

Marine Le Pen: Passion for politics, far-right values stands her apart

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Paris: French presidential candidate Marine Le Pen hopes to break through the ceiling of fear that stopped her father from winning in 2002.

Marine Le Pen

Le Pen herself is making her second bid for the French presidency. She was placed third in her 2012 bid for the presidency

And what stands her apart from other candidates is her passion for politics and far-right values that were forged in the cradle.

A terror attack that killed a police officer on Paris' Champs-Elysees Avenue on Thursday night, three days before first round of the presidential vote, fed the central themes of Le Pen.

She wants to build a secure sovereign state by cracking down on what she calls the "massive immigration" of radical Muslims she claims are trying to supplant France's Judeo-Christian heritage.

If elected president, she vowed to immediately put in place a "battle plan against Islamic terrorism ... so that France lives!"

At 48, Le Pen, the mother of three, is an ambitious, bold and gritty leader who defied the old guard of her far-right National Front party, expelling most to try to remove the taint of racism and anti-Semitism that clung to it for decades under the leadership of her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen.

In 2015, she did not shirk from pushing him out of the party he founded in 1972. The former paratrooper and fiery orator had refused to desist from anti-Semitic provocations that were undermining his daughter's bid to make the National Front an acceptable political alternative "and compromising her dream of becoming president.

Marine Le Pen placed third in her 2012 bid for the presidency, a year after taking over the National Front, and the defeat only reinforced her desire to win.

She used local, regional and European elections to build up a party machine to serve her ambitions. In 2014, the National Front won 11 towns in municipal elections, and her party performed better than any in France in elections for the European Parliament, where she co-presides over a far-right group.

The anti-establishment Le Pen has a soft touch that appeals to voters once too timid to vote for the extreme right "but her passion for cats can't hide a steely resolve and a tongue that can be as cutting as her father's.

First a lawyer then a politician, Le Pen has served as a European lawmaker since 2004 and since 2010 as a regional councilor for the northern region of France, a hardscrabble land where she feels at home.

Born Marion Anne Perrine Le Pen in 1968 in a western Paris suburb, the youngest of three daughters, the far-right leader was weaned on family dramas.

Le Pen has written that she was "raised on honey and the acid of politics," a reference to her privileged life and the weight of her larger-than-life father and his defiant populism.

"To be the daughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen was not always easy," she said in a recent interview on the BFM TV station. But to be his daughter was to follow in his footsteps, she suggested, calling politics "the virus one has within."

An attack destroyed the family apartment building as 8-year-old Marine Le Pen and her sisters slept.

The French media relished recounting the divorce of her parents in her teen years. In a reflection of that bitter separation, her mother, Pierrette Lalanne, posed for Playboy in 1987, partly dressed in a maid's costume. The magazine quoted her as saying she was responding to her husband's Playboy interview in which he said she could become a housekeeper if she needed money.

For years, Marine Le Pen had no relations with her mother, but today "there is lots of love between Mama and me," she said.

Le Pen is nothing if not loyal. Old friends from her days studying law in Paris, members of a radical student group known for violence and anti-Semitism, hold crucial roles in her inner circle "and are at the center of an alleged party financing scheme. The affair, to be heard in court, raises unanswered questions about Le Pen herself as she balances radical forces within the party with people she has won over from the mainstream left and right.

For Le Pen, it's not her father but "eternal France" that inspires her.

"Like mother's love, the love of France is not explained, it is lived," she wrote in a 2012 book.

- (With AP inputs)