

French President Francois Hollande pulls out of 2017 Presidential elections

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Paris: France's President Francois Hollande announced in a surprise televised address that he would not seek a second term in next year's presidential election, acknowledging that his personal unpopularity might cost his Socialist party the Elysee.

“I have decided not to be a candidate in the presidential election,” Hollande said in the prime time slot, adding that he hoped by stepping aside to give the Socialists a chance to win “against conservatism and, worse still, extremism.”

The 62-year-old president - the country's least popular leader since World War II - said he was "conscious of the risks" his lack of support posed to a successful candidacy.

"What's at stake is not a person, it's the country's future," he said.

The announcement Thursday came just a few days after Hollande's No. 2, Prime Minister Manuel Valls, said he was "ready" to compete in next month's Socialist primary.

In a written statement on Thursday night, Valls praised Hollande's "tough, mature, serious choice."

"That's the choice of a statesman," he said, without confirming if he plans to seek the presidency himself.

In his address Hollande avoided saying if he would support Valls - or any other candidate.

Hollande's popularity plunged soon after he took power in 2012, and polls show most voters don't want to see him stay in office.

Voters expressed disappointment over the lagging economy, higher taxes and the pro-business shift Hollande adopted midterm after first claiming as a candidate his "real adversary" would be the "world of finance".

His image also suffered from personal scandals. He broke up with ex-partner Valerie Trierweiler amid reports that he was having an affair with French actress Julie Gayet, an episode later exposed in a stinging book by the former first lady.

Not only did Trierweiler reveal intimate details of Hollande's infidelities, but she also depicted the Socialist leader as someone who dislikes the poor - a grave political sin for a left-wing leader.

The Socialist party has also been deeply divided over Hollande's leadership from within, with rebels within the party openly criticizing his pro-business strategy and calling for more left-leaning policies.

Two of his ex-colleagues, former Economy Minister Arnaud Montebourg and former Education Minister Benoit Hamon, have already announced they will run next month.

Hollande faced the Dec. 15 party deadline for entering the primary contest - and was expected to say in the coming weeks whether he would run again.

His announcement nevertheless came as a shock to political commentators, many of whom had thought the one-term Socialist leader was posturing to seek re-election despite being low in the polls.

French network TF1 only said late in the day that the embattled leader would be speaking on its popular 8 p.m. news broadcast, throwing French media into a frenzy of second-guessing as to what he might have to say.

In a September speech, he repeatedly suggested he was eyeing a re-election bid.

"I will not let the image of France be spoiled ... in the coming months or the coming years," Hollande said at the time.

Hollande said he would seek re-election if he were able to curb the unemployment rate in France, which for years has hovered around 10 percent. The latest figures showed a slight decrease in the jobless numbers, but this didn't seem to quell the criticism.

Valls may launch his bid on Saturday, when he expected to speak at a political rally in Paris hosted by a group linked to the Socialist party.

Whichever candidate Socialist voters choose in January will face former Prime Minister Francois Fillon, among other rivals, in the two-round presidential election in April and May.

Fillon, 62, who won France's conservative presidential primary on Sunday, has promised drastic free-market reforms, along with a crackdown on immigration and Islamic extremism.

Polls suggest the sober, authoritative Fillon would have a strong chance of winning the general election amid the widespread frustration with France's current leadership.

He did not waste time in hammering Hollande and the Socialists in a statement sent out minutes after Thursday's televised address.

"Tonight, the president of the republic is admitting, with lucidity, that his patent failure is stopping him carrying on," Fillon said.

"This term ends in political mess and in the decay of power," Fillon added, promising "action" and "results."

Fillon, who was prime minister from 2007-2012 under ex-President Nicolas Sarkozy, enjoyed a surprise surge in popularity in recent weeks. A rise in nationalist sentiment across Europe may have favored his strict conservative positions.

However, it's expected he'll face a strong challenge from Marine Le Pen, leader of the far-right National Front party, Le Pen is running an anti-establishment campaign that particularly targets immigrants, France's Muslim minority, and the European Union.

The series of terror attacks on French soil by Islamic extremists that have left hundreds dead over the last two years has energized the country's political right, which has vowed to take a tougher stance against immigration.

Centrist Emmanuel Macron, the former economy minister under Hollande, also is seeking the presidency in the general election scheduled for April-May, but has decided not to take part into the Socialist primary.

- (With AP inputs)