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Cautious solidarity

france



France's Foreign Minister, Mr. Hubert Vedrine, with Mr. Yasser Arafat... Paris playing it cool.

FRENCH LEADERS while expressing solidarity with the U.S.-led global coalition against terrorism have nonetheless played a cautious game. Every declaration of solidarity has been accompanied by a caveat. "We will support on the condition that there is prior consultation," was the message the President, Mr. Jacques Chirac, gave the U.S. President, Mr. George Bush, in Washington, while the Prime Minister, Mr. Lionel Jospin, declared in Paris that any military intervention would require the prior approval of Parliament.

Given France's history, cultural ties and immense economic interests in the Arab world, especially Lebanon, the Maghreb (Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco), and Syria, such a reaction is not surprising. The fact that France houses over four million North African Arabs, of whom some extremist elements have been involved in terrorist attacks in this country, only augments French prudence and caution.

"If France were to appear as an active ally in what is happening today, it would be at risk. We have already started taking preventive measures with the arrest of several extremists and 'sleepers' or dormant potential terrorists who pose a threat... And although France

has pledged solidarity and support, when it comes to actual action, it will be reticent. The U.S. is aware of this and they too will refrain from asking France for more than it can give," says Mr. Eric Rouleau, journalist and former Ambassador.

In France, Islamic terrorists have found fertile ground. "France has tended to overlook the fact that many of the regimes in North Africa were corrupt, dictatorial police states. So there is a very complicated relationship with northern Africa," explains Mr. Christophe Jaffrelot, editor of con-

Given France's ties with the Arab world, it will tread cautiously in backing the U.S., writes Vaiju Naravane.

temporary histories on India and Pakistan and the Director of CERI, the prestigious Centre for Research on International Relations. Mr. Maxime Rodinson is a well-known Islamic scholar whose biography of Prophet Mohammad is still considered a work of refer-

ence. "There has been a radicalisation of Islam in France. Several French Muslims believe that they are the object of hatred and contempt on the part of the public. Of course there is a grain of truth in that but they too are responsible for feeding this perception. So the Islamic community has begun to think of itself as a fortress under siege," Mr. Rodinson said.

French economic interests in the Arab and Muslim world are immense. France depends largely on Arab petrol and has huge commercial interests in the Maghreb, Lebanon, and in Syria. "The Americans have military might. We do not have that. Therefore we have to be convincing and we must be liked. In order to protect our interests we have to be seen as a friend. So France would be more reluctant than other countries when it comes to going out on a limb, militarily with the Americans," said Mr. Rouleau.

Mr. Jaffrelot tends to disagree. "While there is a definite threat to France, it is not the fear of a terrorist backlash that defines French policy. French reluctance has much more to do with our independence of thinking — an old Gaullist tradition — and because we are really listening to the Arabs and share some of their concerns."

THE HINDU

30 SEP 2001

Chirac offers sympathy, but keeps options open

By Vaiju Naravane

PARIS, SEPT. 19. With over four million north African Arabs on its soil and having witnessed a series of bloody terrorist attacks by Islamic fundamentalists in the Eighties and Nineties, the French are understandably nervous about the fallout on any direct military support to Washington.

The French President, Mr. Jacques Chirac who was the first foreign Head of State to meet the U.S. President, Mr. George Bush had a delicate three-fold mission: express French sympathy for the victims, promise support and co-operation while retaining France's legendary independence by keeping open the country's political and military options. "The fact that the French President became the first Head of State to hold a crisis meeting with President Bush is not due to chance. The U.S. and even its European allies see France as slightly unpredictable, tending to place its own strategic, economic and political interests before and above the interests of the community of nations. So the French had to be nailed first," a Western diplomat from the Paris-based OECD, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development told *The Hindu*.

Keeping French options was the most delicate and difficult



The U.S. President, Mr. George W. Bush, with the French President, Mr. Jacques Chirac, at the Oval Office in the White House on Tuesday. — AP

part of Mr. Chirac's mission to Washington and New York. "Of course, we can conceive of military co-operation but on condition that there is prior consultation with us about the objectives and modalities of such an action," Mr. Chirac said during a dinner at the White House. Having uttered this caveat, Mr. Chirac could speak of France's "full determination to efficiently fight this new kind of absolute evil that

is terrorism." Most Europeans and particularly the French are wary of plunging headlong into the "new type" of warfare promised by Mr. Bush. A war, he said, where there were no front lines, nor beaches on which to stage dramatic landings. But a war nevertheless which will require concerted international effort. Mr. Bush's declarations implied unstinted and unconditional allied support and alignment. The

French resist the idea of signing Washington a blank cheque.

