

French candidate wants to put church-state separation into constitution

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Paris, February 6 (ENInews)--The front-runner in the race for the French presidency wants the separation of church and state to be put into the constitution, prompting religious and legal experts to question how this might alter the way France functions as a state that is already secular by law.

The proposal is part of the platform unveiled by Socialist Party candidate Francois Hollande, who leads President Nicolas Sarkozy and other candidates in public opinion polls ahead of the two-stage presidential election scheduled for April and May.

Hollande said the proposal is meant to reinforce the secular character of France. Few consider it to be under threat, but politicians have sought to reassure voters that it will remain a pillar of French society as immigration and other trends cause gradual demographic changes in the population.

France made the church and state separate in a 1905 law, but regional and other exceptions have been allowed. The legislation, for example, does not apply in Alsace and Moselle. These areas joined France after World War I and were allowed to keep an 1801 arrangement by which the salaries of Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish clergymen are paid from public funds. The areas also require religious instruction in publicly-run schools.

Hollande's proposal calls for taking regional situations like these into account but does not suggest how they might be accommodated. Sarkozy has criticized the proposal as threatening a century-old consensus on how the separation of church and state is applied.

In the absence of any details, its potential impact has quickly become the subject of speculation that could increase its importance as an election issue. "We don't know what it's about," Claude Baty, president of the Protestant Federation of France, told ENInews, adding that the proposal might be simply "words for a political rally, which don't have any serious foundation."

He said France's status as a secular nation is already mentioned in the preamble to the constitution, and speculated that making the separation of church and state a constitutional mandate could affect things like state funds for maintaining historic churches.

A prominent constitutional lawyer, Jean-Pierre Machelon, dean of the Paris Descartes University law school, told ENInews that legal regimes like the one in Alsace and Moselle, and concessions that nations commonly grant to religious institutions, are among things that Hollande's proposal might affect. France offers religious groups some tax concessions, for example, and churches built before the 1905 law are owned by the public sector.

Opposition to the proposal has become most intense in Alsace, where the large city of Strasbourg is located. According to Baty, the people there "live in a situation that suits them well."