

Germany: a political profile of new CDU chairperson Angela Merkel

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Angela Merkel was recently elected as the new chairperson of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), gaining 96 percent of the vote at the party congress. The same CDU functionaries who frenetically applauded Merkel for several minutes would not have considered such a scenario possible six months ago.

Merkel's meteoric rise to lead Germany's Christian Democrats came in the wake of a party finance scandal that nearly wrecked the organisation. Revelations of corrupt and illegal practices not only brought down long-time CDU leader and former Chancellor Helmut Kohl, but also his successor Wolfgang Schäuble.

With few exceptions, the German media is in awe of Merkel. They talk of a new "political star" and liken her election to a "cultural revolution" in the CDU. They marvel at her supposed attributes: at 45, she is described as a young woman; she comes from the East; she is a Protestant; and she has even been divorced. Rare features indeed!

Then there is her homey appearance: older CDU gentlemen are said to be delighted when a meek smile suddenly emerges from her frozen features.

What really characterises Angela Merkel? Why was she elevated to the pinnacle of the CDU? It is not so easy to answer this question, because in her 10-year political career Merkel has never spoken of her own political initiatives or conceptions. When she became families minister, and later environment secretary, she had the opportunity to carve out a higher political profile. Instead she remained colourless and avoided any conflict with her political mentor, Kohl.

It is impossible to find any significant political or theoretical insights authored by Merkel. Indeed, on the basis of her interviews, it is difficult to make out any independent political standpoint.

A glance at the biography of Merkel does not promise anything particularly illuminating, but it does give an

indication of the shape of the CDU today.

Angela Dorothea Kasner (Merkel) was born in 1954 in Hamburg. Shortly after her birth, her father, a Protestant minister, and her mother, a teacher, moved to the German Democratic Republic (East Germany—GDR).

Her father took over a parish in Templin in the state of Brandenburg. He regarded the Stalinist regime benevolently. However, at the time of the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 he joined the oppositionist *Neues Forum* (New Forum). Her mother joined the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and her brother became a member of *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* (Alliance 90/The Greens).

In her youth, Angela Merkel was an active member of the FDJ Stalinist youth organisation. After finishing high school she studied physics in Leipzig. From 1978 to 1990 she worked as a scientist for the Central Institute for Physical Chemistry at the East Berlin Academy of Sciences, and in 1986 she attained her doctorate.

There are no indications that she ever expressed any political opposition to the East German regime. If the GDR had not collapsed, she would have continued to exemplify a completely "normal, average East German biography" (in Merkel's own words).

So Angela Merkel came to politics almost by coincidence. More precisely, she had—like many other "democrats" in the GDR when the Wall came down—only one desire: to save her own skin and suffer the least possible damage.

At the end of 1989 she became a member of *Demokratische Aufbruch* (Democratic Awakening—DA), which, like several other opposition groups, was under the wing of the Evangelical Church. DA was led by the attorney Wolfgang Schnur and the priest Rainer Eppelmann.

Merkel rose to become the DA press spokeswoman. A short time later, Wolfgang Schnur was unmasked as a

Stasi (East German secret service) agent. DA subsequently broke up and those who supported the rapid introduction of capitalist market economics in the GDR moved as a group into the CDU.

But let Angela Merkel speak for herself: "My boss at that time and I absolutely wanted to get into politics, and so we both went in search of a party. He immediately got stuck into the SPD. But they sang such funny songs, like 'brothers, towards the sun, towards liberty'. I wanted to help with reconstruction."

She explains her motives for becoming politically active in the CDU as follows: "For me, three things were immediately clear after reunification: I wanted to get into the *Bundestag* (parliament), I favoured rapid German unity and I supported a free-market economy" (*Berliner Morgenpost*, 1998).

After the *Volkskammer* (East German parliament) elections on March 18, 1990, which established a CDU-led coalition government under the leadership of Lothar de Maizière, Merkel became a deputy government spokeswoman. In August she joined the CDU.

Günther Krause, who together with Wolfgang Schäuble had negotiated the unification agreement between the GDR and West Germany, and who later had to resign as CDU transport minister because of a corruption scandal, helped her become a candidate for the *Bundestag* in the CDU-dominated Stralsund/Rügen constituency. With 48 percent of the first round votes, she beat two candidates from the West to gain the nomination.

From then on, her ascent was rapid. It is well known that ex-chancellor Helmut Kohl built up "the girl", as he called her, in his own interests. People close to him could only advance if they were considered adaptable and obedient. Angela Merkel was both. Kohl personally chose the shy priest's daughter in order to polish up the image of the CDU in the East.

In 1991 Kohl brought Merkel into the cabinet. She became federal minister for women and youth. From then on she did not miss an opportunity to pay homage to the "Chancellor of German unity". Just a few months later, she won a majority of the votes at the party congress in Dresden in the election for CDU deputy chairperson.

Even if it is difficult to place Merkel within a specific wing of the CDU, it is not hard to demonstrate her clearly conservative and often reactionary political attitudes. When in government, during the debate about the disputed paragraph 218 limiting women's abortion rights, she voted with the fanatical anti-abortionists of the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU). She continues to

advocate grades in school for diligence and good behaviour, and the compulsory teaching of ethnology.

As environment secretary, she quickly established a reputation for herself with the Greens and environmental organisations as a "supporter of the atomic industry". Merkel approved the use of brutal force to ensure that the transportation of atomic material went unhindered. There were radioactive accidents in the case of the so-called Castor-transport, which led to the SPD and the Greens demanding her resignation. From Kohl, she learned how to sit out problems and political scandals.

She expressly supports the CDU's anti-foreigner campaigns in the upcoming state elections headed by Roland Koch in Hesse and Juergen Ruetters in North Rhine-Westphalia. The fact that the "blossoming landscapes" promised by Kohl in East Germany have become industrial deserts, rife with unemployment and social misery, has never particularly disturbed the young East German politician. In the style of her mentor Kohl, she shifts the consequences of her policies as far away from herself as possible.

Merkel is often praised for her pronounced instinct for power and her tactical abilities. She did skilfully and ruthlessly exploit the CDU's financial crisis to reach the pinnacle of the party. When in December 1999 she became one of the first leading party figures to dissociate herself from Kohl, the action was more a reflex act of self-preservation than a decision based on political principles.

"We East Germans knew how to come to arrangements with the powerful without becoming totally bound to them," she said in an interview. In this, Merkel embodies the worst characteristics of the German middle class: their reverence for the state and passive support for whoever is in charge.

It cannot be overlooked, however, that her opponents in the CDU/CSU—like party head Merz and the powerful regional party bosses Stoiber, Koch and Müller—have left the field open for her for the time being only because the real political struggle lies in the future. It is rather improbable that in the wrangling to decide who will be the conservatives' candidate for chancellor at the next elections that Merkel will make the running.



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