Under pressure from dogged American journalists, Mr. Chirac finally agreed that the situation called for "war which had to be waged on all fronts". Mr. Chirac's obvious discomfiture in Washington got the message across more clearly than words: France wants prior consultation and agreement. The French Prime Minister, Mr. Lionel Jospin, underlined the same point when he said any demand for military co-operation formulated by Washington would have to win the approval of the French parliament.

France has substantial economic interests in the Arab world and its position on Iraq has often annoyed the United States. The French are also urging restraint because they fear any direct participation in an offensive alongside the United States could be misinterpreted by the large Algerian community in France. For the past decade, the French have been trying to weed out Islamic fundamentalism through painstaking intelligence gathering. "France has to be careful. After all, we have had a hijacking and several extremely costly terrorist attacks both in terms of human life and damage to property. We cannot afford to place public confidence in jeopardy," a French official said.

Bush remark fuels row in U.K.

By Hasan Suroor

LONDON, SEPT. 19. The U.S. President, Mr. George W. Bush's comment that he wanted Osama bin Laden "dead or alive" has added to the controversy already raging over his description of the proposed U.S. retaliation against terrorists as a "crusade".

The use of the term "crusade" provoked widespread criticism because of its connotations harking back to the Christian-Muslim wars in the Middle Ages.

There have been calls for lowering the "tone" amid fears that insensitive language could fuel the growing anti-Muslim backlash. Mr. Blair on Tuesday personally intervened to assure Britain's Muslim community that the "vast majority of decent" Britons did not hold Muslims responsible for what happened in America last week. "Those responsible are not communities nor religions, but fanatical individuals. Blaming Islam is as ludicrous as blaming Christianity for loyalist attacks on Catholics or nationalist attacks on Protestants in Northern Ireland," he said in an article in a London-based newspaper *Daily Jung*.

He is believed to have written a series of articles for distribution among Muslims in the wake of rising anti-Muslim sentiment in Britain. "The articles reflect concern in Downing Street and the Home Office that there are very serious dangers of attacks on the British Muslim community," according to *The Guardian*. It said senior Downing Street officials were "working hard" on newspapers such as the *Sun* — the easily excitable mass circulation tabloid — to restrain them.

There have been a number of attacks on mosques across Britain and Muslims in the streets have been assaulted and abused.

Muslims, meanwhile, joined issue with the BBC for describing Osama bin Laden as an "Islamic" fundamentalist and demanded that he should be called simply as a terrorist.

The Muslim Council of Britain, which was the first to condemn the terrorist attacks in U.S. and has been attacking Muslim extremists in Britain, said that by describing Osama by his faith, the BBC was "planting an association" between his individual actions and his religion. "We fear that this can cause unrest. ...The BBC should call bin Laden a terrorist

which is what he is," a Council spokesman said pointing out that the BBC never identified the terrorists in Northern Ireland by their faith.

Fatwa against Musharraf

A U.K.-based extremist group, Al-Muhajiroun, led by a maverick cleric, Sheikh Omar Bakhri Mohammed, has issued what it claims is a "fatwa" against the Pakistani President, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, for supporting any U.S. move against Afghanistan in its hunt for Osama bin Laden.

It asks the Pakistani army to defy Gen. Musharraf and "punish" him for his "crimes". Sheikh Bakhri who has been investigated in the past for his alleged links with terrorist activities abroad, particularly in Kashmir and Central Asia, announced the so-called "fatwa" in a BBC radio interview on Tuesday calling on Muslims to "reject the authority of Musharraf" and support the Taliban.

The Foreign Office Minister, Mr. Peter Hain, said he would ask the police to investigate whether Sheikh Bakhri could be prosecuted for what he termed as a "chilling edict".

GRAFT CHARGES / 'PAYMENTS MADE FROM SECRET STATE FUNDS'

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Chirac defends luxury trips

15/7

PARIS, JULY 14. The French President, Mr. Jacques Chirac, seeking to defend himself in a snowballing scandal involving cash payments for trips when he was Mayor of Paris, said on Saturday the payments were "perfectly legal" and made in cash for "reasons of discretion and security."

