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**SHASHI ON SUNDAY****Too bad we can't have a leader like Sarkozy**

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The president of France is a small man. Only in the literal sense of the term, though. Nicolas Sarkozy stands about 5 feet four inches, slightly shorter than Sachin Tendulkar. That's not the only point the two have in common. Sarkozy has taken his country by storm the way the Boy Wonder has captured our national imagination. And his impact on his chosen world — in his case, that of national and international politics — is likely to prove just as great as Tendulkar's on the cricket field.

President Sarkozy recently addressed the French business confederation, the Medef (a sort of CII, Ficci and Assocham rolled into one). I happened to be there, and observed the restless movement of his leg as he delivered his hour-long speech from the podium. (He shakes hands with a firm grip, but his restless energy is difficult to confine: he is a tightly-coiled man, seemingly ready to burst out of whatever box he is confined in.) It was a bravura performance, commanding, full of humour and casual asides, but laying out a serious new policy position on economics to go with the new positions he had already announced on a variety of other issues. He took not a sip of water and won over a tent overflowing with over 4000 people with a fluent and nuanced style of delivery that an actor would have envied.

In his first few months in office, President Sarkozy has practically reinvented his country — its politics, its economics, its attitude to government, even its holiday style (he startled his countrymen by taking his annual vacation in, of all places, the US). The flurry of initiatives he has launched in four months would outdo most governments' full terms — capping his country's high tax rate at 50%, arguing for a later retirement age (of 65), proposing reduced pension benefits, poaching Socialist leaders for key posts in his government (including Bernard Kouchner as foreign minister), pressing the nationalised gas company into a merger with the largest private energy firm, repairing strained relations with Washington, sending his wife off to free the Bulgarian prisoners in Libya (and then going there himself to sign a nuclear agreement). The mood in Paris is one of exhilaration. In the course of a lengthy conversation in French, a senior executive uttered one phrase in English: "France is back!"

And so it is: every word coming out of Paris is being listened to more carefully in world capitals. Elected with just 51% of the vote, Sarkozy has seen his popularity soar to an approval rating of nearly 70%. His decisiveness, his flair, his readiness to launch initiatives, have also benefited from the nature of the institution he inhabits: the French presidency. The Constitution of the Fifth Republic creates a strong president, simultaneously head of state (and, therefore, endowed with all the trappings and the grandeur of that role) and chief executive. The prime minister is technically the head of government, but the president appoints and dismisses him (or her) at will, and it is clearly understood that the role of the PM (any PM) is to faithfully execute the policies of the president.

On foreign policy, there is even less ambiguity, the foreign minister being seen quite explicitly as the president's choice, and the president alone being entitled to stride the world stage as France's representative in international councils. Nicolas Sarkozy is a strong man in a strong position: he has seized upon the potential of the post to promote his vision of a France remade.

As an Indian, it's difficult not to feel envious. The French have exactly what our country needs and we are constitutionally incapable of having: a strong national executive. Instead of a prime minister heading a fractious coalition of 20-odd parties and having to temper his every policy instinct to the whims of the more capricious of his detractors, the French have a president who is secure for five years and is essentially invulnerable during that time. He appoints a PM and a cabinet to his taste, rather than having to bend over backwards to accommodate the political interests of unreliable allies. He pursues policy initiatives he judges appropriate, and is not subject to the risk of a group of parliamentarians threatening to bring him down over a policy they don't like. (The PM, of course, requires a parliamentary majority, but the president cannot be removed by a vote of no confidence, even if he signs a nuclear agreement with the US!)

And, in the case of President Sarkozy, he is 52 years old and bursting with ideas and energy, rather than a leader who is deemed suitable for exalted office only at an age when he should be enjoying his grandchildren. In New Delhi currently, our able PM, president, foreign minister, home minister and human resources minister (not to mention the leader of the opposition) are all in their 70s.

There is no other democracy in which so many key positions could be held by septuagenarians. It's not that there's anything wrong with the wisdom of grey hair; it is just that 70-plus is not an age for taking new initiatives, but rather for proceeding with the know-it-all caution born of long experience. (That, in a country where more than half of whose population is under 25.)

India would never have a Sarkozy heading our government. Given the demands on India in the 21st century, more's the pity.

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