



TOULOUSE: Supporters of French presidential election candidate for the far-left coalition La France insoumise hold placards during a campaign rally at the Prairie de Filtes park. — AFP

FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL HOPEFULS BATTLE IT OUT WITH WEEK TO GO

MOST UNPREDICTABLE VOTE IN THE COUNTRY'S POST-WAR HISTORY

PARIS: A week before France's high-stakes presidential election, the four top candidates began a final push yesterday to woo undecided voters who will determine the outcome of the tight race between the hard left, centre, right and far right. On April 23, the French go to the polls in the most unpredictable vote in the country's post-war history to choose two candidates from a field of 11 who will go through to a run-off two weeks later.

With a duel between far-right leader Marine Le Pen and Communist-backed radical Jean-Luc Melenchon, both eurosceptics, among one of six possible outcomes the election is being closely watched in Brussels and around the world. Opinion polls show one in three voters still undecided about who to back after a campaign characterized by scandals and upsets. In an interview in Le Parisien newspaper on Sunday, 65-year-old Melenchon, who is threatening to quit the euro and massively increase public spending, vowed he would be a safe pair of hands on the eurozone's second-largest economy.

"I am not from the far left," the leader of the La France Insoumise (Unbowed France) movement said, insisting he was "ready to govern". Melenchon's surge has shaken up the race, with many hesitating between voting with their hearts

and a tactical vote for whichever candidate they see as best placed to keep Le Pen or Melenchon out of power. Le Pen, whom polls show leading the first round with centrist Emmanuel Macron on around 22-24 percent each, returned to her party's core themes of immigration and Islam Saturday to try to mobilize her base. The opinion polls had shown her virtually assured of a place in the May 7 runoff but Melenchon and the conservative Francois Fillon have narrowed the gap with her and Macron to about three points, blowing the race wide open.

Identity angst

In a speech in the southern city of Perpignan the 48-year-old National Front (FN) leader lashed out at Macron and Fillon, accusing them of being soft on radical Islam. "With Mr Macron, it would be Islamism on the move," Le Pen said, in a play on the name of Macron's En Marche (On the Move) party, calling the 39-year-old champion of diversity "unscrupulous".

Casting herself as the best defender against the jihadists who have killed over 230 people in France since 2015, Le Pen also tore into Fillon, accusing him of letting ultraconservative Islam gain ground when he was prime minister between 2007 and 2012. The election has

revealed high levels of angst over a perceived erosion of French identity, which Le Pen has pinned on immigration, particularly from Muslim North Africa.

In an Ifop-Fiducial poll for Le Journal du Dimanche (JDD) newspaper 86 percent of FN voters said they "no longer feel at home" in France and 73 percent considered Islam incompatible with the French Republic. But the poll also showed Le Pen, who has spent years trying to detoxify the FN's image, still struggling to win over the absolute majority of voters needed for victory in a run-off. Three-quarters of non-FN voters said the party as "dangerous for democracy" and four out of five found it "racist". Fillon, who is on the rebound from a damaging expenses scandal that had caused some of his voters to switch to Le Pen or Macron, used Easter to mobilize his traditionalist Catholic base.

"Patriotism is not a dirty word," he told supporters in the cathedral town of Puy-en-Velay on Saturday-borrowing from the songbook of Le Pen who styles the FN the "party of patriots". In an interview published yesterday, the 63-year-old former prime minister, who refused to bow out despite being charged with misusing public money over payments to his wife, said he was convinced the scandal was behind him. — AFP



PARIS: In this July 12, 2016 file photo, French presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron attends a rally for his movement, En Marche! (In Motion!). — AP

MACRON: 39-YEAR-OLD FRENCH PRODIGY EYEING A PRESIDENCY

PARIS: "Neither of the right, nor the left" in his own words, Emmanuel Macron is a 39-year-old former banker hoping to convince the French to take a chance on his brand of youthful optimism. He has never been elected and only launched his party last April, but polls currently show Macron as one of the frontrunners for the two-stage election next Sunday and on May 7.