In his first public comments on the allegations, Mr. Chirac tried to take the offensive, calling in a live TV interview for a freeze on the system of so-called "secret funds," which are at the disposal of Prime Ministers and not subject to any oversight. Mr. Chirac's image has been tarnished by a string of corruption allegations dating from his 18-year tenure as Paris Mayor. The most recent scandal involves cash payments made for some 20 luxury trips overseas for Mr. Chirac, his family and entourage from 1992-1995, when he was Mayor.

Mr. Chirac said the trips, some for Government purposes and some private, were financed from those secret funds, and were "perfectly legal." "They were paid for in cash. Why? For reasons of discretion and security," he said. Asked about allegations the money may have come from other, illicit sources, such as kickbacks he is accused of receiving while serving as Mayor, Mr. Chirac said: "I have nothing to hide."

He denounced what he called "rumors and manipulation" that he said were damaging democracy in France, and the country's image. Mr. Chirac also said he was "profoundly wounded" by the treatment of his family in the recent scandal. Mr. Chirac's daughter, Ms Claude Chirac, was called to testify before judges earlier this week. "The President has a right to a private life," he said. Ms Claude Chirac is one of the President's top advisers.

The televised interview came after Mr. Chirac hosted the nation's Bastille Day parade — usually a highpoint of the year for the head of state, who oversees the military parade along the Champs-Elysees. But a driving rain plagued the parade, which Mr. Chirac reviewed with his guest of honour, King Juan Carlos of Spain. The traditional flyover by military jets had to be cancelled due to heavy fog. And, for nationwide television viewers, it was upstaged by his long-awaited comments on the corruption case.

Mr. Chirac has repeatedly invoked presidential immunity and refused to answer judges' questions about alleged illicit slush funds at City Hall during his tenure there. On Saturday, Mr. Chirac reiterated that he would not testify in the latest scandal because of his special role as President.

The latest revelations have triggered passionate debate in France over presidential immunity and set the tone for what analysts say could be a nasty campaign ahead of next year's presidential election. Mr. Chirac and the Socialist Prime Minister, Mr. Lionel Jospin, are both expected to run, though neither has yet declared candidacy.

The three judges investigating the cash-for-plane tickets case are debating whether to summon Mr. Chirac as a witness. Prosecutors are publicly divided over whether the President can legally be called to testify.

Le Monde newspaper reported in its Sunday edition that the amount paid for the trips was 2,239,144 francs (\$ 320,000). It quoted from a transcript of testimony of an aide to Mr. Chirac as saying the money came from secret funds that Mr. Chirac was entitled to as Prime Minister, from 1986-1988. It said Mr. Chirac brought that money to City Hall when he became Mayor, where it was kept in a safe.

The cash-for-tickets affair comes on top of allegations that the Mayor's office received millions of dollars from construction firms in the 1980s and early 1990s in exchange for building contracts, and then funneled the money into political parties, like Mr. Chirac's Rally for the Republic. — AP

MP gains ground in crusade to impeach Chirac

PARIS, June 24. The carefully laid re-election plans of the French President, Mr. Jacques Chirac, of France are being undermined by an **allegation** but **dogged** backbench MP, who is driving staff at the Elysee Palace to distraction.

Mr. Arnaud Montebourg has produced a 29-page parliamentary resolution calling for Mr Chirac to be impeached over corruption allegations relating to his time as mayor of Paris.

If such a resolution were even to be debated in Parliament, it would amount to a crushing humiliation of the President.

For that to happen, Mr Montebourg needs 58 MPs to endorse his call for impeachment. What was originally seen as a maverick provocation with no chance of success, has got its 31st supporter, and further converts are predicted in the coming week.

Until recently, Mr Montebourg — who is calling for a new "politics of virtue" — was little known outside his own stronghold in the Loire Valley. He had never held ministerial office and had never made much of a

name for himself in the National Assembly. During next year's presidential election campaign, however, he could yet become Mr. Chirac's nemesis. So far, all attempts have failed to persuade Mr. Montebourg to withdraw his petition calling for the President to be sent before the investigating committee of the High Court.

Public interest is high. More than 30,000 copies of the petition have been sold in three weeks.

Mr. Chirac was mayor of the capital from 1977 to 1995. The resolution lists a detailed series of references to him during police investigations into corruption at Paris city hall. Mr Montebourg is demanding that he testify over allegations relating to that time.

