

French far right collapses in regional runoff elections

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Paris: Marine Le Pen's far-right National Front collapsed in French regional elections Sunday, failing to take a single region after dominating the first round of voting, pollsters projected. The conservatives surged against the governing Socialists, changing the political map of France.

The failure of the National Front to gain any of the six regions where it was leading didn't stop the anti-immigration party from looking to the 2017 presidential election — Le Pen's ultimate goal.

Le Pen had been riding high after extremist attacks and an unprecedented wave of migration into Europe, and the party came out on top in the voting in France's 13 newly drawn regions in the first round a week ago. But projections by France's major polling firms suggested the party lost in all of the regions Sunday, including decisive losses for both Le Pen and her popular niece.

"Here we stopped the progression of the National Front," said conservative Xavier Bertrand, who was projected to beat Le Pen in the Nord-Pas de Calais region.

Le Pen supporters in a hall in the gritty northern town of Henin-Beaumont booed his image on a big screen as he spoke. The atmosphere was grim, in stark contrast to a week earlier when Le Pen won more than 40 percent of the vote — and was more than 15 points ahead of Bertrand.

The tables turned on Sunday as Bertrand beat Le Pen by nearly 15 points.

Le Pen struck an upbeat tone despite the rout, pledging to keep fighting to expand support for her party. She said she would in the coming weeks "rally all the French, of all origins, who want to join us."

"Nothing will stop us," she told cheering supporters.

Le Pen won 42.8 percent compared with Bertrand's 57 percent, according to the Interior Ministry. Le Pen's niece, Marion Marechal-Le Pen, took 46 percent in the southern Provence-Alpes-Cote d'Azur region, compared with 53.7 percent for conservative Nice Mayor Christian Estrosi.

The conservatives were boosted to victory in the two Le Pen races with help from the Socialists who withdrew their candidates, asking voters to give their ballots to the mainstream rival. Turnout rose sharply from the first round, suggesting that many voters wanted to prevent the once-pariah National Front from gaining power.

In all, the conservative Republicans took seven regions, and the Socialists won five, Interior Ministry results showed.

Among prizes falling to the conservatives was the Paris region, long a Socialist bastion.

A nationalist not affiliated with a major party won Corsica.

Le Pen denounced the "campaign of calumny decided in the palaces of the (French) Republic," a reference to fear tactics by rivals, including Prime Minister Manuel Valls who said the National Front could lead the nation into "civil war."

Turnout was 7 percent higher than for the previous regional elections in 2010, with 50.4 percent of those eligible to vote

casting ballots by 5 p.m. (1600 GMT), three hours before polls closed in big cities, according to the Interior Ministry. The figures weren't updated. The second-round turnout at the same time five years ago was 43.4 percent.

In the past, the National Front has performed well in first-round votes but failed to carry through in the final round. That reflects a fear of allowing a party associated with extremism to take power.

Despite its loss, the National Front sent a message to the French.

Prime Minister Manuel Valls warned that the far right remains a "danger" despite the defeat, and urged his country to rally together against extremism.

"France in moments of truth has always taken refuge in its real values," Valls said.

The National Front has racked up political victories in local elections in recent years, but winning control of any region would have been an unprecedented boost for the party ahead of presidential elections in 18 months.

Still, politicians on the left and right said mainstream parties must reassess their priorities.

"We can no longer continue like this. We must act," Socialist Party leader Jean-Christophe Cambadélis told leftist ranks.

Indeed, the day kicked off the unofficial election season as politicians from all parties cast Sunday's results in terms of their presidential ambitions.

- AP