

International

French MP candidates under fire in post-MeToo era

Candidates dropping out is a sign things are changing

PARIS: The #MeToo anti-sexual harassment movement is finally reshaping France's sexist political culture, with several politicians running for parliament in upcoming elections forced to stand down over alleged violence against women. Several French feminist politicians and journalists launched the "MeToo Politique" movement last November to decry sexism in politics and to demand that men accused of sexual violence be systematically thrown out of office.

Six months later, their bid to shake up politics appears to have taken root, with several prominent candidates for the June legislative elections accused of violence against women throwing in the towel under pressure.

Jerome Peyrat, a candidate for President Emmanuel Macron's LREM party who was found guilty of violence against his former partner, will no longer stand, party chief Stanislas Guerini said on Wednesday.

Guerini had prompted an outcry earlier in the day by appearing to downplay the issue. "Peyrat is an honest man. I don't think he is capable of violence against women," he told FranceInfo radio. Peyrat, who was an advisor to former presidents Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy as well as to Macron, was handed a suspended fine of 3,000 euros (\$3,160) in September 2020.

Medical examinations seen by the Mediapart news site noted bruises on the face, neck, arm, shoulder and wrist of Peyrat's ex-partner, as well as jaw pain and a post-traumatic stress disorder. She was signed off work for two weeks.

"Nominating someone to stand as an MP means giving them weight and a platform," said local Paris politician Alice Coffin. She is a founding member of the Observatory of Sexist and Sexual Violence in Politics, created in November when

"MeToo Politique" was launched.

"We cannot celebrate abusers," she told AFP. Taha Bouhafs, who was running for MP on a hard-left ticket with the France Unbowed movement (LFI), also stepped down last week after several women came forward to LFI and accused him of sexual assault.

Candidates dropping out is a sign things are changing, said Fiona Texeira, a staffer at the Paris City Hall and founding member of the Observatory. "(But) the true victory will be when parties do the work internally and don't nominate people accused of sexist or sexual violence," she added.

Boys' club

French politics has long been perceived as a boys' club. French women did not win the right to vote until 1944, several decades after their British, Dutch and American counterparts. The country has never had a female president and it was not until this week that Macron named the second-ever female prime minister, Elisabeth Borne.

But a series of high-profile sexual violence cases involving prominent politicians have shaken the political sphere. In 2011, when powerful Socialist politician Dominique Strauss-Kahn was arrested in New York on charges of trying to rape a hotel maid, the French political class closed ranks behind him.

Such a stance is much more unlikely in the aftermath of #MeToo, experts say. In recent years, prominent political figures such as Green politician Denis Baupin and former environment minister Nicolas Hulot have been forced to retire from public life following accusations of sexual harassment or abuse.

'We cannot celebrate abusers'



SAINTES, France: Former comedian Gerald Dahan, candidate for the left-wing coalition "NUPES" (for "Nouvelle Union Populaire Ecologique et sociale" in French) in the Charente-Maritime department for the upcoming parliamentary elections, talks with people during a campaign visit at a market in Saintes. —AFP

Hulot withdrew from public life in November last year after a documentary aired on prime-time television featuring several women claiming he sexually abused them, including a woman who says he raped her when she was a minor.

Macron's decision in 2020 to appoint Gerald Darmanin as interior minister—even though he was accused of rape, sexual harassment and abuse of power—also drew heavy criticism, even sparking demonstrations. However Darmanin has denied any wrongdoing and prosecutors in January asked for the case to be dropped.

'By nature sexist'

"The mediatisation of sexist and sexual violence has definitely evolved in favour of women these past years," said

Merabha Benchikh, a sociologist from Strasbourg University in eastern France. But #MeToo has had less effect in France than in Britain and the United States, Benchikh added. She put this down to a culture of seduction in France she says often amounts to harassment.

Shortly after the #MeToo movement began, around 100 French women writers, performers and academics including screen icon Catherine Deneuve wrote an open letter defending the "right to bother" women.

"We were the only country to have an opinion column signed by women against #MeToo," said Coffin. Three candidates for the presidential election in April—Eric Zemmour, Jean Lassalle and Francois Asselineau—had been accused of sexual abuse or harassment. —AFP

Green outshine Scholz as stars of German government

BERLIN: German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has seen his popularity slide over his cautious stance on the war in Ukraine, eclipsed by two ministers from the Green party who have taken a more decisive approach. Scholz, whose Social Democrats (SPD) are in power with the Greens and the liberal FDP, has faced a barrage of criticism over his perceived weak response to the war, including his hesitancy over sending heavy weapons to Ukraine.

Meanwhile, Green party Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and Economy Minister Robert Habeck have impressed with their more vocal approach, topping a recent survey of the country's most popular politicians. Scholz sought to redress the balance with a speech to the Bundestag parliament on Thursday.