After quitting his job as economy minister under unpopular President Francois Hollande in August, he has concentrated on building up his own centrist political movement called "En Marche" ("On the Move"). The accomplished pianist and lover of poetry was initially dismissed by sceptics as appealing to a narrow group of young, urban professionals but his packed rallies and voter surveys show otherwise. "We can't respond with the same men and the same ideas," Macron said as he launched his presidential bid in November at a jobs training centre in a gritty Parisian suburb.

With frustration at France's political class running high, Macron has tapped into a desire for wholesale change that has also propelled far-right candidate Marine Le Pen and leftist Jean-Luc Melenchon. "I'm here because he's young, he's dynamic. It's like a breath of fresh air," 23-year-old shop worker Marine Gonidou told AFP at a rally in Brittany in January. At 39, Macron would be the youngest French leader in modern history, upending tradition that has seen voters tend to favour experience in their powerful presidents.

'Uber-isation'

Although positioned as an outsider, the brilliant student followed a well-worn path through elite French universities including

ENA, which serves as a finishing school for top civil servants and future leaders. After going into banking, where he earned nearly 2.4 million euros (\$2.6 million) from 2011-2012 at Rothschild, Macron became an economic advisor to Hollande in 2012 and then economy minister two years later.

During his time in government, he is best known for a free-market law that bears his name which liberalised the bus sector, allowed large stores to open at weekends and offered investment incentives to farmers. The legislation was strongly contested by France's powerful trade unions and had to be rammed through parliament using executive powers, but it helped cement his image as an economic reformer. "I want us to be able to start a business more easily, to innovate more easily" is one of his mantras, repeated at rallies and explained in his pre-election book "Revolution".

As well as wanting to improve the business environment, he stresses the need to improve education in deprived areas and has spoken out against stigmatizing Muslims with France's strict rules on secularism. His championing of tech firms and the "Uber-isation" of the economy, in which people increasingly work as independents rather than as employees, has helped burnish his image as a modernizer. After looking the most likely next president for the last few months, polls have shown support for him falling slightly in recent weeks. The outcome of the election will be the ultimate test of his claim that France is "contrarian"-ready to elect a pro-EU, pro-globalization liberal at a time when rightwing nationalists are making electoral gains across the world. — AFP

MELENCHON: FRANCE'S HARD LEFT CANDIDATE

PARIS: Jean-Luc Melenchon, a fiery Communist-backed eurosceptic vowing to return "power to the people" as France's next president, says he has mellowed after years spent giving the establishment a tongue-lashing. "I'm less of a hothead," said the bespectacled 65-year-old in a recent interview. "I'm becoming a reassuring figure." In an election season marked by widespread disillusionment with the political class, the head of La France Insoumise (France Unbowed) is now among the top four candidates in the April 23 first round of the two-stage vote.

Observers say strong debate performances showcasing a milder but still quick-witted Melenchon helped propel him into joint third place with the scandal-hit conservative candidate, Francois Fillon. Suddenly part of a close-fought four-way affair, they are nipping at the heels of joint frontrunners Marine Le Pen of the far-right National Front (FN) and centrist former Socialist Emmanuel Macron. The two leaders of the first round will go through to a runoff on May 7.

Melenchon "invented political stand-up. He's become a showman," said former Socialist Party colleague Julien Dray. "This style keeps him from being too harsh. He's in teaching mode, the old professor giving lessons about the world and how to change it." Melenchon also has an internet edge, boasting more than a million followers on Twitter and his own YouTube channel-a way to circumvent the traditional media, which he accuses of bias.

And he has turned heads with simultaneous appearances at campaign rallies using holograms, a technological first for a French presidential campaign and a sign of renewed vigor. With the Socialist Party split between leftist and reformist camps under President Francois Hollande, its 49-year-old candidate Benoit Hamon is languishing at distant fifth place in the polls.

