of the French Republic on 6 May 2007 was clear and unambiguous, testament to a skilful political construction and aggregation of conflicting interests. If the disillusion rapidly set in, this was in part due to a capability-expectations gap, in the absence of a clearly defined political program or consistent legitimizing discourse. Marlière (2009) describes Sarkozy's ideological syncretism in terms of an ideological theme park, with the French President borrowing from the key Bonapartiste, Orleanist, and

Legitimist traditions on the French Right. Sarkozy also drew on a range of influences well beyond those of the French Right; in some key respects he has been the most American of French Presidents, both in terms of the American Right (the disputes about the roles of genes in criminal behaviour, or, in foreign policy, the early proclamation of a much stronger trans-Atlantic relationship) and the American Left (the apparent support for diversity and gender balance, themes unusual in the French context) (Badiou 2008). In one important sense, Sarkozy can be likened to Blair in the UK, sharing with the former UK Prime Minister what Garton Ash (2007) describes as a "post-ideological and pragmatic conception of politics, mixing themes associated with left and right, more concerned with what works than with ideological coherence." In both cases, plural ideological references were primarily mobilized to justify action.

Hyper-President Sarkozy?

The office of the presidency might be considered in its own terms as an institution in two core senses of this term. It is defined in precise ways by constitutional rules and legal norms. It also represents a set of expectations about the personal and political roles that a French President ought to perform. The two prevailing images of the French President are as a supra-partisan republican monarch, and as an interventionist and partisan political leader. The mixed evidence since 1958 has given rise to two partly rival narratives of the office of the presidency, more or less convincing depending upon the period in question. The mainly presidentialist narratives of the first two decades of the Fifth Republic gave way during the next two decades to more balanced accounts, the centrality of the presidency having been challenged by repeated episodes of "cohabitation" and minority administration, variable configurations within the core executive and changing leadership styles in an age of closer European integration (Hayward and Wright 2002).

If there is a considerable body of literature on the evolution of the presidential office from de Gaulle to Mitterrand (Hayward 1993), understanding Sarkozy's tenure requires a more direct comparison with his immediate predecessor, Jacques Chirac. The reputation of the presidency under Chirac suffered from repeated failures as a result of the misuse of the exceptional tools provided for the President in the 1958 constitution. First, the falling into abeyance of the tool of dissolution (article 12) of the National Assembly, after the unsuccessful attempt undertaken by President Chirac in 1997. Second, the effectiveness of the presidential use of the tool of the referendum was challenged, after French electors voted No to the EU constitutional treaty in 2005. Third, President Chirac had to endure the longest episode of

cohabitation—from 1997 to 2002—in the history of the regime; in this *cohabitation de longue durée*, the political legitimacy and personal authority of President Chirac was repeatedly challenged (Elgie 2002). Finally, the nature of Chirac's overwhelming second round victory in 2002 (81.25 percent against Jean-Marie Le Pen of the far right Front National) could not obscure the outgoing President's poor performance in the first round (19.88 percent of votes cast, but only 13.6 percent of registered electors), the weakest score of any outgoing President of the Fifth Republic. The exceptional circumstances of 2002 overshadowed the final years of Chirac's presidency, which would be laid low by the referendum defeat of 2005.

During the 2007 campaign, Sarkozy promised a new political and presidential style: one based on unashamed presidential leadership and direct accountability to the electorate, after what he perceived to be the compromises of the Chirac period. The Sarkozy presidency was inaugurated with a discourse of reform, indeed of *rupture*—a break with existing political practices and established interests, a skilful political construction that captured the reform theme for the French right. In an obvious contrast with Chirac in 2002, the manner of Sarkozy's election thus strengthened the de facto role of the President as a partisan politician, rather than a supra-partisan arbiter. Once elected, President Sarkozy pushed furthest the break with the inherited roles of the office, dispensing almost entirely with the fiction of a supra-partisan, non-interventionist President that was the principal legacy of de Gaulle. Hence the media frenzy over Sarkozy's so-called hyper-presidency, the case for which rests upon the creation of new instruments of presidential domination, the consolidation of older forms of political pre-eminence, and the practical impact of a quickening political pace resulting from the henceforth five-year political cycle.

The first substantive political change lay in restoring the instruments of the president's political ascendency. By mid-way through the third cohabitation (1997–2002), there was a degree of cross-partisan consensus that "cohabitation" was a flawed arrangement best to be avoided. The dual executive problem was addressed in 2000 by premier Jospin and President Chirac jointly supporting a constitutional reform to reduce the President's term from seven years to five years, the same duration as the parliamentary mandate. By aligning the two electoral cycles and ensuring that the presidential election precedes the parliamentary contest, these constitutional changes consolidated the political ascendancy of the presidency. Sarkozy's election as President in 2007 represented a new phase in the history of French presidency; in the parliamentary elections following the presidential contest the UMP by itself had an absolute majority, with 313 deputies out of 577. Much more clearly than in 2002, in 2007 a directly elected President appeared as the de facto head of a

parliamentary majority elected explicitly on the basis of supporting the presidential program.