Rumours of kickbacks and illegal funding of the Gaullist RPR party during Mr Chirac's time as mayor have circulated for more than a decade, but recent investigations have ground to a halt as a result of obstruction from the Elysee. Mr Chirac has steadfastly refused to speak to magistrates on the subject, citing a law granting presidential immunity from criminal prosecution.

tion. Under French statutes of limitation, the case may have to be dropped by the time he stands down as President — a possibility that has outraged Mr Montebourg.

"If nothing is done now," he said, "it will be tantamount to handing out an amnesty." The Socialists of the Prime Minister, Mr. Lionel Jospin, have been loath to pursue the matter — fearing a political backlash that would turn the investigative spotlight on to them.

Despite all obstacles, Mr Montebourg is determined to shame the President into testifying. He is carrying an increasingly large section of non-Gaullist MPs with him. A cross-party agreement last week to change immunity laws for future Presidents failed to pacify the growing ranks of supporters.

A nationwide campaign is now under way to find the 27 extra MPs necessary to force a parliamentary debate on impeachment. Mr Montebourg's supporters say they expect up to 10 more MPs to have come over to his side by next weekend.

At the grassroots level, a network of pres-

sure groups has been established across France with the aim of lobbying local MPs. On Wednesday, Mr Montebourg plans to hold a televised public meeting in the town of Anthony, a Chirac stronghold.

"At first, it just seemed a cranky thing to do," said an official from the French Socialist Party who is undecided on whether to join the campaign. "But he's refusing to give up on it, and it's beginning to generate its own momentum. It's certainly getting under the skin of Chirac aides at the Elysee."

The palace has accused Mr Jospin of covertly supporting the activities of Mr Montebourg. Last week, stung by accusations that he dissembled over his past links with Trotskyist organisations, the Premier made a biting reference to Mr Chirac's refusal to testify to investigating magistrates.

"I may have been late in explaining myself to journalists," he said, "but that's rather less serious than being late in explaining oneself to judges." — ©Telegraph Group Limited, London, 2001

THE HINDU

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25/3

New tango in Paris

IT IS typically March weather, cold, wet and blustery. The chateau of Blois looks grey and forlorn, its gardens sodden, the monotony broken only by lines of snivelling tourists carrying streaming umbrellas. With its dominant position on the fertile Loire valley, Blois is one of the finest examples of France's renaissance architecture and a major centre for art and architecture. The town is beautiful and enjoys a justified reputation for good living — calm, comfortable and easy-paced.

In the past week, however, the atmosphere in Blois has been charged, febrile. In municipal elections held last Sunday, Blois residents unceremoniously dumped their long-time Mayor, the Education Minister, Mr. Jack Lang, to elect a relatively unknown right-wing contender.

"Mr. Lang richly deserved what he got. We are a proud people here and we cannot be taken for granted," says Huguette, who for 20 years has worked as the chateau's Damepipi or washroom attendant. "First he makes a bid for the socialist nomination as Mayor of Paris. Then he accepts a huge ministerial responsibility. ~~When would he have had time~~ for us? He wasn't happy with us. We were too small. He had his eyes set on Paris. Let him remain there. Mr. Lang thought he had us in his pocket. Well, he was wrong," she concludes with a satisfied squaring of her shoulders.

Mr. Lang is not the only French Minister to suffer this fate. Ms. Elizabeth Guigou, Minister for Labour, Mr. Pierre Muscovici, Minister for European Affairs, Ms. Dominique Voynet, Minister for Environment, and several other members of the left-wing coalition holding high office were booted out by electors who said they had had enough of politicians who held down two or more elected offices and had no time for their needs or concerns.

The socialists managed to capture France's two largest cities, Paris and Lyon, the first almost by default because of battles within the conservative camp, but lost over 40 large and small towns to the conservatives. This severe verdict was a direct denunciation of the Prime Minister, Mr. Lionel Jospin's somewhat misconceived policy of what the French call "parachuting" Ministers to capture Opposition-held towns.

"It was a gamble that did not

pay off. I am surprised at Jospin's lack of perspicacity, of sound strategy. He has always consciously cultivated the image of a honest, sincere, hard-working, serious politician. He has never lost an opportunity to criticise the conservatives, especially when he was in the Opposition. I remember the time when Alain Juppe was constantly under attack from Jospin because he was an MP, the Prime Minister, the head of the RPR party and the Mayor of Bordeaux, all at the same time. Jospin quite rightly pointed out that Mr. Juppe could not possibly manage to perform any of these tasks satisfactorily. Why did he then accept that same logic," asks the pollster, Mr. Francois Mechet.