For many, Melenchon, after emphatically refusing to ally himself with Hamon, has emerged as the main voice on the left. Often appearing at rallies wearing a Mao jacket, Melenchon speaks without notes as he rails against the "neoliberal" European Union and stumps for his tax-and-spend agenda. But while he shares Le Pen's animosity toward the EU-they are both currently MEPs-Melenchon is her polar opposite when it comes to immigration.

"Today as yesterday, I am delighted that France is a mix of races and all the children are our children," he has said. An admirer of late Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez as well as Bolivian leader Evo Morales, he advocates a policy of non-alignment and wants France to withdraw from NATO. — AFP



MARSEILLE: In this April 9 2017 file photo, French hard-left presidential candidate, Jean-Luc Melenchon, speaks in Marseille. — AP

LE PEN: THE FAR-RIGHT HEIR AIMING TO TAKE DOWN EU

PARIS: Marine Le Pen was a daddy's girl growing up, and she wept for joy when her father-the bogeyman of French politics-beat his Socialist rival for a spot in the final of the 2002 presidential election. But while Jean-Marie Le Pen never seemed to truly covet the top job, his charismatic daughter is convinced that, come May 7, France will have its first woman president.

Over the past six years her rebranded "party of patriots" from both left and the right has gone from strength to strength, propelled by the kind of anti-globalisation, anti-establishment fury that drove Britain's vote to leave the EU and Donald Trump's election in the United States. "Against the moneyed right and the moneyed left I am the candidate of the French people," Le Pen declared in a TV debate with four rivals last month.

Since taking over the leadership of the far-right National Front (FN) in 2011 from her father, the telegenic 48-year-old former lawyer has promoted her efforts to purge the party of the anti-Semitism and overt racism that were its hallmarks. But her recent remarks about the roundup and deportation of around 13,000 French Jews during World War II may have set back those efforts.

Le Pen was criticised for declaring that France was "not responsible" for the roundup carried out by French police acting on orders from the collaborationist Vichy regime-despite three former presidents admitting France's guilt. Le Pen said she was thinking of France's youth. "I want them to be proud of being French," she said. But her remarks inevitably drew comparisons with the revisionism of her father, whom she booted out of the party for describing the Holocaust as "a detail of history". Le Pen suspended her father in 2015 from the party he co-founded for downplaying the Nazi gas chambers. A wounded Jean-Marie refused to go quietly, dragging the FN before the courts.

French first

The split marked a turning point in the career of Le Pen junior, a politician who developed a tough shell after a tumultuous childhood. When she was eight, a bomb ripped through the Paris apartment building where the family lived, slightly injuring

six people but sparing the Le Pens. Eight years later Marine's mother Pierrette walked out on her husband and three daughters, sensationally resurfacing shortly afterwards in Playboy magazine for which she posed nude.

"It was a huge shock," Le Pen, who did not see her mother for 15 years after the split, told an M6 television interviewer last year. Now herself a twice-divorced mother-of-three, she keeps her private life out of the spotlight, appearing rarely as a couple with her partner, FN vice-president Louis Aliot.

Le Pen, who has her father's gravelly voice and flair for sharp putdowns, started out as a lawyer defending illegal immigrants facing deportation as a state-appointed attorney.

Despite that experience she blames migration-and the European Union, which she has predicted "will die"-for France's economic woes. "We are not going to welcome any more people. Stop. We are full up," she insists. The FN has come a long way since it was launched in 1972 as a refuge for paramilitaries who opposed France granting independence to Algeria. It also drew apologists for the wartime Vichy regime's collaboration with Nazi Germany and ultra-conservative Catholics.

Under Le Pen junior, the party has shown a more progressive face by promoting openly gay politicians to its upper echelons and showing racists and anti-Semites the door. Critics, however, point to the role of several hard-right Le Pen aides who were once part of violent student groups-and the recurring chant of "This is our land" at FN rallies-as evidence that it still attracts hardliners.