A clearer presidential mandate gave rise, second, to a more explicitly assumed *policy leadership*. Most of the key reforms of the 2007–2012 period were directly associated with Sarkozy; from the reforms to the thirty-five hour week and flexible working (2007), through the detailed interventions in the field of state reform (RGPP, 2007–2012), the universities (2007), the environment (2008), local government (2009–2010), and the pensions reform (2010). The pace of the early period could be explained because the incoming President was fully vested with the legitimacy of a decisive electoral victory. But there was no consistent specific style associated with Sarkozy. If the RGPP was implemented in a top down manner, the ambitious program of environmental reforms (the "Grenelle") was conceived as part of a protracted process of negotiation with key economic and environmental interests. And if the key 2010 reform to pensions was implemented against the bitter opposition of the trade unions, the latter were regular visitors to the Elysée and associated with other important changes (for example, the rules for determining which union lists are representative in professional elections). The overall evaluation of Sarkozy's reformist record, tempered by the impact of economic crisis, is rather paradoxical. If Sarkozy's presidency was a reformist one, almost all of the key reforms introduced in 2007–08 had been modified or abandoned by 2012 (Courtois 2010).

A third dimension of the hyper-presidentialist argument is that of *appointments and control*. If all presidents, including Chirac, have taken the key role in *appointments*, the power and scope of presidential involvement in nominations under Sarkozy was perceived by many to have increased exponentially, symbolized by his unprecedented involvement in media appointments and his general interference in the broad commercial spheres of influence (such as the heads of energy firms GDF-Suez and EDF). Even more than a spectacular increase in appointments, however, Sarkozy's first term of office was characterized by the enhanced role of the presidential *entourage*, as well as the detailed intervention in the nomination of ministers and their advisors and more generally in the structure of government.

Though the role of the *entourage* has been the subject of controversy under each incumbent President (Cohen 1981; Stevens 1993), the Elysée Staff performed a far more public role under President Sarkozy than his predecessors. The Elysée staff were encouraged to become public figures, including giving media interviews and publishing position papers in the press. The General Secretary of the Elysée from 2007–2010, Claude Guéant, performed a more public role than any of his predecessors, before eventually becoming a controversial Interior Minister in 2010. Other presidential advisers (special advisor Henri Guiano, social advisor Raymond Soubie, media advisor Pierre Charon, and others) also occupied the public limelight. The key policy

negotiations were often orchestrated by the President's special advisors, rather than by ranking ministers or their senior civil servants. Two examples illustrate a broader trend. Soubie, the President's social affairs advisor, almost entirely orchestrated the negotiations with the social partners over the pensions reform of 2010. In foreign policy, the former Socialist Foreign Minister (Kouchner) and the permanent career diplomats of the Quai d'Orsay complained bitterly of the influence of the Elysée's diplomatic cell, led by Jean David Levitte.

There was a marked presidentialization of the core executive and personalization of inner-executive relations after May 2007. Sarkozy made explicit a leadership vision where a President with a popular mandate exercises executive authority, which is implemented by the Prime Minister, the ministers, and the broader machinery of government. Initially, Prime Minister François Fillon professed actively to share such a vision; Fillon repeated incessantly that the President "governs" and that the role of the premier is one of loyal implementation. Sarkozy pushed the presidentialization of inner-executive relations farther than any previous President when, in 2008, he invented the "G7 meetings of ministers," whereby seven leading ministers were convoked by the President to receive their instructions. Such a contravention of collective governmental responsibility marginalized de facto the Prime Minister, even when he was present. The gradual abandoning of these "kitchen cabinet" meetings did little to dispel the image of competitive, and rather conflictual presidential–prime ministerial relations. With time, Fillon became less self-effacing, the Prime Minister notably challenging the right of the Elysée Chief of Staff Guéant to speak in the name of the government, and robustly rejecting the President's description of him as a *collaborateur* (a member of the team).

The hyper presidential thesis is powerful, but misleading in some key respects. The tools of presidential domination were double-edged. After being reminded of his subordinate status for three years, the popular Fillon was reappointed as Prime Minister in November 2010 against most expectations, a defensive move that demonstrated the limits of Sarkozy's hyper-presidential practice (Leparmentier 2010). A fragile President, with historically low polls ratings, could not take the chance of dismissing a popular premier only eighteen months from the 2012 presidential election. Moreover, the third Fillon government of November 2010 was a much more traditional center-right/Gaullist government than its predecessors—testament to the need to accommodate a fractious and rebellious UMP presidential party. Hence two of the key instruments of restored presidential pre-eminence—a subordinate prime minister and a presidential majority elected to support the President—were rendered fragile by the tempo of the five-year cycle. Older informal presidential tools—such as dissolution, referenda, and especially the dismissal of the Prime Minister—were far less easy to manipulate in the reduced timescale. Above all, a President who governs had to succumb to the unpopularity of

governments which govern and which have been routinely punished by electors in this period of economic crisis.

