

# François Hollande Offers Sensible Change

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As soon as François Hollande was elected the new French President in May, he was swamped by a wave of hope and expectations, in France and abroad, in some ways similar to Barack Obama's 2008 election in the United States.

After 17 years of uninterrupted conservative government, Hollande is the second socialist President of the Fifth Republic. Moreover, his election has gained special meaning in this time of economic crisis and budget cuts, when socialist recipes are not very popular. Indeed, Hollande's election may have marked an end to the austerity measures adopted by the Merkel and Sarkozy – "Merkozy" – tandem.

Over the last five years, under Nicolas Sarkozy, France's image deteriorated: on the one hand, the flamboyant style of the President was not always followed by long-term results; on the other, the growing weight of the far-right party, the National Front, damaged France's image as a human rights champion. The strong presidency exerted by Sarkozy, uncommon in France's recent political history, created the impression that something has to be rebuilt, similar to the end of the George Bush era in the United States. In 2008 the challenge was to put an end to the unilateralism in international relations of the Bush administration, and find a new balance between hard and soft power. In 2012, Hollande's challenge is to reconfigure the Franco-German alliance and restore the image of France.

Of course, to change a country's direction requires years, so it is naive to think that Hollande will quickly be able to leave a visible mark on the history of his country. There are consolidated economic and political interests that have to be preserved for the good of the nation and its citizens regardless the party in power. Nevertheless, a few changes are expected in France's foreign policy, and both the style and the decisions taken by Hollande in the first months at the Elysée may indicate that, if not a 'revolutionary', some changes may transpire.

Hollande presents himself as the 'normal' President, in opposition to the 'bling' style of Sarkozy, who embodied the 'superpresidentialism', meaning a very personal way to exert the power of the President, which was often criticized for being detrimental to institutions. Hollande kept a low profile throughout the electoral campaign and despite criticism of his lack of charisma, the French people trusted him more than Sarkozy. Concerning foreign policy, the different styles of the two men has been likened to a turtle – Hollande – and a hare – Sarkozy – leaving hope that Hollande's mandate will be less spectacular than his predecessor but hopefully marked by better long-term results.<sup>1</sup> During the campaign, Hollande was attacked for not having ministerial experience and a strong grasp of international relations.

1 Jean-François Bayart, "La lièvre et la tortue?" (*Le Monde*, 2 May 2012).



Nevertheless, it is useful to remember that when François Mitterrand was elected for the first time in 1981, his international career was essentially based on his role within the Socialist Party and the relations he built with the leaders of other European left wing parties.

However, the first months of President Hollande were quite successful on the international scene. He attended the NATO summit in Chicago at the end of May, then the G20 meeting in Los Cabos, Mexico, and he has met with European counterparts on many occasions since his election. Hollande's action during this period was influenced by the legislative elections that took place on 10 and 17 June, so he limited himself to confirming some campaign decisions, such as the withdrawal of French troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2012. So far, Hollande has created the impression that he is more pragmatic than his predecessor, and acts as a careful architect who plans to link individual decisions into a coherent foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> This attitude recalls the "tranquil force", a slogan used during the 1981 campaign by François Mitterrand, a sort of father figure for Hollande.

More concretely, Hollande's vision of the world and France's global interests do not significantly differ from that of Sarkozy. There is room for some adjustment, new strategy and style, but the main tenets will remain unchanged.

Regarding relations with the European Union, Hollande's position is still undefined. During the campaign, the debate focused on internal issues and none of the candidates expressed a clear idea of how Europe should look in the future. Hollande anticipated that a European solution to the euro zone economic crisis should include a plan for growth, while Sarkozy's position appeared wed to that of Merkel. As candidate, Hollande promised to renegotiate the Fiscal Compact Treaty. After the European Council meeting held on the 28 and 29 June, he announced that the French National Assembly will rapidly ratify the Treaty, as such decisions taken in Brussels constitute a renegotiation of the agreement.<sup>3</sup>

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Another aspect of the discontinuity between Sarkozy and Hollande is found in relations with Germany. The Merkozy alliance was criticized throughout Europe and has already proven its limits in solving the crisis. Merkel's support did not help Sarkozy. Merkel's rigid position has been detrimental to the image of Germany and has revived anti-German instincts, never completely put to rest in France. In this situation, Hollande appealed for the

end of the Franco-German tandem and the inclusion of other European countries in discussions over Europe's fate.