"(Russian President Vladimir) Putin still believes that he can forge peace by dictatorship, but he is wrong—just as he was wrong about Ukraine's determination and the unity of our alliances," he said. Scholz also tried to shake off accusations that he is dragging his feet in dealing with Moscow over fears of escalating the crisis. "I want to say clearly that helping a brutally attacked country to defend itself is not an escalation but a contribution to repelling an attack and thereby ending the violence as quickly as possible," he told parliament. But the chancellor has his work cut out to turn around public opinion.

In a nod to just how badly this reticent stance has played with the public, the SPD suffered a crushing defeat in a key regional election at the weekend—losing to the conservative



BERLIN: German Chancellor Olaf Scholz delivers a speech ahead of the next EU summit during a session at the Bundestag (lower house of parliament) in Berlin on May 19, 2022. —AFP

CDU with its worst-ever result in Germany's most populous state of North Rhine-Westphalia. The Greens, meanwhile, almost tripled their score compared with five years ago to finish in third place and look almost certain to be part of the next regional government. Der Spiegel magazine called the result a "personal defeat" for Scholz after he was heavily involved in the election campaign, appearing on posters and at rallies. In a bid to win back the public, Scholz has in recent days given lengthy television interviews. But in a devastating reading of his performance on screen, the weekly Focus said "his language is poor, his facial expressions monotone and his body language too understated."

According to Der Spiegel, the chancellor's communications strategy seems to revolve around one mantra: "Repeat, repeat, repeat." Other media have accused him of stubbornly sticking to the same plan and ignoring what is going on around him. —AFP

Brazil's Lula ties the knot

SAO PAULO: Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, the front-runner in Brazil's October presidential elections, took a break from campaigning Wednesday to marry his fiancée and fellow Workers' Party member, sociologist Rosangela da Silva.

The former president posted a photo on Instagram Wednesday night in which he appears to be saying his vows to Da Silva while placing a wedding ring on her finger. Lula, 76, and Da Silva, 55, tied the knot in an evening ceremony in the upscale Brooklin neighborhood of Sao Paulo.

Closed to the press, the event was attended by about 200 guests, including family members, politicians and artists, who only found out about the location the day before. Upon entering the party, they were instructed to leave their cell phones in the coatroom, according to local media.

Before the event, rumors about the festivities, budget and menu swirled online, with supporters of far-right incumbent Jair Bolsonaro painting the allegedly lavish party as evidence in support of the corruption charges that have long dogged leftist ex-president Lula.

Seen arriving at the party were former president Dilma Rousseff, former Sao Paulo governor and Lula's vice-presidential candidate Geraldo Alckmin, and singer Gilberto Gil, among others. Looking considerably grayer than during his 2003-2010 presidency, Lula has presented his relationship with "Janja"—his fiancée's nickname—as evidence he still has the youthful energy to lead Latin America's biggest economy.

Pictures of the couple kissing and cuddling regularly go viral on social media, and one of them in a Speedo-



SAO PAULO: Rosangela da Silva, known also as Janja, is seen in a wedding dress during her wedding ceremony with former Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula Da Silva, in Sao Paulo, Brazil. —AFP

style swimsuit embracing her with a giant grin became a topic of national conversation when Da Silva posted it online in August.

"I'm in love as if I were 20 years old," Lula told Time magazine recently. "A guy as happy as I am doesn't have to rage-let your opponents do what they want... If I can, on the campaign, I will speak only about love. I don't think it's possible to be a good president if you only feel hate inside you."

It will be Lula's third marriage. His first wife died in 1971, two years after they married. Marisa Leticia, his second wife, was Brazil's first lady during his two terms. They had four children together and were married for 43 years, until she died of a heart attack in 2017. —AFP

Rare monkeypox outbreaks in North...

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"These latest cases, together with reports of cases in countries across Europe, confirms our initial concerns that there could be spread of monkeypox within our communities," said UKHSA Chief Medical Adviser Dr. Susan Hopkins.

The WHO said it was also investigating that many cases reported were people identifying as gay, bisexual or men who have sex with men. "This is new information we need to investigate properly to understand better the dynamic of local transmission in the UK and some other countries."

The UKHSA noted that monkeypox has not previously been characterized as a sexually transmitted disease, underscoring that "it can be passed on by direct contact during sex." "Anyone, regardless of sexual orientation, can spread monkeypox through contact with body fluids, monkeypox sores, or shared items (such as clothing and bedding) that have been contaminated with fluids or sores of a

person with monkeypox," a US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) statement said Wednesday, adding that household disinfectants can kill the virus on surfaces.

The illness often starts with flu-like symptoms such as fever, muscle ache and swollen lymph nodes before causing a chickenpox-like rash on the face and body, the US agency explained. The Massachusetts Department of Health, said that the case there—the first confirmed this year in the United States—occurred in a patient who had recently traveled to Canada and "poses no risk to the public, and the individual is hospitalized and in good condition."

