

Sarkozy's comeback hopes crumble, polls show
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PARIS, April 13 — French President Nicolas Sarkozy defended his economic record today as a slew of opinion polls suggested his prospects of re-election were crumbling just over a week from round one of a vote where Socialist Francois Hollande is clear frontrunner.

A CSA poll showed Hollande extending his lead over Sarkozy, with the conservative incumbent's modest gains of the past month starting to evaporate ahead of a two-round contest taking place on April 22 and May 6.

The poll showed Hollande winning the May 6 decider with 57 per cent of the vote, and two other recent surveys also suggested his chances of becoming the first left-wing president since Francois Mitterrand were strengthening.

In their latest standoff, Sarkozy said he had helped France weather economic crisis over the past four years far better than countries such as Greece or Spain, and he renewed warnings of market turmoil if rival Hollande won power.

"What fires up the financial markets and speculation is when a country does not repay its debts, reneges on its commitments and embarks on a path of ill-considered spending," Sarkozy told TV news channel i>TELE.

"Mr Hollande, by promising to raise spending without any commitment to cutbacks, is setting the stage for a confidence problem (in financial markets)," he said.

Hollande, who says he can slash the public deficit but also promote jobs and education as he hikes tax on the rich, stuck to his line in three newspaper interviews published today, saying austerity would be self-defeating if not accompanied by efforts to promote economic growth in France and Europe.

"This I say clearly: financial markets will not lay down the law in France," he told the business weekly La Tribune.

Change of direction in Europe

Hollande has raised eyebrows in Berlin and other capitals by criticising a European accord on debt and deficit control – the fiscal compact agreed in a bid to counter the euro zone debt crisis – and saying he would open talks if elected to amend it with a pro-growth commitment.

"Germany understands that it cannot remain an island of prosperity in an ocean of recession," he told Les Echos daily. "The changeover in France will pave the way for a change of direction in Europe."

The other two promising polls for Hollande were published by the BVA and LH2 agencies yesterday.

The BVA poll showed Hollande winning the runoff with a score of 54 per cent, up two percentage points from a previous sounding. The LH2 poll showed him taking 55 per cent of the vote in the decider round.

Sarkozy, who launched his campaign in mid-February, enjoyed a rise in the polls during mid-to-late March and even overtook his Socialist rival in many poll estimates of first-round voting scores, although not a single poll in the past year has shown Hollande losing the decider vote on May 6.

Some analysts and commentators had predicted that a spate of killings by an al Qaeda-inspired gunman in mid-March would make security fears overshadow economic concerns as the focus of the campaign, playing to Sarkozy's strengths.

The picture now emerging suggests that whatever gains Sarkozy enjoyed at that time were short-lived.

But he showed no sign of relenting, telling i>TELE: "Polls and journalists don't make elections. Voters do." — Reuters

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