

The French and political corruption: Big test at the Élysée Palace

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The French have tended to be more relaxed about corruption but their patience may be running out.

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France has long had a problem with political corruption. At the very bottom of the scale, local mayors are routinely hauled up in front of the courts for embezzling funds or using their influence to get favourable planning decisions. And, at the very top, almost every French President has at least one major corruption scandal to his name.

The problem is made worse by what the French call the '*cumul des mandats*', which allows politicians to hold multiple offices at the national, regional and local levels simultaneously. In 2016, a staggering 86% of Members of Parliament held another elected office, ensuring a steady flow of political patronage and fraud.

Deep roots

A few recent examples will give us a sense of how widespread the problem is. Take the centre-right politician, Alain Juppé, for example. For the past few years, opinion polls have consistently shown him to be the strongest candidate to contest next month's presidential election, but he was found guilty of abuse of public funds in 2004.

It is the same story with Jacques Chirac. In 2011, he became the first former French President to be tried and found guilty of using public money to employ political staff while he was mayor of Paris in the early 1990s.

And, of course, few recent politicians can match former President Nicolas Sarkozy's remarkable talent for venality. Mr. Sarkozy was — and still is — embroiled in no fewer than nine 'affairs'. These include fiddling with his campaign financing, negotiating dodgy deals with Kazakh businessmen and accepting illegal party donations from both the heiress of the L'Oréal cosmetics empire, Liliane Bettencourt, and the former Libyan dictator, Muammar Qadhafi.

Even Marine Le Pen, the leader of the far-right Front National, has developed an impressive record. She is currently under investigation for tax fraud by the French authorities and she has been formally accused of using European Union money to pay for fictitious jobs for her party in the European Parliament.

Turning point

In this crowded field, no one paid much attention to Mr. Sarkozy's former Prime Minister, François Fillon. A traditional and subdued figure, he was mostly ignored in the run-up to this year's presidential election. It came as a surprise, therefore, when he beat both Mr. Juppé and Mr. Sarkozy in the right-wing primary in November. At the time, his victory was widely interpreted as a rejection of Mr. Sarkozy's 'bling-bling' politics and Mr. Juppé's cronyism.

But in late January the satirical newspaper, *Le Canard enchaîné* — famous for exposing hundreds of corruption scandals since it was founded in 1915 — revealed that Mr. Fillon used parliamentary expenses to pay his wife a salary to do a non-existent job from the late 1980s to 2013. The consequences were explosive. The story immediately grabbed the headlines and Mr. Fillon was forced to fire-fight. In a pre-emptive conciliatory move, he told the press that although he was innocent, he would step down if he was formally indicted.

Unfortunately for him, the revelations kept coming. Prosecutors claimed that his children had also benefitted from 'fake jobs' and investigations revealed that he had received illegal loans and free gifts, among them more than €48,000 worth of suits.

When he published his tax returns in early February in an effort to prove his innocence, it only served to highlight the scale of the problem. According to the figures, his wife was paid an average of €3,600 per month over 15 years, 50% more than the average income in France. Given that Mr. Fillon owns €1 million worth of property, the overwhelming impression was of a rich man making himself (and his family) richer.

He was finally indicted in late February but immediately broke his promise to step down. Instead, he did the exact opposite. He organised a huge rally on March 5 at the Trocadéro in Paris, and, in front of a crowd of 100,000 people, proclaimed that he would fight to the end. It was a bold move on the part of a desperate man.

Mr. Fillon is now a politician in danger. The French right and its candidates were supposed to make major gains in the upcoming election cycle, but he currently languishes in third place in the polls which would mean certain elimination.

Edging closer

More importantly, this latest corruption scandal has served to heighten the already acute sense of dissatisfaction that many French voters feel with politics. It is surely no coincidence that the current front-runner, Emmanuel Macron, has spoken a great deal about how he intends to restore the morality of public life. Like François Hollande before him, he has promised to break some of the entrenched structures that have made corruption endemic.

There is little assurance that a future President Macron would succeed in achieving his goals, but the task is urgent. The French may traditionally have been more relaxed about corruption than some of their other European counterparts but Mr. Fillon's elimination would be the clearest sign yet that their patience is running out.

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