Health authorities in Canada's Quebec province announced they were investigating at least 13 suspected cases of monkeypox, the public broadcaster CBC reported Wednesday. The cases were flagged to Montreal authorities after diagnoses were made in several clinics specializing in sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections. The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) told CBC it had called on "public health authorities and laboratory partners across Canada to be alert for and investigate any potential cases." According to the CDC, there were no reported cases of monkeypox for 40 years before it re-emerged in Nigeria in 2017. —AFP

among the mourners hurled projectiles at officers.

Zionist forces frequently crack down on displays of Palestinian identity, including the national flag, one of which was draped over Abu Akleh's coffin. Police have vowed to investigate the controversial incident. Meanwhile, a left-wing Arab lawmaker in Zionist entity quit the governing coalition on Thursday, citing among other factors police aggression at an Al Jazeera reporter's funeral, rendering the government a minority in parliament. The decision by Ghaida Rinawie Zoabi of the dovish Meretz party leaves the coalition headed by right-wing Prime Minister Naftali Bennett with just 59 out of 120 seats in Zionist entity's parliament, the Knesset.

The development does not, however, necessarily indicate that the coalition—an alliance of parties ranging from the Jewish right and Zionist entity doves to an Arab Muslim party—is set to collapse. Approving a motion to dissolve parliament and call new elections requires 61 votes. —AFP

Jordan king says half-brother...

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Hamzah had last month announced he was "renouncing the title of prince", a month after a royal court statement said he had apologized to the king for the attempted coup. But Abdullah II said on Thursday that Hamzah had during the past year or so "exhausted all opportunities to restore himself on the right path".

Independents celebrate in...

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parliament," Hamdan told AFP. Speaking at his family home in the village of Kfeir, he vowed to fight for the rights of ordinary Lebanese who have been left behind.

Hamdan was hit in the chest by a lead pellet in 2020 during a demonstration near parliament, days after a deadly explosion struck Beirut's port. At the time, rights groups said security forces and men dressed in civilian clothing fired rubber-tipped bullets and tear gas canisters into the crowd.

But on Tuesday after the election results came in, jubilation was in the air as exhausted friends gathered in his backyard to celebrate. Youths aspiring for change in Lebanon have rejoiced at the victories of Hamdan and Jarade. Hamdan won against unpopular banker Marwan Kheireddine, while Jarade nabbed a seat held since 1992 by pro-Syrian regime politician Assaad Hardan.

In 2019 Hamdan was among hundreds of thousands of Lebanese who protested against the entrenched ruling class, widely blamed for the country's economic collapse. "We fought against an alliance of banks and the political class... to show there is an opposition in the south, to break the political hegemony imposed on us, and we succeeded," he said.

A dashing young man and an eloquent speaker,

"The delusion he lives in is not new," the king said. "Not long after vowing to renounce his erroneous ways, he goes back on his promises and returns to the path he chose years ago, putting his interests before the nation." The king appointed Hamzah as crown prince in 1999, at the request of his late father, King Hussein, but removed him from the post in 2004, later naming his son, Prince Hussein, as next in line to the Hashemite throne. Hamzah's mother, American-born Queen Noor, said on Twitter shortly after the king's announcement that "some truly bizarre and stranger than fiction stuff (is) circulating right now," without elaborating. —AFP

Hamdan hopes he will be able to pave the way for a new style of politics in Lebanon. But the road ahead is strewn with difficulties in a country where the system favors sectarian allegiances and power is often inherited.

"We want to build a nation where there is rule of law... to restore people's confidence in the country so that it does not remain a place of death and migration," he said. An economic meltdown has pushed many middle-class Lebanese to emigrate in search of a better future.

Some of Lebanon's most disadvantaged people have tried to reach Europe on rickety boats—a treacherous and often deadly route. Hamdan's father Ismael, a former brigadier general, said he was proud of his "self-made" son.

"Officials must understand that change has begun," he said, standing in front of a large portrait of himself in military uniform. A few kilometers (miles) away in the village of Ibl Al-Saqi, Jarade's family welcomed well-wishers who filled the house with bouquets of flowers and cheerful chatter.

But the newly elected MP, also an eye surgeon, was busy tending to patients in Beirut.

Jarade's friends and family who gathered in his living room lavished him with praise. "We voted (for independents) like we were clinging to a piece of wood to keep us from drowning," said retired teacher Ibrahim Rizk, as he sipped on his coffee. A Harvard university graduate with a passion for farming, Jarade is well-liked in his community because he is seen as humble. When he is not working the land and raising poultry and fish in his farm, the surgeon spends time tending to patients between Lebanon and Dubai. —AFP

Zionists arrest pallbearer of...

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"For them, the subject of the funeral and the coffin was scandalous." Police dismissed any link between the funeral and Khudeir's arrest. "We are witnessing an attempt to produce a conspiracy that is fundamentally incorrect," a statement said.

"The suspect was arrested as part of an ongoing investigation which contrary to allegations had nothing to do with his participation in the funeral procession."

Police justifications for the raid at St Joseph's hospital have varied. They have cited the need to stamp out "nationalistic" chants and also said that "rioters"