Like Trump, Le Pen is proposing to pull up the drawbridge and restore French glory with a policy of "economic patriotism" that most economists see as a recipe for ruin. Her plans to ditch the euro and hold a "Frexit" referendum have caused particular alarm. Le Pen also wants to pull out of Europe's Schengen border-free area, adopt a French-first policy on jobs and public housing and tax products from French companies that offshore factory jobs by 35 percent. In the last presidential election in 2012 she finished third on just under 18 percent. — AFP



LYON: In this Feb 5, 2017 file photo, French far-right leader presidential candidate Marine Le Pen acknowledges applause. — AP

FILLON: BOWED NOT BROKEN IN ELECTION

PARIS: French conservative candidate Francois Fillon has seen his hopes of becoming president severely dented by a fake jobs scandal, yet he has clung on in the race and could still spring a surprise. Fillon was charged in March with misuse of public money and corporate assets, mainly over the employment of his British-born wife Penelope as a parliamentary assistant for 15 years.

It was a severe blow to the 63-year-old former prime minister, who clinched the nomination for the Republicans party in November by claiming he was unswayed by the scandals that surrounded his rival and former boss, ex-president Nicolas Sarkozy. The allegations that Penelope had done little work to earn 680,000 euros (\$725,000) were first reported by Le Canard Enchaîné newspaper in January.

Fillon's reaction to the accusations has been to deny that either he or his wife have done anything wrong and to claim his left-wing rivals are operating a "secret cell" to blacken his name. It is a line of attack that has drawn scorn from Socialist President Francois Hollande and surprised even some of Fillon's own allies.

Having backtracked on an early promise to withdraw his candidacy if he was charged, the erstwhile arch-conservative has found himself in the unlikely position of running as an anti-establishment rebel determined to defy the media, the government and magistrates he says are working against him. Subsequent revelations that a wealthy Franco-Lebanese lawyer bought handmade suits for Fillon worth 13,000 euros each have drawn further ire from his opponents. The charges have caused Fillon to slip from the position of clear frontrunner he occupied early this year.

Yet despite the charges, support for him is still hovering at around 19 percent, putting him tied for third in the race with the hard-left Jean-Luc Melenchon but behind co-leaders Marine Le Pen of the far-right and centrist Emmanuel Macron. Some observers believe Fillon is under-estimated in opinion polls and might perform far more strongly in the first round on April 23 than they show.

One of France's top pollsters, Jerome Fourquet of IFOP, said while many rightwing voters were "highly disappointed" by

the scandal surrounding Fillon, "it is not impossible that part of this electorate returns to his camp at the last moment".

Cuts and competitiveness

Fillon's policies are based on deep cuts in public spending and slashing hundreds of thousands of jobs from what conservatives believe is a bloated civil service. He also wants to attack one of the sacred cows of the French left, the 35-hour working week, raising it to 39 hours. A leaner, meaner France could, he claims, rival Germany as the foremost economy in the eurozone within a decade.



MONTPELLIER: French conservative presidential candidate Francois Fillon reacts after his speech during a campaign meeting. — AP

In TV debates, Fillon has stressed that only he among the candidates has experience of running a country. Supporters have also cheered his headline stance on immigration. Fillon raised eyebrows when he told immigrants in a TV debate that "when you enter someone else's house, you do not take over." His outspokenness stood in contrast to his image as prime minister, of a quiet and urbane man whose steady temperament contrasted with the impulsive Sarkozy who once dismissed him as "Mr Nobody". Once the youngest member of parliament at age 27, Fillon is a devout Catholic who voted against gay marriage when it was legalised in 2013. The self-declared "Gaullist"-a form of nationalism that proposes an independent and strong France-also has a close bond with Russian President Vladimir Putin. — AFP