

Hollande, France's 'Mr Normal' would-be president
Reuters
April 17 , 2012

PARIS, April 17 — The very first thing “Mr Normal” Francois Hollande plans to do if he becomes France’s first Socialist president since Francois Mitterrand on May 6 is to cut his own salary by 30 per cent.

One thing he says he will not do in debt-stricken times is to unleash a public spending blitz or a wave of nationalisations of the kind that opened the Mitterrand era in 1981.

Hollande, 57, is a moderate left-of-centre politician whose battle plan commits France to eliminate its public deficit by 2017 while raising taxes, primarily on the rich, to fund priority spending programmes in areas like schooling.

That falls short of the mark for many economists who argue that deep public spending cuts and a rollback of the state are needed to tackle high national debt, revive the economy and make France more internationally competitive.

But Hollande contends that Greek-style austerity would be self-defeating by reducing economic activity and state revenue, hence defeating the deficit reduction it was meant to achieve.

Beyond economic policies that are central to this election, Hollande’s agenda is modern centre-left: he would permit gay marriage, legalise adoption for same-sex couples and allow euthanasia under strict conditions. And he has said he has no intention of marrying his female companion.

He has billed himself as the “Mr Normal” the country needs after five years of at times flashy, narcissistic leadership that earned his conservative rival, incumbent Nicolas Sarkozy, the nickname “President Bling Bling”.

Hollande used to go to work by scooter until the demands of a near year-long election campaign and security requirements got the better of his modest mode of transport.

Hollande was best known abroad until recently as the former partner of Segolene Royal, a telegenic fellow-Socialist who had four children with him and ran unsuccessfully for president in 2007. The two split up after that campaign.

His current partner, Valerie Trierweiler, is a journalist who says she wants to stay at work even if Hollande wins to help provide for three children she had before living with the candidate.

Gravitas

Hollande’s wit is razor sharp. Even Bernadette Chirac, wife of former president Jacques Chirac, who sits in opposition to him in the Correze county council, once conceded: “He is very funny. He knows how to work a crowd, a market, a fair, a local council.”

His natural joviality has taken a backseat without vanishing as he seeks to convey the gravitas of a statesman. He has never been a minister, devoting his political life to regional politics and serving the Socialist Party.

He held the fractious party together as first secretary for 10 turbulent years from 1997 to 2007 after working in the shadows in Mitterrand's presidential office.

Critics say he is inexperienced, bland and indecisive. Wags nicknamed him "flanby" after a wobbly caramel pudding. Backers say his strength is that he is a consensus-builder who pursues reform by consent.

Hollande slimmed down and sharpened his looks for the election with a crash diet that deprived him of one of his great loves, chocolate cake. The jam-jar spectacles of past years were ditched in favour of fashionable sharp-edge glasses.

Born on Aug. 12, 1954 in the northwestern city of Rouen into a middle-class family, Hollande, son of a doctor father and social worker mother, told family and friends from a young age that he wanted to be president one day.

After moving to the Paris region in 1968, he attended the top-rank HEC business school and graduated at the end of the 1970s from the Ecole Nationale d'Administration, the civil service academy that churns out most of the political elite.

From there, he started a political career as a back-office aide to Mitterrand in 1981, along with Royal.

Another thing he says he will do immediately if he wins is put in a call to share the news with his ageing father, who spent some time campaigning for the far-right in the 1960s, angry that France was letting go of then colony Algeria. — Reuters

Francois Hollande, Socialist Party candidate for the 2012 French presidential election, removes his scarf as he visits the SAFRA industrial rail body factory as part of his campaign trip in Albi on April 16, 2012. — Reuters pic

The Malaysian Insider

Copyright © 2012 The Malaysian Insider

Source: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/world/article/hollande-frances-mr-normal-would-be-president/>