



French Govt. Ministers Vacation on Dime of Arab Tyrants

French President Nicolas Sarkozy is in a quandry: the government ministers of France have been taking vacations in the sand and surf of the southern Mediterranean and presidential palaces on the Red Sea, with the Egyptian government and a Tunisian businessman picking up the tab. How high does this subsidized vacationing go in the French government? Prime Minister François Fillon, the head of government in the Fifth Republic, and Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie, second in precedence in the ministerial system, have both received gratis vacations at the expense of foreign governments or foreign nationals.



There are long-standing political and cultural ties between France and the Arab nations of the Mediterranean Basin. Tunisia was part of the French Empire until decolonization after the Second World War. When Islam was riding highest, the French won the Battle of Tours, blunting the Muslim penetration of Western Europe. Centuries later, the French monarchy often used the Ottoman Turks as an ally against Hapsburg hegemony, and the Ottoman fleets used ports in what are now Tunisia and Egypt.

France has also maintained strong ties with its former colonies, such as Tunisia, and unlike other colonial powers, the French especially worked to insure that French culture, not just French institutions or alliances, were part of the long-term relationship. As a consequence of these factors, it is not nearly as strange as it might seem to Americans that those governments and millionaires from the Arab world would fete French government ministers.

European customs are divided on the propriety of this sort of informal fringe benefit of office. The Italian premier, Silvio Berlusconi, a media multi-billionaire, and the Russian “Vozhd” Putin (nominal government titles such as “President” or “Prime Minister” mean little in describing Vladimir Putin’s rule of Russia), often provide each other with opulent resort vacations, which either they or their nations own. No one is shocked. Sadly, cronyism among the political elites of the world is what moderns have come to expect from those who rule in the name of the people.

In nations such as Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, however, this sort of perk would be akin to malodorous payoffs. Part of this distinction, however, is more form than substance. Denmark, Sweden, and Norway are monarchies. Gifts to the royals of these nations are hardly considered offensive, and although not fabulously wealthy, the royal families are certainly kept in comfort and ease without the “grubby” business of earning money. France, like Italy and Russia, has no monarchy. The ballot box, not birth, determines who reigns in these nations.

Sarkozy, as head of state (though not head of government), reigns in France until he is voted out in a presidential election. Although he has been a guest of the rich and powerful, the problem is not Sarkozy



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on February 14, 2011

but his ministers. And in this case the problem is not so much the compromising of his government — all grand systems of government are “compromised,” as Lord Acton warned a century ago: “Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.” The dilemma for French President Sarkozy is one of symbolism: Tunisia has just overthrown a corrupt government and Egypt is in the process of doing the same; therefore, it looks bad for French politicians to be luxuriating on the coin of despots while the despots are being thrown out.

So President Sarkozy has pronounced: “It’s only by being irreproachable that highly placed decision-makers will be able to shore up citizens’ confidence in the institutions of the state. That which was common several years ago can be seen as shocking today.”

[Miklos Marschall](#), Deputy Managing Director of Transparency International, a group which addresses the appearance of public corruption, called the French situation “embarrassing,” adding about Prime Minister Fillon: “I’m sure [his] judgment hasn’t been compromised but by accepting the invitation, it puts him in a position where people can legitimately complain that it has. In established democracies, such behavior is unacceptable and goes against all basic transparency standards.”

Complicating matters are two other public policy issues. Sarkozy, along with other political leaders in increasingly post-Christian Europe, has grappled with ways to confront or finesse the growing demographic problems of Europe. Native Europeans in many states are not reproducing at a rate adequate to prevent a long-term decline in population (more troubling because so many of the light-skinned, aging Frenchmen, Dutch and Danes are looking to the young men of the angry Arab population in those countries to pay for their old age benefits.)

The introduction of political and social liberty and free-market economies might reverse the migration of poor Arabs into Europe, and it might also produce real economic growth and religious liberty in places such as Tunisia and Egypt, which would redound to the health of Europe. When French prime ministers and foreign ministers accept gifts from tyrants who run those lands, it weakens the chance of the people in these countries for freedom and makes the French appear to be facilitating the brutal overlords.

Also, when government officials of nations such as France, in which a substantial part of the economy is supported by tourism, take their vacations by the largesse of these foreign dictatorships, it makes it difficult for the French government to urge its citizens to spend their vacation dollars in their own homeland. When governments throughout Europe are working to see local businesses such as cafes and resorts blossom again, the image of French prime ministers and foreign ministers along the coast of the Red Sea or the harbors of Tunisia tipping waiters and ordering luxurious dinners can only demoralize an already profoundly disturbed nation.

The difficulties of Europe and the Islamic world are far from just symbolic, but symbols do matter. And the ministers who ultimately answer to President Sarkozy in France are sending just the wrong message at just the wrong time.

Photo: French President Nicolas Sarkozy, left, speaks with French Prime Minister Francois Fillon, right, during a ceremony to commemorate the 65th anniversary of the Allied victory over Nazi Germany, in Paris, France, May 8, 2010.: AP Images



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