

On the Scrappy Fringes of French Politics, Le Pen Tries a Rebranding

By NORIMITSU ONISHI

LA TRINITÉ-SUR-MER, France — It was the setting for a straightforward origin story, or so it seemed. Marine Le Pen, the far-right leader aiming to be France's next president, came to launch her latest campaign in the seaside resort where her firebrand father once announced his own bid for the presidency from the family home.

But the recent trip to the family base at La Trinité-sur-Mer in western France, where Ms. Le Pen posed for selfies with admirers, schmoozed with oystermen and took TV journalists on boat rides, was a critical part of a rebranding effort toward respectability.

Steering the motorboat was Florent de Kersauson, a prominent businessman who, after decades of backing center-right candidates, was switching to Ms. Le Pen's National Rally. By embracing Mr. de Kersauson, a former senior executive at the telecommunications giant Alcatel, Ms. Le Pen latched on to the kind of establishment figure who could help persuade voters that her party was more than a scrappy, family business. And maybe even assuage doubts about her competence to move into the Élysée Palace.

"The National Rally, formerly the National Front, has gone from being a protest movement to an opposition movement, and is now a government movement," Ms. Le Pen said.

A year before France's next presidential election, Ms. Le Pen, 52, is expected to be President Emmanuel Macron's main challenger in a rematch of the 2017 vote. For the past four years, Ms. Le Pen has been trying to rebuild her credibility following a poor campaign that was marred by an incoherent message and punctuated by a disastrous debate against Mr. Macron.

She has tweaked her economic message, shedding the party's opposition to the euro and European Union, a stance that alienated mainstream conservatives. She now talks of forming a government of national unity by picking the most competent, seasoned individuals, including figures from the left, who would add gravitas to a party whose vice president, Jordan Bardella, is only 25 years old.

Even as she hews to the party's harsh nationalist, anti-immigrant vision, Ms. Le Pen has redoubled efforts to "un-demonize" her party, which has long been associated with the anti-Semitism, xenophobia, Holocaust denialism and colonial nostalgia of Jean-Marie Le Pen, her father and the party's founder.

Part of that has been an effort to humanize her. A flurry of recent news reports revealed that she loved cats so much she had become a certified breeder, specializing in Bengals and Somalis. The



DMITRY KOSTYUKOV FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

After a poor showing in 2017, the far-right leader Marine Le Pen wants to persuade voters that she and her party can govern France.

photos of her posing with the cuddly felines were visual evidence that the party no longer belonged to her father, known for his fondness of menacing Dobermans.

Recent polls show Ms. Le Pen and Mr. Macron running neck and neck in the first round of next year's election, with Ms. Le Pen trailing by just a few percentage points in a second-round runoff.

Nicolas Lebourg, a political scientist, said Ms. Le Pen, who is running for president for the third time, has struggled to bounce

Recruiting centrist party members and softening her image.

back from her shaky performance in 2017. While she projected a modern image when she took over the party from her father 10 years ago, she taps into fears running through French society without offering a positive vision for the future, Mr. Lebourg said.

"It's possible she'll earn very good results in the first round, maybe even come in first, and then lose in the second round," Mr. Lebourg said, adding that her projected strong showing owed less to her "charisma" than pessimism in France. "It's more about the French fear of decline."

The government's poor handling of the coronavirus pandemic has undermined faith in the state and deepened a sense of general national decline, Mr. Lebourg said.

Mr. Macron has also been bogged down in a series of crises, including the Yellow Vest movement. Attacks in recent months have also heightened fears of terrorism and accelerated Mr. Macron's shift to the right to fend off Ms. Le Pen.

"I think I can win," Ms. Le Pen said in an hourlong interview inside her office at the National Assembly in Paris, where copies of "The Philosopher Cat," an illustrated volume of feline-themed aphorisms, and a blue binder marked "immigration" and "security" lay on her desk.

To Ms. Le Pen, Mr. Macron was globalization's candidate, whose presidency was one of "disorder, fragmentation and fracturing of French society."

"Me, I'm the candidate of the restoration of the authority of the state," Ms. Le Pen said, adding that she would protect France's national interests.

She has shed part of her populist economic agenda, especially her proposal to drop the euro. She said she now believed that the stability offered by the common currency outweighed the negatives.

Keeping the currency is believed to help Ms. Le Pen court traditional conservatives, the same group targeted by Mr. Ma-

cron. "It's reassured people who were worried by a position that made them think that it could have consequences on their assets," she said.

Her party has gained further credibility, Ms. Le Pen argued, in the local governments that her party controls, mostly in depressed areas in the north and south of France.

In La Trinité-sur-Mer, she introduced Mr. de Kersauson, the former Alcatel executive, as the head of her party's ticket in next month's regional elections. Getting more defectors from the center-right — who are financially better off than the National Rally's traditional backers, but who are also feeling unsettled by the social changes rippling through France — is one key to victory next year.

"Marine is a woman of her era, with the problems of her era, and she has the answers of her era," Mr. de Kersauson said in an interview.

