France’s Outsider Candidates Seize the Presidential Race

By Elisabeth Zerofsky, NEW YORKER, Feb. 7, 2017

Marine Le Pen (above), of the far-right National Front, and Emmanuel Macron, an independent, have emerged as the front-runners in France’s Presidential election

The public gymnasium across the street from my Paris apartment, in an unassuming neighborhood of the Nineteenth Arrondissement, has become an effigy for the city’s political class. One morning a few weeks ago, posters went up announcing a rally for Arnaud Montebourg, a former minister and perennial Presidential candidate, his bland smile stamped in rows across the building’s façade. A few days later, the French voted him out of the Presidential race. The posters were, inevitably, defaced. A strip torn from one of them ripped right through Montebourg’s teeth.

After Montebourg, there were torn posters for former Prime Ministers Manuel Valls and François Fillon. So far this election cycle, French voters have been vicious in throwing out the symbols of entrenched power. In November, former President Nicolas Sarkozy was humiliated when his carefully calibrated comeback earned him a distant third place in the primary of the center-right Republicans; in December, François Hollande was pressured into becoming the first sitting President of the Fifth Republic not to run for reëlection. At the end of January, Valls was
defeated in the Socialist Party race by Benoît Hamon, a dapper *frondeur*, a member of a rebel faction.

Fillon, Sarkozy’s former Prime Minister, managed to circumvent public ire when he triumphed over his boss in the Republican primary; a stern, traditional conservative, his win was attributed to a surprise showing from France’s “zombie Catholics.” The faithfully observant, who live largely in exurban areas, are, after decades in which public expression of religion was taboo, beginning to assert their identity. But as soon as Fillon took over the Party apparatus he was subject to the French rage toward the establishment. In late January, *Le Canard Enchaîné*, a satirical paper with a penchant for going after stodgy men, revealed that Fillon’s wife, Penelope, had received five hundred thousand euros in compensation from the Parliament over five years for her work as an assistant (Fillon has held positions intermittently in both chambers since 1981). Hiring family members is standard practice in the insular world of French élites (an estimated twenty per cent of parliamentarians do it), but Penelope Fillon’s remuneration was remarkably high for an assistant, especially since she had declared, in 2007, that she had “never actually been his assistant or anything like that,” referring to her husband, and told the press last fall that she had “never been involved” in his political life. Her income was soon discovered to add up to nearly a million euros over fifteen years, and the dragnet expanded to include Fillon’s children, who were paid amply for brief periods of work. Investigators searched François Fillon’s office, and police questioned the couple for five hours.

One of Fillon’s campaign promises had been to abolish five hundred thousand civil-servant positions. *Le Gorafi*, France’s version of the Onion, came up with an alternative proposition: “François Fillon will condense 500,000 civil servant positions into one single position, and it will be for his wife.” At a press conference on Monday, Fillon maintained that everything he’d done had been perfectly legal, but he acknowledged that the public had grown intolerant of the political class’s behavior, saying that “what was acceptable yesterday . . . no longer is today.” The left rejoiced at what it predicted would be Fillon’s downfall. But it was a pitiful kind of schadenfreude. “Penelope-gate is not good news,” a French documentary-photographer friend, Vincent Jarousseau, wrote on Facebook. “It is just one more expression of a democracy that is running on empty.” Jarousseau has spent the past few years working on a book that has just come out, “L’Illusion Nationale,” about the former mining and industry towns in the north, which are desolated and impoverished, and increasingly voting for the far-right National Front. He told me of a family of seven that was living on a monthly government check of eleven hundred euros. In the family’s town, Denain, on the Belgian border, the life expectancy is fifty-eight—the same as Mali. “What becomes clear by the end is terrible—the incompetence of politicians, the contempt that results from broken promises and successive lies,” he wrote on Facebook. “These people have been used, and they know it. They are angry, very angry.”

The conventional wisdom holds that what’s bad for Fillon is good for Marine Le Pen, the head of the National Front. Fillon found himself, oddly, to the right of Le Pen on many social issues, and stood to steal some of her voters. But as an economic “liberal,” who wants to gut social security, expand free-trade pacts, and deregulate, Fillon is a poor match for the moment; Le Pen’s sovereign protectionism is more in vogue. Polls currently show Le Pen safely winning the first round of the election in late April, which will advance her to a runoff against the second-place finisher. The début of the Trump Administration, however, has brought a sense of reality to her
candidacy that cuts both ways. Le Pen has long vowed to end “uncontrolled” immigration to France. But after the chaos that accompanied Trump’s executive order banning citizens of seven Muslim countries and refugees from entering the U.S., Le Pen’s campaign director told Le Monde that such a move “is not a priority” for the National Front. “Everything is imaginable if particular needs justify it,” he said, “but our priorities are reëstablishing our borders, closing mosques that preach radical Islam, and destroying ISIS.”

The candidate who stands to gain the most from Fillon’s scandal could be the former economy minister Emmanuel Macron, who is running as a non-party-aligned centrist. When Macron, thirty-nine, declared his candidacy as an independent, in November, he was clearly looking at polls showing that only eight per cent of French citizens trust the political parties. It may turn out to be a brilliant gamble. Alternately called a “traitor,” an “opportunist,” and “Brutus” for overtaking his political patron, Hollande, he now stands to pick up voters who find Fillon too conservative or corrupt, Hamon too quixotic, or the National Front too nationalist. Macron’s critics are many, but they ignore that he is doing the dull, plodding work of actual politics. Last spring, long before the campaign season had started, he launched a new “movement” that sent volunteers across France to talk with citizens about what troubled them most. He is now seeking candidates to run in the legislative race, which comes a month after the présidentielle and determines the efficacy of an administration. Macron is requiring that candidates on his ticket be free of legal run-ins—another novelty in a country where half the candidates on the right and a smattering on the left have been investigated for corruption. Macron is responsive to public sentiment, and he is building political infrastructure.

Little attention has been paid to the Socialist Party, which, after five years under a terrifically unpopular President and an immobilizing internal conflict between liberals and the hard left, had been declared dead. The nomination of Hamon, however, has energized many, who see the candidate as bringing the “old left” into the twenty-first century. Hamon has launched a semi-serious discussion of universal basic income, and he eschews the eternal back-and-forth of the French laïcité debate, which has become fixated on whether Muslim women should be permitted to cover their heads in public, in favor of new ideas. He has called for a corpus of “inspectors” who will be dispatched to insure that businesses and institutions are not discriminating based on faith, in the spirit of the original 1905 law. The intellectual left was, like the Party, considered shrinking and demoralized, but Hamon has pulled some of its proposals back into the public debate. “There is an intruder that has glided onto the platform of nonstop politics: the dream,” Daniel Schneidermann wrote in Libération. “Through what window did it come? We thought it was murdered, trampled, buried, thrown in the dungeon, at least since 1981.” Hamon’s poll numbers are rising, but he has a significant gap to make up.

When I asked my photographer friend how he thought the race would turn out, he laughed and said that, with all the chaos, anyone who says he knows what will happen is not to be believed. But as Fillon’s numbers sink—he is now running behind Le Pen and Macron, with eighteen and a half to twenty per cent of the vote—it is increasingly probable that, for the first time in decades, the second round of the election could be a runoff between two non-mainstream parties. Surely, this kind of repudiation, should it come to pass, is clear as can be.