In response to his own question, Mr. Mechet points out that there is just one year to go



for Presidential elections in France and that Mr. Jospin, like the incumbent, Mr. Jacques Chirac, is burning up with ambition. In deciding on his electoral strategy, Mr. Jospin, explains Mr. Mechet, had next year's legislative and presidential elections in mind.

"French cities are rich. Mayors control the administrative machinery and huge budgets. Paris, for instance, has an annual budget of \$4.6 billions. Being Mayor gives you enormous political clout and the more towns a party controls the better prepared it can be for a national electoral campaign. Jospin wanted to batten down the hatches, take as many municipalities as possible. Unfortunately for him, his strategy backfired badly. People reacted negatively. What does a person like Elizabeth Guigou know or care about Avignon? She is not from the region, does

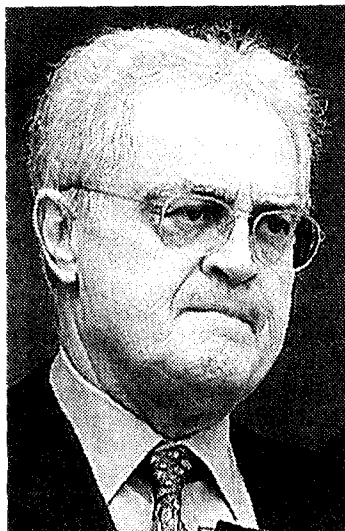
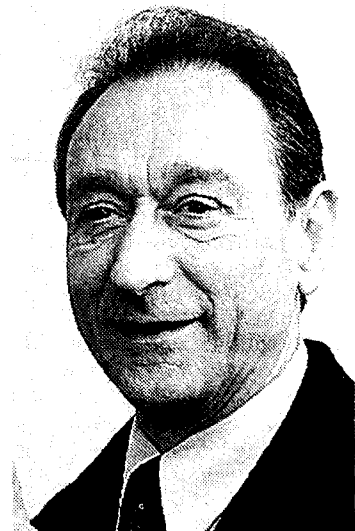
not know the town well and is more interested in running her big Ministry in Paris. There was resentment, a lot of bad blood. She lost," says the political scientist, Mr. Jacques Debarre.

If Jospin the socialist has been hurt, Chirac the conservative has been wounded. While the conquest of over 40 towns and cities has been touted by the Right as a thumbs down sign for the socialists, the loss of Paris has been a personal blow to the President. Mr. Chirac used the Paris city hall as a launching pad to the French presidency. But in the years following his election several financial scandals came to light. Mr. Chirac decided to drop Mr. Jean Tiberi, his former lieutenant who succeeded him as Mayor of Paris, and did some parachuting of his own in the form of Mr. Philippe Seguin who was foisted

campaign hard and managed to split the conservative vote, handing Paris on a golden platter to the socialists. The French capital turned socialist after 130 years of uninterrupted conservative rule.

Municipal elections in France are a bit like reading tea leaves at the bottom of the cup. They are often the first warning salv of voter discontent. This time voters have told both extremes of the political spectrum, the communists and the extreme right, that in the present political climate, they are becoming redundant. The economy is doing nicely, unemployment is low — the lowest in 13 years — while inflation remains constant at under two per cent. Companies are posting profits and the property market is thriving. As usual, when times are good,

Lionel Jospin's gamble failed to pay off. The socialists captured Paris and Lyon but lost over 40 other towns. VAIJU NARAVANE on the recent civic polls in France.



Mr. Jacques Chirac (left), Mr. Lionel Jospin and Mr. Bertrand Delanoë (right)... a mixed bag for both sides.

upon Parisian voters as the candidate of the unified Right. Mr. Tiberi (who has among other things been accused of falsifying electoral rolls and taking juicy bribes on construction contracts) refused to take his unceremonious ouster lying down. He

extremes lose their appeal. The French communist party lost several traditional strongholds and there are calls for the resignation of the party president, Mr. Robert Hue.

The extreme right too lost the one large town it controlled. It will be difficult for these two groupings to win back voter confidence, especially if the present economic situation lasts.

Mr. Jospin's Government has by and large managed to deliver. Despite the results of the municipal elections opinion polls continue to place the socialists ahead of the conservatives in next year's presidential election.

