

Haider's resignation as leader of Austria's Freedom Party: a tactical manoeuvre

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The resignation by Joerg Haider as chairman of the Freedom Party (FPÖ) is generally seen as a tactical manoeuvre designed to improve the chances of the ultra-right-wing politician becoming Austrian chancellor at a later point.

On February 28 Haider unexpectedly announced that he was resigning as chairman of the FPÖ, a party which he has led since 1986 and which he has transformed from a fringe group into a party of government and the second strongest force in the Austrian parliament. He justified his step by claiming he no longer wanted to be regarded as shadow chancellor of the government in Vienna. "I wish to avoid a situation where our ministers are permanently suspected of checking every decision with the shadow chancellor in the province of Carinthia," he said.

As a further reason he raised the double burden of serving as party chairman and state president in Carinthia. Haider has emphasised that he has no intentions of retiring from politics, but instead will concentrate on the office of Carinthia minister president.

Haider's successor as party chairman will be the 39-year-old Susanne Riess-Passer, who is loyally devoted to Haider. She began her career in 1987 as press speaker for the FPÖ and became executive head of the party in 1996. Her caustic attacks on opponents of Haider won her the nickname "the king's cobra" inside the party. For the past month Riess-Passer has occupied the post of vice-chancellor in the coalition government of the FPÖ and the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP). She is regarded as a reliable caretaker for Haider's interests and is expected to continue this role as party chairman.

Haider's resignation from national politics has been assessed in some quarters as the first fruit of the

European sanctions levelled against Austria. Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel maintained that Haider's resignation was "planned to take some of the load off the government". Haider, he added, had given a "signal for national and international détente". For his part, Haider has denied that he bowed to international pressure in making his decision.

The real reason for Haider's tactical move must be seen in his attempt to publicly distance himself from the new Austrian government, since the latter has already run into problems. He has thereby opened up the possibility of playing at once the role of incumbent government and opposition. From Carinthia he can criticise and publicly put pressure on the national government, while at the same time pulling the strings in the background.

The ÖVP-FPÖ government has decided on a programme which stands in contradiction to Haider's pose as the defender of the "little man"—his main theme in the recent elections. At the heart of the government programme is balancing of the budget through massive cuts and redundancies in public services, as well as reductions in social benefits. Haider has loosened his ties with the government in order to divert the inevitable disappointment on the part of the electorate away from himself.

Additional factors include personnel problems inside the FPÖ. As is often the case with right-wing authoritarian parties, Haider has tailored the organisation to his person and has not tolerated anybody who might be capable of challenging him politically. This led to considerable problems when the FPÖ was called upon to select candidates for posts in the new government.

The first conflict emerged between Haider and Finance Minister Karl-Heinz Grassler, who refused to

donate a part of his wages to a party welfare fund. In 1996, in order to preserve his reputation as an advocate of the little man, the landlord and multimillionaire Haider demanded a pledge from all FP functionaries to give up all income from political office which exceeded \$4,300 per month. Grasser refused and was able to insist on his stance against Haider.

Then, after just 24 days in office, the 44-year-old justice minister, Michael Krüger, resigned. The official reason given was unflattering: he was “overtaxed”. Krüger, who drives a Porsche with the license plate number “LAW 1”, boasted in an interview that he had passed his school finishing exams by means of fraud, and later “shared” Miss Vienna with a friend.

His successor in the government, Dieter Böhmendorfer, can thank his close friendship with Haider for his unexpected rise to prominence. Böhmendorfer has represented Haider in court in a number of libel actions between Haider and the media.



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