

Political reactions to the Paris attacks: from national unity to politics as usual

How will the terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November affect domestic politics within France? [Marta Lorimer](#) assesses the reactions from the country's main political parties. She writes that while the previous terrorist attacks in Paris in January resulted in a display of political unity, the united front following the November attacks has been much shorter lived. Although some political figures from the opposite side of the political spectrum have offered support to President Hollande, other actors, including former President Nicolas Sarkozy and members of the Front National, have already voiced criticism of the government's security and immigration policies in light of the attacks.



In the early hours of Saturday, for the second time in ten months, President François Hollande addressed the French nation as it came under attack from Islamic terrorism. The death toll of the previous attacks in January on satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo and a Kosher supermarket paled in comparison to the November attacks: five venues attacked, hundreds of people held hostage in a concert venue for a total of 129 victims and over 300 wounded. The political reaction was also quite different – but not in the way one would have expected.

In January, the French government and most major political forces agreed that it was time for France to stand together in the face of an attack which clearly threatened its values of freedom, equality and fraternity. In a call for unity, party leaders buried the hatchet and took to the streets together, in a demonstration that rallied thousands of people in the city of Paris. While the decision to exclude the [Front National](#) (FN) from the rally caused some controversy, the overall picture was one of cohesion.

The scenario after the 13 November attacks was not altogether different – if anything, the gravity of the attacks could have led to an expectation of more national unity, rather than less. However, this time, the political break was significantly shorter: within 24 hours, politics as usual had resumed.

A short lived break: the usual suspects on the far right...

It may come as little surprise that among the first to break the climate of unity were members of the Front National. Former president Jean-Marie Le Pen, whose membership of the party is at the moment contested, [expressed his condolences at 2AM](#), adding, however, that 'we [the FN] have criticised this criminal barbarism for years'.



The leadership, on the other side, was much more moderate and even cautious in its reactions, perhaps confirming the thesis that suggests the party has become increasingly less radical over the years. Party leader Marine Le Pen

immediately announced on Twitter the suspension of regional election campaigns, and refrained from commenting until Saturday afternoon, [when an official statement posted online resumed the position of the FN](#). The speech retraced all the usual arguments of the party: an immediate return to controlled national borders, expulsion for radicalised figures and revocation of citizenship, and increased investments in the military.

...and the unusual falcons on the right

What was perhaps most surprising, however, was the speed at which the mainstream right started offering alternative solutions, implicitly suggesting that the government had failed in its mission to keep France safe. Philippe De Villiers of the [Mouvement Pour la France](#), a former ally of Nicolas Sarkozy, was already tweeting during the attacks, claiming that they were the results of the [‘laxity and Mosque-isation of France’](#). Laurent Waquiez, secretary general of [Les Republicains](#) (the main right-wing party), on his side, called for the necessity to detain the 4,000 people suspected of terrorist links in internment camps.

However the strongest critiques of the government came from Nicolas Sarkozy. The former French president and leader of *Les Republicains* met with president Hollande at the Elysee on Sunday morning. The statements he issued later showed quite clearly that he did not intend to resurrect the climate of national unity that had followed the January attacks. Preferring to talk about ‘national solidarity – [as reported by French newspaper Liberation](#) – he advocated a stronger security policy, an alliance with Russia in Syria and concluded with an attack on Europe’s immigration policy, in what amounted to an all-round (albeit implicit) attack on the government’s activities up until now.

A fragile unity in hard times: elections, leadership and Europe

One can venture a few hypotheses to explain why national unity was so short lived. The first and most obvious is that France is right in the middle of the electoral campaign for the regional elections, set to take place in December 2015. These elections will be the last major electoral contest before the presidential election in 2017. While the right-wing coalition is in the lead, it is followed closely by the *Front National*, who hope to make major gains in this election and continue their series of strong electoral results. In this context, the right cannot afford to look too closely at the left as this would fuel the FN’s discourse that all mainstream parties are the same.

The second reason, which concerns Sarkozy in particular, is a will to regain his leadership position on the right of the political spectrum. From his loss in the 2012 presidential elections, Sarkozy has had difficulties in maintaining his status as leader. This is an exceptional occasion for him to show that he is ready to lead again and present himself as radically different from François Hollande, whose leadership abilities have occasionally proven quite shaky.

There is a final – and quite possible – explanation which has little to do with French politics, but which is closely related to the ongoing migration crisis in Europe. The January attacks happened at a relatively peaceful time for Europe. This time, however, debates over national security entwined with the migration crisis, as demonstrated by the great attention given to the fact that the passport of a Syrian asylum seeker was found on one of the terrorists. Thus, instead of supporting the government in its endeavours, parties who have made ‘tightened security’ their motto decided to capitalise on the ‘we told you so’ effect.

Ultimately, four days after the terrorist attacks in Paris, the overall climate in France is still one of unity. Sarkozy and



the FN represent the exceptions rather than the rule. On the right, Alain Juppe and François Fillon confirmed their full support for Hollande in these hard times. Similarly, leaders of other parties have expressed solidarity and a commitment to national unity; but with the elections approaching and a comprehensive solution to the migration crisis nowhere to be seen, the consensus may be short-lived.

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