

French socialists divided in dispute over leadership vote

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France's opposition Socialist party was tearing itself apart yesterday as rival camps in this weekend's leadership election traded insults and accusations of cheating after a hotly contested vote left the party deeply divided.

Party insiders warned that the risk of a permanent split was greater than ever after the Friday poll which gave a razor-thin victory to the party traditionalist Martine Aubry over Ségolène Royal, former presidential candidate. The margin was just 42 votes out of 134,784 valid ballots cast.

The two factions would have to agree on a compromise, said Michel Sapin, a Socialist deputy and a former finance minister. "If they do not it is the death of the Socialist party."

But yesterday there was no sign of a truce. Indeed, Ms Royal's camp went strongly on the attack, with its spokesman accusing some returns from Lille - the city where Ms Aubry is mayor - of being "written forgeries". Legal action would be launched this week, he said.

The Socialist party of Lille responded to the accusation by threatening its own lawsuit for defamation.

The bitter feuding began on Saturday and escalated yesterday as it emerged that errors had crept into certain returns and that others from abroad had not been taken into account. Ms Royal has called for a new vote, which the Aubry camp has rejected outright.

A special committee is due to meet this morning to review returns and the winner will be announced tomorrow. But the feuding has been so bitter that the chance of creating a unified party under either candidate to oppose Nicolas Sarkozy, right-of-centre president, now seems remote.

Members of the ruling UMP party delighted in the chaos, citing the opposition's remarkable "talent for self-destruction".

Party veterans argue that the crisis has been fuelled by a leadership election fought on personality rather than on policies that they say could have revitalised the French left.

Mr Sapin, a supporter at various stages of both Ms Royal and the Paris mayor Bertrand Delanoë, her first round rival, said the real failure had been the party's lack of renewal and of ideas.

The contest had not been one of "left versus the right of the party... but of a concept of the party and a style of politics. This is much more difficult to resolve."

Ms Aubry, a last-minute candidate for the leadership and the daughter of Jacques Delors, former president of the European Commission, was encouraged to run by many of the party's old guard who are strongly opposed to Ms Royal.

She has promised a more disciplined shadow government, anchored on the left. However, the former social affairs minister's role in 2000 in creating the 35-hour working week, which even many Socialists now disown, leaves many sceptical about her ability to modernise the party.

Ms Royal, on the other hand, has raised the possibility of alliances with the centrist MoDem, and wants to create a broader party open to Socialist sympathisers as well as traditional activists.

She makes no secret of her desire to use the party as a vehicle for her presidential ambitions, which has alienated many traditional Socialist supporters.

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