The socialists' control of Paris city hall could prove disastrous for Mr. Chirac, especially if the new Mayor, Mr. Bertrand Delanoë, decides to start delving into cupboards hitherto kept firmly under lock and key by the conservatives.

There is still a lot left of the Right

TOM HENEGHAN
PARIS

STRANGE as it may seem, the day that saw French President Jacques Chirac lose his political fiefdom of Paris and bungle the right's defence of Lyon may not have been so disastrous for him after all.

The two stinging defeats that Chirac's conservative RPR party suffered in Sunday's municipal elections were roughly balanced out by about 30 losses the Socialists and their Left-wing allies suffered in smaller cities around the country.

Looking ahead to the legislative and presidential elections due in the spring of 2002, the right may find it easier to rally its troops for those electoral races than the Left does in running its Socialist-Communist-Greens coalition.

"The right wing is alive and well," CSA pollster Stephane Rozes said. "In cities where there was a change of generation, the right has done quite well." "The blue (conservative) wave that swept across France's regions weakens Lionel Jospin more than the gains in Paris and Lyon strengthen him," the Left-wing daily *Liberation* wrote.

Chirac with his wife. AFP photo

The surprisingly resilient conservative vote, which won a majority for the right in the country's 36,000 mayoral votes, offers Chirac a sturdy basis for next year's electoral battles.

Interestingly, this support held up despite the fierce feuds that poisoned the right's campaign in Paris, the lack of a coherent alternative to Jospin's policies and the feeble support leading conservatives gave to their allies on the stump.

By contrast, the local polls showed the disciplined "plural Left" that Jospin led to victory in 1997 is changing in ways that could cause headaches for him on the campaign trail. Many Socialist cabinet ministers were humiliated in their bids to win mayoral jobs on the side. The continued long-term decline of the Communists weakened that pillar of his coalition and opened them to pressure from the extreme Left.

The main winner on the Left was the Greens party, whose new demands threaten to turn off more traditional Socialist and Communist voters and turn away centrists Jospin needs to win.

The crucial problem for the right, which had been stumbling since losing the snap general election Chirac called in 1997, is that fierce feuds and power struggles have deeply split its national leadership.

Politicians such as former prime ministers Alain

Juppe and Edouard Balladur have been saying for months that the right needs to join forces to confront the united Left next year. "We have to create a united right and lead it to victory in the legislative and presidential elections next year," Juppe, who was easily re-elected mayor of Bordeaux, said on Monday. Juppe has launched a new debating club called "France Alternative" that will hold its first convention on April 4.

Given the right's strong showing locally, the daily *Le Monde* said, one of Chirac's main tasks now will be to block Jospin's plans to reverse the planned order of next year's elections to put the presidential vote ahead of the legislative poll.

The main challenge for Jospin will be to keep the united Left together now that the Communists are weaker than ever, with pressure from the Greens and the far Left growing and given that most of his ministers now have "loser" stamped on their foreheads. "The Left is confronting a major problem — how to integrate this new Left... with the old Left weakened by the continued decline of the Communists," the daily *Le Monde* wrote.

"Lionel Jospin has to balance the two extremes — win the electoral battle in the centre and integrate those who criticise the Left since it has been in power so long." (Reuters)

INDIAN EXPRESS

INDIAN EXPRESS

21 MAR 2001

Bad news for Chirac: Leftists win election after 130 years

BY BARRY JAMES
International Herald Tribune

Paris, March 12: In what could be a major setback for the centre-right President, Jacques Chirac, a leftist coalition appeared poised late on Sunday to wrest control of the Paris city council for the first time, making it increasingly likely that Mr Chirac could be the loser in next year's presidential election.

But throughout the country, the results of the first round of region-

al and municipal elections were mixed, with several members of the government headed by Prime Minister Lionel Jospin suffering dramatic defeats in towns where they ran for mayor. They included labour minister Elisabeth Guigou, the Communist transport minister, Mr Jean-Claude Gayssot, and the minister for the environment, Mr Dominique Voynet.

The national results indicated that Mr Chirac's party was holding up better across the country than in Paris, where it has been

weakened by allegations of sleaze. Nationwide polls indicated that the centre-right was emerging roughly level with the united left, including Socialists, Communists and environmentalists.

PARIS MAYOR

JA Reuters report said France's political parties began horse-trading on Monday after Sunday's poll failed to produce the "red wave" that Prime Minister Lionel Jospin's Socialists had hoped for and gave some stinging reprimands to Cabi-

net ministers who had tried to win a second job as a mayor somewhere as well.

