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Analysis: Socialists try to keep dominance

By DEBORAH SEWARD

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PARIS – Fresh with a first-place showing in round one of regional elections over President Nicolas Sarkozy's governing UMP party, France's Socialists now have a week of deal-making with rival leftist parties to try to secure dominance in the upcoming runoff — and 2 1/2 years to transform its regional success into victory in the 2012 presidential vote.

The Socialists refrained from trumpeting their success in Sunday's vote. After all, the Socialists trounced the conservatives in the 2004 regional vote, only to lose the 2007 presidential election three years later after a bitter battle within the party to nominate their own candidate.

Final figures released by the Interior Ministry early Monday morning showed the Socialist-led left with 53.5 percent with the UMP-led conservatives at 39.9 percent amid record abstention.

Although widely seen as a referendum on Sarkozy's 34 months in power, 53 percent stayed away from the polls. That is much higher than in 2004, when abstention was 39 percent on the first round.

Xavier Bertrand, the pugnacious general secretary of Sarkozy's UMP, warned the left not to engage in "triumphalism."

"There is a new election that is starting tonight," he said as results poured in Sunday. Like other conservatives, Bertrand said the low turnout meant the vote did not represent his party's true power.

However, a snap poll released Monday predicted more bad news for the conservatives Sunday when the second round is held. The survey by CSA polling firm for the Le Parisien newspaper and Europe-1 radio predicted that the left would emerge even stronger after the runoff with 55 percent and that the conservatives would do even worse than in the first round, in what is the last major election before the presidential vote in just over two years time.

No party outright won any region in Sunday's first round of voting, meaning the runoff is crucial everywhere. Any party that gets more than 10 percent in round one can team up with any party that won more than 5 percent and present a joint list of candidates in Sunday's runoff.

The scramble to put together joint lists was well underway, with Europe Ecologie, an amalgam of green parties created several years ago, emerging as the kingpin. By Monday evening, Europe Ecologie and the Socialists said they had reached deals in most regions.

The demise of the French Communist Party over the last 20 years has left the Socialist Party seeking a new major ally to form coalitions to beat the conservatives. The collapse Sunday of the centrist MoDem party, and Europe Ecologie's strong showing, has given the greens a real chance at shaping regional politics now and even national politics going forward.

Europe Ecologie appeared ready to drive a hard bargain in terms of both seats and policy.

"The Socialists now have the responsibility not to revive their hegemonic temptation," Cecile Duflot, the head of Europe Ecologie, told France-Info radio.

For their part, the Socialists appeared determined to welcome the rest of the left in alliances rather than insisting on playing first fiddle in all regions as they have in the past. In recent years, the Socialists consistently have done well in regional and municipal balloting only to falter on the national level — and they have not won the presidency in more than two decades.

"The vote next Sunday is decisive," said Socialist Party leader Martine Aubry, a potential leftist candidate for the presidency. Former party leader Francois Hollande promised "total unity" among leftist parties.

The strong leftist showing comes as Sarkozy increasingly appears ineffective and isolated. France has emerged from recession but is shedding jobs daily. The public, worried about unemployment and immigration, appears fatigued by his frenetic style of leadership and his marriage to an ex-supermodel and singer hasn't boosted his popularity, now dismal at less than 40 percent.

On his way to work Monday morning, Paris commuter George Soubral told Associated Press Television News that he thought the electoral slap to the conservatives represented a "sanction" for the ruling party. For Pierre Germain, another commuter, the vote was a "good rebalancing" of the French political landscape. "I think as well that even though only half of the French population voted, it's a rejection for the UMP and for the government."