A presidency in crisis and of crisis

We referred above to the distinction between transactional versus transformational leadership styles (Burns 1978). In domestic politics, the new interventionism produced in practice a transactional style of leadership; one where the President was forced to bargain with interests, compromise with parliament and party, and make compromises on the details of domestic policy. Arguably, the supra-partisan presidential aura was diminished by the attempt to intervene in matters of "day to day" politics. The effects of the economic crisis after 2008 strengthened the impression of the perceived unfairness of some of the early measures, such as the tax shield (*bouclier fiscal*), which forced the French Treasury to reimburse very wealthy people having paid too much tax. More generally, there was a gradual calling into question of the symbolic measures of the first year under the weight of a major economic crisis. At the same time, Sarkozy's presidency was gradually transformed by having to respond to an unprecedented economic crisis, from the 2008 credit crunch through to the seemingly interminable sovereign debt and euro crises of 2010–2012. The state of permanent crisis provided opportunities for reverting to a more traditional role conception of the presidency.

France's presidency of the European Council from July–December 2008 represented a major opportunity for its ambitious President. Sarkozy was lucky to be President of the European Council when the crisis first broke out. In the French President's opinion, the situation called for decisive leadership by heads of state and government. Sarkozy was instrumental in defining a reinvigorated form of intergovernmental steering, first with Gordon Brown, later with Angela Merkel. By attempting to place the French presidency at the center of operations, Sarkozy returned explicitly to older visions whereby heads of government should "preside and decide" the EU, and large countries should make the key history-making decisions. Sarkozy's belief that only governments could act in a crisis revived Franco-German leadership claims. By November 2008, Sarkozy and German Chancellor Merkel were jointly calling for a relaxation of the Stability and Growth Pact rules. Three years later, Sarkozy and Merkel were admonishing Greece for proving itself incapable of respecting the terms of the euro bailout fund. While these positions were diametrically opposed, in practice public opinion was invited to draw the lesson that the Franco-German "couple" were once again in charge of the European ship. By 2011–12, however, the ongoing and highly unpredictable economic crisis had sapped the popularity of most

incumbent governments, including that of the French. And not even a successful and highly personal war in Libya could provide relief for the embattled Sarkozy.

Conclusion

If reshaping the presidency was central to Sarkozy's 2007 campaign message, by 2012 the office had tamed Sarkozy. The 2007–2012 period witnessed an evolution from the early highly interventionist President, to the consciously more focused figure seeking to symbolize national unity and crisis management. Initially ambivalent to Gaullist symbols, by the end of the first term in office Sarkozy embraced the gaullien model as a means of restoring the authority of the office itself (Landrin 2009). As many political leaders before him, Sarkozy looked to salvation in the EU, in the international political economy or in foreign policy interventions (such as that in Libya) to make a difference, through adopting the regalien posture that only the Head of State can assume.

But was this the same presidency as that of his Fifth Republic predecessors? The first Sarkozy term bore the mark of the *quinquennat*, an acceleration of political time that makes cohabitation less likely, but propels the French president into a much more active role from the beginning of the mandate. The French President appeared more explicitly as de facto head of government than any of his predecessors, and as such was forced to take responsibility for governing. In 2007–2012, the personal governing style of "speedy Sarko" combined with a changed set of rules of the presidential game (the quickening rhythm of the *quinquennat*) to create the *fast* presidency, an evolution of the traditional presidential office. The carefully constructed fast presidency then had to confront a deep world economic crisis that required political leaders to be seen to act, but which overwhelmed their capacity for action. Sarkozy's necessary claim to embody suprapartisan neutrality was difficult to sustain given the hyper-presidentialist activism of the first three years. Though Sarkozy's advisors repeatedly briefed that he was good in a crisis, in practice there was during this period of crisis a poor fit between the fast presidency and the role of representing the nation that French presidents had traditionally fulfilled. Not only was there a lack of domestic political consensus (for example on the 2011 euro crisis), but the office itself had evolved to such an extent that the public's perception of presidential action could not be dissociated from the cleavages of domestic politics. The core question is whether the 2007–2012 period will have created a new temporality for the French presidency, fundamentally challenging received view of institutional roles, or whether the

2007–2012 presidency will come to be viewed as an aberration, an office reconstituted and incarnated by an individual who divided public opinion.

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