Conservative candidates held their own outside Paris, especially where they were the incumbents,

so the rival camps should go neck-and-neck into next Sunday's run-off if they can overcome internal rivalries and present united fronts.]

In the Paris race, the Socialist candidate, Mr Bertrand Delanoë, won 34 per cent of the vote.

according to the Sofres polling institute. Sofres pollsters forecast that the environmentalist Greens, partners in Mr Jospin's Socialist-led government, and the outgoing conservative mayor, Mr Jean Tiberi, would each win from 11 per cent to 14 per cent of the ballot. The final situation will not be known until March 18, after a second round of elections among the leaders of the first round.

Polls indicated the collapse of the extreme right, which seemed to have lost two-thirds of its sup-

port after an intermeccine battle among the leadership. The polls indicated that the extreme right received less than four per cent of the vote, making it a marginal force. Nationwide, exit polls indicated that the right was holding its own outside Paris, with an overall vote of 45.6 per cent for parties in the Socialist-led government and 45.2 per cent for the main extreme right. Voters turned out in 36,000 towns and cities around the country, but much of the attention was on the race in Paris.

THE ASIAN AGE

13 MAR 2001

Socialists ahead in Paris poll

PARIS, MARCH 12. Mr. Bertrand Delanoe, the socialist candidate for the Paris Mayoral post, a conservative bastion for 24 years, led the race in Sunday's first round of French municipal elections, but the spectacular triumph predicted by pollsters proved elusive.

The national trend in the elections in more than 36,500 districts showed the right wing maintaining itself around France, with approximately 45 per cent of the vote, compared to 46 per cent for the left.

The divided right's failure to hold onto cities like Paris ahead of 2002 presidential and legislative elections would deprive the conservative President, Mr. Jacques Chirac, of a strong political base. Mr. Chirac could face the socialist Prime Minister, Mr. Lionel Jospin, in the next presidential vote, though neither has yet declared his intentions.

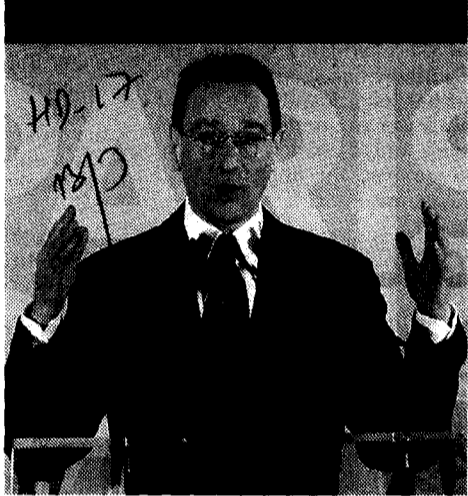
The socialists plucked a clear first-round victory in Tulle, Mr. Chirac's hometown, with the party First Secretary, Mr. Francois Hollande, getting an estimated 53 per cent of the vote, according to polls.

While the taking of Tulle was a blow to Mr. Chirac's prestige, Mr. Jospin also suffered a setback in the weak showings of Cabinet Ministers seeking mayoral posts.

The Environment Minister, Mr. Dominique Voynet, and the Transport Minister, Mr. Jean-Claude Gayssot, were defeated in the first round.

Results in Paris — where Mr. Chirac served as Mayor for 18 years — were far less dramatic than pre-election polls predicted. The socialist candidate, Mr. Bertrand Delanoe, got some 31-36 per cent of the vote, compared to about 24-26 per cent for Mr. Philippe Seguin, the Rally for the Republic Party (RPR) candidate, according to polling firms.

Bertrand Delanoe



Mr. Bertrand Delanoe reacts to the municipal elections' first results from his campaign headquarters in Paris on Sunday. — AP

Mr. Seguin obstinately refused a call from incumbent Mayor, Mr. Jean Tiberi, expelled from the RPR for refusing to bow out of the race, to ally with him in the second round.

Mr. Seguin asked, instead, that all rightists not in the lead in Paris' 20 districts withdraw. The Mayor got about 12 per cent of the votes, according to polls. He is tarnished by scandals that allegedly date to Mr. Chirac's days at City Hall. Mr. Delanoe is likely to strike an alliance with the Green candidate, Mr. Yves Contassot, who, like Mr. Tiberi, got some 12 per cent. — AP

THE HINDU

13 MAR 2001