**[France: The Power of Le Pens](http://publici.ucimc.org/?p=51989)**

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The Left has done well in some recent elections in Southern Europe- in Greece, Portugal, and, most recently, Spain. But not in France. The Socialists, who are now in power, took a terrible beating in the December 2015 regional elections.

The Political Context

There are a number of reasons for this discontent with the status quo. There is very high unemployment, especially among young people. The social democratic Socialist Party has not been able to do much about that. President Hollande is an uninspiring character and there are few politicians in that party who seem to have the stature or the intellectual and political acumen or stature of some of the historical Socialist leaders, such as Jaurès, Blum, Mendès-France, or even Mitterrand. There are immigrants and their French-born children, mostly from North Africa, who are relatively poorly educated or trained and suffer the greatest impact of unemployment. Nevertheless, they, as well as the government, have often been blamed for the unemployment of French people with long ancestral roots in the country. And there is “terrorism.” Terrorism is not new to France. During the Algerian war in the early 1960s, right-wing terrorists, some of them associated with the French military, used bombings and assassination attempts (including against President De Gaulle) to try to prevent France from recognizing Algeria as an independent country. For several years now, there have been a series of violent attacks against Jewish people stimulated by anti-Zionist and pro-Palestinian sentiments. And, in 2015, there were terrorist attacks against journalists who have been seen as insulting Islam, as well as against public places in response to the French government’s role in fighting what it regards as dangerous Islamic extremists in Mali, Iraq, and Syria.

Economic, racial, and religious based resentment against immigrants and their children and increasingly deadly terrorism have proved to be fertile ground for the Far Right party called the National Front (Front National). The Front has its roots in a long history of French pro-monarchy, fascist, anti-Semitic, and racist movements. The Front’s historical predecessor was the *Action Française* (French Action) which, after it was banned, “relegalized” itself by changing its name to Amitié Française (French Friendship). This organization was fiercely anti-republican. It was a strong supporter of the Catholic Church and resented the secularism of French republicanism. Its members collaborated with the Nazi occupation of northern France, and with the puppet French Vichy government in the southern half of France. It supported Franco’s fascist-monarchical side in the Spanish Civil War of the late 1930s.

The National Front Seizes the Advantage

A good part of the reason that the French Left is in such tatters is the political astuteness of the Le Pen family and their followers. Papa Jean-Marie Le Pen, who is now in his mid-eighties, was affiliated with the *Action Française* when he was a law student in Paris. After that he enlisted in the French Foreign Legion. After the “fall” of Vietnam from French control in the 1950s, he was elected to the National Assembly as a member of the Poujadist party, a populist right-wing group based largely on small shopkeeper and rural support. During the Algerian war for independence from France in the early 1960s, he served as an intelligence officer in the military. He has been accused of torturing captured Algerian independence fighters, a charge he denies.

In 1972, he, along with collaborationists during the Nazi occupation and the Vichy government, former right-wing terrorists who tried to keep Algeria under French control, former members of Amitié Française, and other rightists, formed the *Front National.* It was openly anti-Semitic and anti-Arab, except for the Algerians who had collaborated with the French to prevent Algerian independence. Le Pen was a constant Front candidate for the presidency, running in 1974, 1988, 1995, 2002, and 2007.

He did not have much success until 2002, when he made it to the second round of the presidential elections. Prior to that he had won election to the French National Assembly, to the European Parliament, and to a number of local government positions.

In 2011, Jean-Marie, then 83, left his position of chair of the Front, becoming honorary chair. His place as real chair was taken by his daughter, Marine Le Pen. She, too, had graduated in law from the University of Paris. She is an extremely gifted orator and has tried to give, at least outwardly, a softer veneer to the Front. This brought her into conflict with her father, who continued to spout anti-Semitic in statements, including belittling the significance of the Holocaust. He was convicted in court for some of his remarks. In August 2015, she engineered the expulsion of her father from the Front. The next month he formed his own political group. But the Front still has two Le Pens who serve on its Executive Board and run for office, Jean-Marie’s granddaughter and Marine’s niece, Marion Marchal-Le Pen. Marion is the youngest member of the French National Assembly, and the Front’s shining star, second only to Marine.

I contended that Marine tried to give a “veneer” to the party, because it is doubtful that its members have actually shed their anti-Semitism. But it does not play well if the Front is seriously interested in capturing the French presidency. Moreover, because of the context discussed above, she and her movement had enough ammunition without using open anti-Semitism, which many in France and abroad would find unacceptable. Indeed, after already pushing both the Socialists and the opposition center-right Republican Party (led by former president Sarkozy) further to the right, the Front scored a stunning success in the first of the two rounds of the December 2015 regional elections. They won in two regions, Pas-de Calais-Picardy, Marine Le Pen’s region, and Provence-Alpes-Cote d’Azur, niece Marion’s region. They got 40% of the vote in those two regions, and a national average of 27.7%. The Front pulled a significant number of votes from people who had previously voted for the Left. Pas de Calais in northwestern France is where many former voters on the left are unemployed and where thousands of Middle Eastern and African immigrants are amassed in the port city of Calais hoping to make their way to England. The Front’s anti-immigration and anti-Islamic stands resonated there. So did the Front’s casting of European Union structures and the open borders as undemocratic and destructive of French national sovereignty and France’s ability to control its borders, a casting that is more rational and has wider appeal than its racist xenophobia, although in real life they can converge in the minds of voters.

The Socialists helped prevent a Front victory in those two districts by a unilateral sacrifice. They had proposed to the Republicans that they each withdraw where they were weakest and throw their support to the other. When Sarkozy’s Republicans refused, the Socialist candidates (with one exception) nevertheless withdrew. Even without this, the Front might have lost those two regions because some people who had not voted in the first round voted in the second, and others who cast votes for the Front in the first round might have engaged in a protest vote and then changed their vote in the second.

But Marine will be back in 2017 in a campaign for the French presidency. If the very unpopular former President Sarkozy insists on running as the Republican candidate and gets the backing of the party, she stands a far better chance of winning the presidency than her father had in 2002. If she does win, France could resemble xenophobic, ultranationalist Hungary. Given growing anti-immigrant and ultranationalist sentiments in some of the other Western European countries, including Germany, that could help stimulate a drastically negative change in the face of Europe as a whole.