

France braces

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surveys taken since the April 22 first round have given a clear lead to Sarkozy – with the gap widening in the last days of the campaign.

Some 44 million people can take part in the election, which offers a clear choice between two starkly different programmes of right and left.

Sarkozy, the 52-year-old head of the ruling Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), is proposing a radical economic agenda based on tax-cuts, limits to trade union powers and incentives to work harder.

Royal, 53, who is the first woman to have a serious chance of becoming French president, favours measures to safeguard the country's system of social protection and state intervention to create jobs.

The winner will take over from 74-year-old Jacques Chirac, president since 1995.

Both candidates are seen as representatives of a younger generation of politicians, promising new ideas to tackle France's runaway national debt, high unemployment and the festering discontent in high-immigration city suburbs.

Polling booths open at 8.00 am Sunday and close 12 hours later, with normally reliable projections due out immediately. Voting was taking place a day early in France's overseas territories in the Americas.

Sarkozy and Royal came first and second in the multi-candidate round of the election, with 31.2 percent and 25.9 percent of the vote.

The two-week second round campaign has focussed on the 6.8 million people – 18.6 percent of the vote -- who chose the defeated centrist Francois Bayrou on April 22.

Bayrou has refused to give an endorsement to either candidate, though he has made it clear that his personal preference is for Royal. It

was far from certain that his supporters would follow his lead.

The highpoint of the campaign was Wednesday's televised debate between Sarkozy and Royal, which was watched by some 20 million viewers.

Royal showed an unexpectedly aggressive streak in the head-to-head -- at one point accusing Sarkozy of "political immorality". He attacks won high praise from supporters, but surveys subsequently showed most voters found Sarkozy the more convincing.

Continuing to trail in the polls, Royal launched a fierce personal assault on Sarkozy Friday, saying his election would provoke violence in the high-immigration suburbs that were the centre of riots in 2005.

Referring to his "dangerous candidacy", Royal said she had a "responsibility to issue an alert over the risks ... regarding the violence and brutalities that will be triggered across the country. Everyone knows it but no one says it. It is a kind of taboo."

Sarkozy responded that "never in the history of the Fifth Republic have such violent and threatening comments been heard. Saying that if you vote for a candidate there will be violence is simply to reject the right to democratic expression."

French newspapers Saturday were banned from reporting polls or comments by either candidate, but several noted the gloomy atmosphere inside Royal's camp.

Le Parisien newspaper said that Royal's campaign "is ending in a surreal ambience ... you can cut the atmosphere at PS headquarters with a knife."

The left-wing daily Liberation said that "the hypothesis of defeat began to take hold Friday. Only the candidate herself seems to keep the faith."

Hasina to fly in

FROM PAGE 1

calling for reforms now are being somewhat ambiguous."

"If reform implies changes in the leadership then that should happen through a ballot within a party. If it suggests shifts in a party's policies or constitution or any other area then those too should come systematically."

"The Awami League has a tradition of forming committees on such matters before every council. The committees place their recommendations before the councillors who, in turn, give their opinions and it all lead to final decisions."

"As the indoor politics is banned now the party cannot form any committee or hold a council. How come you bring about reforms with the ban in place?" she questioned.

"I did not volunteer to be the party's president, and neither did my father make me the party chief when he was alive. The Awami League made me its president in my absence," Hasina argued.

About her initial task on return, she said, "I will meet my party members and leaders. We have a Trust that runs a hospital. Many families of the ones dead or injured in political persecution get financial help from the Trust. But all these have slowed down due to my absence and they must resume shortly."

Sheikh Hasina had left for the US on a personal tour on March 15 and was supposed to return on

Dhanmondi roads made one-way from today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) today will start enforcing one-way traffic on a number of city streets in Dhanmondi residential area from 7:00am to 9:00pm in its effort to ease traffic congestion.

DMP will enforce a ban on honking horns on various rickshaw-free city streets along with a few streets in Dhanmondi as well to curb noise pollution.

At Dhanmondi yesterday, DMP personnel were seen making preparations for effective enforcement of the traffic rules set to be imposed from today.

If found guilty of honking horns in the no-honking zones without any justifiable reasons, undercover police will fine motorists with upto Tk200.

The one-way restrictions on vehicular movement in Dhanmondi will not be applicable on holidays. The one-way streets in Dhanmondi will also be considered no-honking zones.

The no-honking zones include Airport Road from Shaheed Jahanir Gate to Uttara and Abdullahep, Kemal Ataturk Avenue up to Phoenix Bhaban via Gulshan 1 and 2, from Gabtoli to Azimpur via Russell Square, from Bijoy Sarani to Mohammadpur Traffic Office, from Hotel Sheraton to Kakrail intersection, from Matsya Bhaban to Rainbow crossing, from Science Laboratory intersection to Matsya Bhaban and from Matsya Bhaban to Golapshah Mazar via old High Court intersection.

BNP leaders Goyeshwar Chandra Roy, Shah Muhammad Alauddin, Muzammil Hossain Alal, Jukta Front leader ASM Abdur Rob, poet Al Mujahid, and wife and daughter of late Obaidur Rahman also addressed the meeting.

Without mentioning the caretaker government, BNP leader Sharmin Al Mamun said, "Do not handle all the matters, do your specific job and arrange the election soon."

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