



By: TA | AP Insight

Marine Le Pen is seeking a way in court to remain a candidate for president in 2027



France's far-right leader Marine Le Pen denied any wrongdoing as she appeared in court on Tuesday to appeal an embezzlement **conviction**, with her 2027 presidential ambitions hanging on the outcome of the case.

Le Pen, 57, is seeking to overturn a March ruling that found her guilty of misusing European Parliament funds.

She was given a **five-year ban** from holding elected office, two years of house arrest with an electronic bracelet, a further two-year suspended sentence and a 100,000-euro (\$116,800) fine.

"I'd like to tell the court that ... we did not feel we had committed any offence," Le Pen told the three-judge panel. "The European Parliament did not play its role to warn us as it should have done" when the party hired its European parliamentary aides, she said.

"We have never concealed anything," she added. The room was packed with dozens of reporters and general public.

Leading presidential contender

Le Pen was seen as the potential front-runner to succeed President Emmanuel Macron in the 2027 election until last year's ruling, which sent **shock waves** through French politics. She denounced it as "a democratic scandal."

Her National Rally party has been coming out on top in opinion polls, and Le Pen alleged that the judicial system brought out "the nuclear bomb" to prevent her from becoming France's president.

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law.

Advocacy group Transparency France noted that her conviction came after years of investigation and a lengthy trial in which Le Pen and other party members were able to freely defend their positions.

The appeal trial, involving Le Pen, 10 other defendants and the National Rally party as a legal entity, is scheduled to last for five weeks. The panel is expected to announce its verdict later, possibly before summer.

Several scenarios are possible, from acquittal to another conviction that may bar her from running in 2027. She also could face an even tougher punishment if convicted anew — up to 10 years in prison and a fine of 1 million euros (\$1.17 million).

Doubt over political future

In March, Le Pen and other **party officials** were convicted of using money intended for EU parliamentary assistants who instead had other duties between 2004 and 2016, in violation of EU rules.

Some did work for the party, known as the National Front at the time, in French domestic politics, the court said.

In handing down the sentence, the judge said Le Pen was at the heart of a "system" set up to siphon off EU parliament funds — including to pay for her bodyguard and her chief of staff.

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The legal proceedings initially stemmed from a

2015 alert raised by Martin Schulz, then-president of the European Parliament, to French authorities.

The case and its fallout weigh heavily on Le Pen's political future after more than a decade spent trying to bring the far right into France's political mainstream.

Since taking over the party from her late father, **Jean-Marie Le Pen** in 2011, she has sought to shed its reputation for racism and antisemitism, changing its name, expelling her father in 2015 and softening the party's platform and her own public image.

Designated successor

The National Rally is now the largest single political group in France's lower house of parliament and has built a broad network of elected officials across the country.



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It is most well-known for its anti-immigration, nationalist stance and its rhetoric often targeting Muslims.

Le Pen and other party members also have long criticized the EU and its rules and campaigned for more national sovereignty, even while serving in the EU Parliament.

She stepped down as party president in 2021 to focus on the presidential race, handing the role to Jordan Bardella.

If Le Pen is ultimately prevented from running in 2027, **Bardella**, 30, is widely expected to be her successor.

His popularity has surged, particularly among younger voters, though some within the party have questioned his leadership.

Le Pen's potential conviction would be "deeply worrying for (France's) democracy," Bardella said Monday in a New Year address.