In this respect, it is likely that Hollande will build different coalitions in order to pressure German reform on eurobonds. A more communitarian approach would produce benefits not only to the smaller European countries but also to the Franco-German leadership, which would gain legitimacy.

Both Mitterrand and Sarkozy at the beginning of their mandates advocated for a diversification of French partnerships within Europe, but each quickly returned to the classical Franco-German partnership.<sup>4</sup> The 50th anniversary of the Elysée Treaty, to be celebrated in 2013, will provide the opportunity to revise the relations between Paris and Berlin, some months prior to the German general elections.

While French relations with major non-European partners

will not vary significantly during Hollande's mandate, there are high expectations coming from France's former colonies in Africa, whose populations see in Hollande a unique chance to put an end to the so-called *Françafrique*. This term was coined in the 1950s by then Ivory Coast President Félix Houphouët-Boigny and had a positive meaning. However, during the last 50 years, the term *Françafrique* indicated a system put in place by General de Gaulle, through which France influenced the politics of its former African colonies by supporting the dictatorial regimes in exchange for preferred access to raw materials for its companies.

In this respect, another parallel exists between François Mitterrand and François Hollande. Officially, every candidate to the Elysée promises to review relations with Afri-

2 Pascal Boniface, "Nicolas Sarkozy un homme de "coups", François Hollande un homme de synthèse" (*Le Monde*, 2 May 2012).

3 Claude Fouquet, "Hollande promet une ratification "rapide" du pacte budgétaire européen" (*Les Echos*, 29 June 2012).

4 Jean-Pierre Darnis, "François Hollande's Presidency: a new era in French foreign policy?" (IAI Working Papers, 12/19, June 2012).



ca. Socialist candidates seem to offer more credible commitments than the inheritors of de Gaulle. The truth is that when elected, any President decides not to renounce to this powerful mean of influence, embodied by the special office for African relations that is under the direct control of the Head of the State. In 1981 Jean-Pierre Cot was nominated deputy minister in charge of Co-operation and Development but he was removed by President Mitterrand the following year because of contrasts on African policy: on the one hand Cot was a supporter of human rights and did not accept to continue the special relation France had with some dictators, on the other one, Mitterrand's attitude was that of the *raison d'État*.

The controversy resurfaced in 2008 between Nicolas Sarkozy, who promised a rupture with the *Françafrique* one year before, and his minister for Co-operation Jean-Marie Bockel. The latter criticized France's relations with select African leaders, and was removed from office, probably under pressure from the leaders of Gabon and Congo.<sup>5</sup> Pascal Canfin, François Hollande's choice for develop-

ment minister, gives some hope to those who want to see the end of the *Françafrique*. Canfin, a member of the Green Party and a former member of the European Parliament, has a promising record on human rights, and French relations with Africa may be at a turning point. Notwithstanding, the experience of Jean-Pierre Cot and Jean-Marie Bockel advise prudence and cabinet tasks may be reshuffled in one or two years.

French foreign policy under François Hollande will be characterized by continuity in bilateral and multilateral relations, with a focus on human rights promotion and cultural diplomacy. President Hollande will boost European integration as a solution to the current political and economic crisis, and he might be helped by a possible change of government in Germany in 2013. His 'normal' style is a novelty in French politics, and his inclination to patiently build his alliances offers hope for results.

<sup>5</sup> "Quand Omar Bongo se réjouit du remaniement ministériel français..." (*Libération*, 20 March 2008).

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