

The Martyrdom of Marine Le Pen

By Theodore Dalrymple

A French criminal court's disqualification of Marine Le Pen, the leader of the French populist party, the *Rassemblement National*, from running for office for five years, along with a sentence of four years' imprisonment—meaning two years under effective house arrest—and a fine of \$110,000 has, not surprisingly, acted like a stick poked into a hornet's nest.



The disqualification means that Le Pen will not be able to run for the presidency, which she had a reasonable

chance of winning, in 2027.

Opinions range from the complacent to the apocalyptic—from “She got what she deserved” to “This is the end of democracy in France.” The one thing that nobody said, not even the accused herself, was that Le Pen was not guilty of what she was charged with: namely, the fraudulent misuse of European Parliament funds, to the tune of about \$5 million, to support her political party at home. Not even she made innocence the grounds for outrage.

It might seem surprising that the French far-Left condemned the disqualification. Its leader, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, said that the ballot box was the proper way to defeat Le Pen, not a

ban on candidates like her from running. This, of course, raises the question of what impunity those running for office should enjoy: should it apply only to presidential candidates, or to candidates for any public office? And should it be for any and all crimes?

Mélenchon may not have been entirely disinterested in his seeming support for Marine Le Pen. She is the only candidate against whom he, or the Left, could conceivably win the presidency, and he himself faces investigations of a not dissimilar kind, though of a smaller scale, from those that led to Le Pen's inculpation.

According to polls, more than half the French population believes that Le Pen was dealt with fairly, her punishment being appropriate to her crime and not different from what anyone else would have received. They found in her conviction and punishment reassurance that France remained a country of the rule of law.

A substantial minority, however, believes that she is the victim of an unequal and politicized justice. France's judicial system is widely thought, not without reason, to be left leaning. The fact that Marine Le Pen is the second presidential candidate of the political Right to be destroyed by legal process shortly before a possible electoral victory lends credence to a perceived trend of political persecution. (The first was François Fillon, conveniently discovered to have created fictitious employment for his wife and children shortly before his electoral bid, though his wrongdoing had continued for 20 years and was widely believed to be so prevalent as to be almost normal.)

If there is an element of unequal justice in the punishment imposed on Le Pen, it lies in the fact that her disqualification from seeking public office takes immediate effect, while the prison sentence and fine are suspended pending appeal. As in many legal systems, appeals in France

take time to move through the courts. Had the disqualification also been delayed, she might still have been able to run in 2027.

Will her conviction have a practical political effect? Possibly—but it may be the opposite of what was intended. If framed cleverly, in a way that encourages the public to forget or overlook her actual guilt, it could cast her as a martyr. And martyrs make good candidates. In any case, her deputy and likely successor—Jordan Bardella, a young man with a silver tongue and no real experience—is at least as popular as she is, and perhaps more so.

As Oliver Hardy put it: here's another fine mess you've gotten us into—"you" being, in this case, France's juridical-political class.

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