FRANÇOIS HOLLANDE EMERGES AS SARKOZY'S RIVAL

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Ferhan Köseoğlu, Paris, Today's Zaman, 17 October 2011
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Hollande, a 57-year-old politician known for his moderation and reconciliatory personality, won the Socialist Party ticket to run as the presidential candidate in the upcoming elections in May and is considered a possible winner against Sarkozy. Hollande defeated party leader Martine Aubry, a politician who strongly sympathizes with Turkey's bid for EU membership, by a clear 15-point margin in the elections in which close to 2.5 million Socialist Party members voted to elect the presidential candidate.
What Hollande's attitude will be regarding Turkey-related issues in the event of his victory in the general elections remains a mystery. Hollande has a more positive approach toward Turkey's accession to the EU than Sarkozy. While Sarkozy aggressively rejects Turkey's membership, Hollande has stated that Turkey should become a member on the condition that "the country becomes fully ready for the occasion." However, Hollande is also a known supporter of the genocide claims of the Armenian lobby in France, which is known for its strong clout with the government.

During his election campaign, Hollande pledged to the Armenian Socialist Party that he would again bring the issue of criminalizing the denial of the so-called Armenian genocide of 1915 in France to the Senate, which had dropped the motion from its agenda last May due to vetoes of Sarkozy's ruling party.

Hollande's attempts at passing the motion and criminalizing the expression that the mass killings at the time of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire during World War I did not constitute genocide were

criticized by Turkey through the Turkish ambassador in Paris, Tahsin Burcuoğlu. The top Turkish diplomat sent a letter to Hollande in which he explained that relations between France and Turkey would be damaged if a law were to be passed that would criminalize denial of the so-called genocide.

It also remains to be seen whether France's cooperation with Turkey on counterterrorism would continue after the next presidential elections. The Turkish and French interior ministers signed an agreement in Ankara in early October to establish solid grounds between the countries to coordinate their efforts against terrorism, and France facilitated crackdowns on terrorists and terrorism sympathizers in the last two years, which resulted in the arrests of more than a dozen suspects on terrorism-related charges.

Sarkozy blocked five negotiation chapters between Turkey and the EU during his presidency and made incessant remarks that Turkey did not belong in the European bloc although it was a valuable ally to France and Europe in general. Sarkozy urged Turkey to recognize the alleged genocide and said he would facilitate a law to be passed to criminalize denials of the alleged genocide in early October, a move that was interpreted by Turkish officials as an attempt to win support from the Armenian diaspora in France.