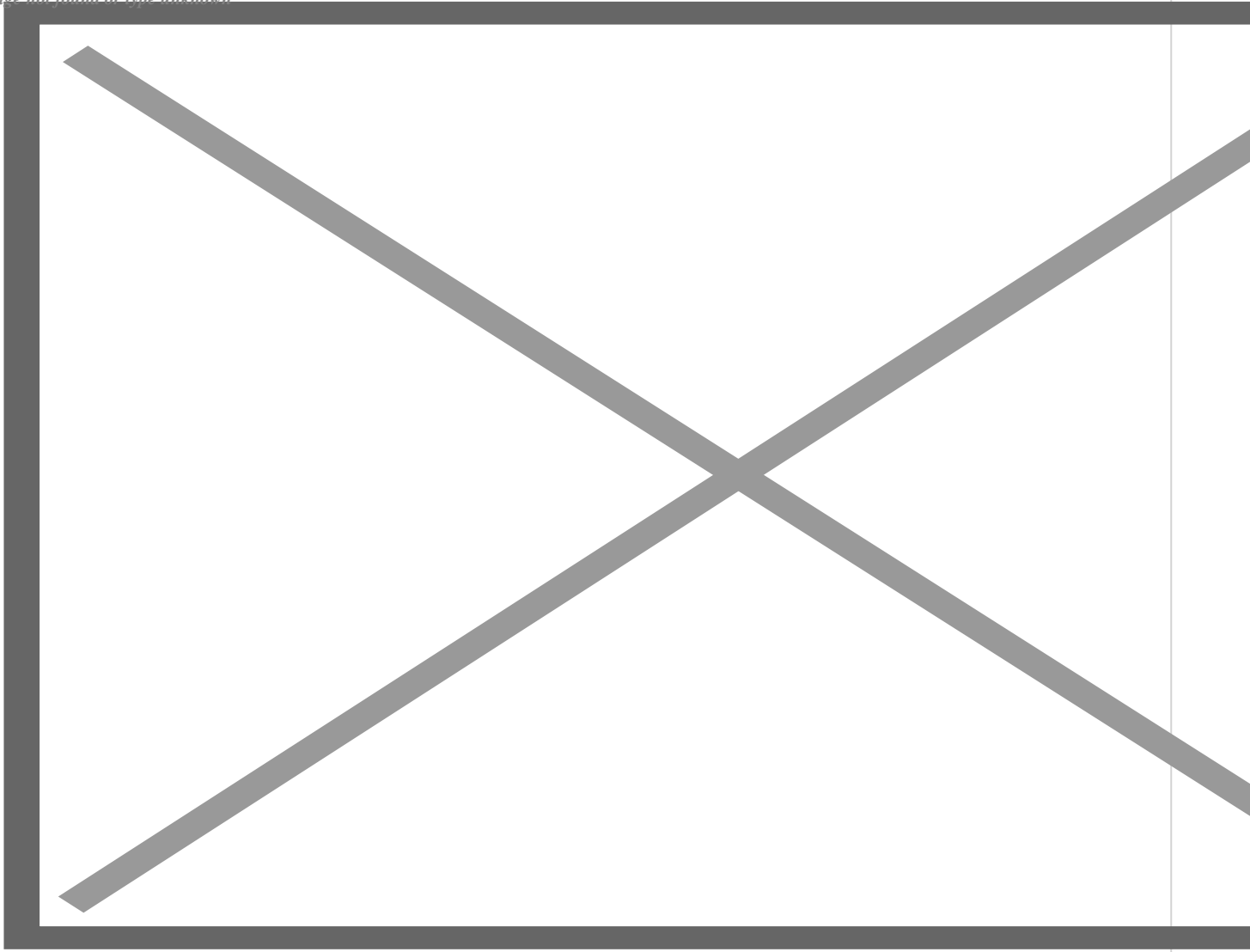


Far-right French leader rides high numbers in poll

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France's Le Pen, at record high in a poll, proposes hijab ban

Paris, January 31 (RHC)-- French far-right leader Marine Le Pen has proposed a ban on Muslim headscarves in all public places, seeking to build on a record recent poll putting her almost neck-and-neck with President Emmanuel Macron.

The hijab policy, which would be contested in court and almost certainly be ruled unconstitutional, saw the 53-year-old return to a familiar campaign theme 15 months from the country's 2022 presidential election.

"I consider that the headscarf is an Islamist item of clothing," Le Pen told reporters at a news conference on Friday, where she proposed a new law to ban "Islamist ideologies" that she called "totalitarian and murderous."

Since taking over France's main far-right party from her father, Le Pen has run twice for the French presidency, losing badly in 2017 to political newcomer Macron in a defeat that she took months to recover from. But recent polling shows her closer than ever to her ultimate prize and has led to a rash of new speculation about whether the anti-EU, anti-immigration populist could finally enter the Elysee Palace.

Despite recent setbacks for fellow ideologues such as Donald Trump and Matteo Salvini in Italy, a survey earlier this week showed her within striking distance of Macron. The poll conducted online by Harris Interactive suggested if a final-round presidential runoff were held today Le Pen would garner 48 percent while Macron would be re-elected with 52 percent, Le Parisien newspaper reported.

"It's a poll, it's a snapshot of a moment, but what it shows is that the idea of me winning is credible, plausible even," Le Pen said at the news conference. The prospect of a tight race set off alarm bells in the French political mainstream as the dual health and economic crises caused by the coronavirus pandemic sweep across the country.

"It's the highest she has ever been at," said Jean-Yves Camus, a French political scientist specialised in the far right, while adding it was "too early to take the polls at face value." He said Le Pen was benefitting from frustration and anger over the pandemic, with France on the verge of a third lockdown, but also the beheading of a French school teacher last October. "It had a major impact on public opinion," Camus said. "And in this area, Marine Le Pen has an advantage: her party is well known for its position denouncing Islamism."

The beheading of Samuel Paty in a town northwest of Paris rekindled bitter arguments in France about immigration, while putting the country's strict form of secularism under international scrutiny. The secondary school teacher was attacked in the street by an 18-year-old after he showed satirical cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad to pupils during a civics class on free speech.

In response to Paty's death, Macron's government shut down a number of organisations deemed Islamist and drafted law legislation initially called "the anti-separatism bill", which cracks down on foreign funding for Islamic organisations.

If re-elected after a campaign that is expected to be centred on jobs, the pandemic, and the place of Islam in France, 43-year-old Macron would be the first president since Jacques Chirac in 2002 to win a second term. Under the presidential system, the top two candidates in a first round of voting progress to a second-round runoff where the winner must get more than 50 percent.

A Le Pen win "was improbable three and half years ago", veteran political commentator Alain Duhamel told the BFM news channel this week. "But today I wouldn't say that it is probable but I'd say, without any pleasure, that it seems to me to be possible."

A rerun of the Macron-Le Pen contest of 2017, which all polls currently show as the most likely outcome, could increase the abstention rate and disillusionment with the French political system.

Turnout in the second round in 2017 was 74.6 percent, its lowest level since 1969, because many voters from the left declined to cast a ballot.



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