Mr. de Kersauson, who situates himself on the center right politi-

cally, said he would never have supported the National Rally when it was led by Ms. Le Pen's father. But he said he had slid toward Ms. Le Pen's party because it was first to make the right "diagnostic" about France's problems, citing immigration and security.

In the interview, Ms. Le Pen's voice rose when she spoke about immigration — the red meat issue that has sustained her party's rise, under both father and daughter. She said government policies were too lax and blamed immigration for fragmenting French society, and giving rise to Islamism and terrorism.

"We can't solve the problem of insecurity if we don't acknowledge the idea that immigration is anarchic, and is the engine of insecurity in our country," she said. "When a plumber comes to fix a leak, the first thing he does is shut off the water."

Ms. Le Pen wants to sharply reduce immigration and deport those who are in France illegally. Acquiring French citizenship

should be made harder, she said, and contingent on respecting French "customs" and "codes."

"It's also about the defense of the French lifestyle," she added. "It's about Americans not being French, French not being Italians. We each have our culture, each our identity."

She also said she had no problems with Islam, but vowed to crack down on Islamism, or any attempt to replace French Republican values with religious laws.

But her critics see a problem in how she defines Islamism. For Ms. Le Pen, the Muslim head scarf is inherently an expression of Islamism, and wearing it should be banned in public.

"In France, we don't wear the head scarf," Ms. Le Pen said. "France, it's Brigitte Bardot in a swimsuit rather than women in niqabs."

In La Trinité-sur-Mer, Ms. Le Pen's message on immigration and security seemed to resonate even among those still skeptical about her economic policies and readiness to govern.

Guyène and Michel André, a retired couple who had come to see Ms. Le Pen launch her campaign, said they felt under siege in a changing France.

"We're in France, after all, and we have the right to do what we want," Ms. André said. "We're reduced to being cautious, not talking too much."

But Mr. Lebourg, the political scientist, said that Ms. Le Pen needs to broaden her appeal.

In the interview, Ms. Le Pen described herself as "very discreet," and said she wanted to open up more about herself before the election. "I think many people feel they've known me for a long time, but they don't know me well," she said. "Maybe they believe they know me because they got to know me through my father."

She said she had reconciled with her father, who is 93 and whom she expelled from the party in 2015 for making anti-Semitic remarks. The year before, she said she had moved out of the family residence near Paris after one of her father's dogs — a rescue, not a Doberman, as some French media initially reported — killed one of her cats.

Ms. Le Pen said that dog was gentle, as had been her father's Dobermans. "We shouldn't indulge in caricatures," she said. "Dobermans have a vicious image, but, in fact, they're very gentle dogs."



INDRANIL MUKHERJEE/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

A fishing village near Mumbai moored boats on Sunday ahead of the arrival of Cyclone Tauktae.

Mass Evacuation as Cyclone Nears India

By ISABELLA KWAI

Tens of thousands of people have been evacuated from their homes in India as a severe cyclone barreled toward landfall on India's northwest state of Gujarat Sunday evening.

Heavy rainfall and winds from the Cyclone Tauktae, which originated in the Arabian Sea, had already pounded some states along India's western coast, causing power outages, downing trees and resulting in at least six deaths, according to the Reuters news agency. Four of the six deaths were in the southern state of Karnataka, where more than 70 coastal villages were affected, according to the state's disaster management authority.

The cyclone, which was classified as a "very severe cyclonic storm" on Saturday, was likely to intensify over the next day, the India Meteorological Department said in a briefing Sunday afternoon. Forecasters said that it would reach the coast of Gujarat, one of India's largest states, on

Sunday, with winds gusting as high as about 115 miles per hour.

The department said it expected a tidal wave of up to nine feet in some areas, with the heaviest rainfalls in some areas in Gujarat on Monday. Gujarat government officials said almost 150,000 people were being evacuated from vulnerable areas on the coast by Sunday evening, Reuters reported.

Officials ordered the suspension of fishing operations in parts of the east central Arabian Sea and along the western coast in some areas of India, with fishermen being advised not to venture out into the sea near the Gujarat coast until Monday.

The cyclone comes as India is grappling with a devastating coronavirus surge driven by a newer variant of the virus that has left hospitals filled to capacity and sick people struggling to get care. As of Saturday evening, 266,207 people in India had died from the virus, which experts say is almost certainly an undercount of the full death toll.

Officials have also effectively suspended vaccinations, including in the city of Mumbai, until Tuesday.

As the cyclone neared, dozens of disaster management teams have been deployed in several states, along with army, navy and coast guard units, the government said, adding in a statement on Sunday it was taking steps to ensure "zero loss of life."

In Gujarat, officials on Sunday said that arrangements had been made for patients at coronavirus centers to continue to receive treatment. Hospitals were sealing windows and doors to windproof them, and more than 170 mobile intensive care unit vans were being deployed to provide emergency care, according to local media.

Heavy rainfall on Friday from Cyclone Tauktae has already led to the evacuation of 15,000 people from low-lying areas. They were temporarily relocated to camps in the southern state of Kerala, according to the Hindustan Times.



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