

Austria: Government limits democratic rights and boosts military spending

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The rightwing-conservative coalition government in Austria feels its position has been strengthened following the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. The entire political establishment is committed to a more aggressive foreign and domestic policy. Both government and opposition agree on using the attacks to further restrict democratic rights and to boost Austria's armed forces. The traditionally neutral country in future wants to participate in international military actions.

Only three days after the attacks in the US, Finance Minister Karl-Heinz Grasser (from the extreme rightwing Freedom Party-FPÖ) agreed to the purchase of 30 new fighter planes. This decision ended lengthy quarrels between Grasser and Defence Minister Herbert Schreibern, who is also a member of the FPÖ.

Schreibner had earlier demanded that Austria's antiquated Draken (Dragon) fighters be replaced, but this was blocked by Grasser. Based on his harsh financial budget, Grasser rejected the \$2 billion acquisition. Together with deputy Chancellor Susanne Riess-Passer (FPÖ), Grasser stressed that combating the deficit had absolute priority, and so justified extensive cuts in the social sector. Now nothing stands in the way of increased military spending, while simultaneously cutting welfare benefits.

Suddenly the long-running debate in Austria over a new foreign policy orientation received a fresh impulse. Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel (from the conservative Austrian People's Party - ÖVP) repeatedly stated that there could be no neutrality in the fight against terrorism. Since coming to power one-and-a-half years ago the FPÖ and the ÖVP have been aiming to end Austrian neutrality and move closer to NATO.

The ministry of defence had already presented a draft paper by its security experts in January this year. This

proposes a new security doctrine, including rapid military rearmament, an end to neutrality and participation in international military interventions. In recent months statements by the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) and the Greens have expressed reservations about these plans, but following the September 11 attacks they have signalled their willingness to reassess these questions.

The opposition parties expressed their unreserved solidarity with Washington and their full agreement with the impending military strikes using practically the same words as the government. Politicians of all parties agreed to over-flights across Austrian air space. During the Kosovo war in 1999 the government, then led by the Social Democrats, had prohibited NATO warplanes from flying over Austria. As Defence Minister Schreibern declared: "In my opinion it is unthinkable that this could happen again in the future".

As far as domestic policy is concerned, the coalition government is utilising the situation to justify and intensify its plans to strengthen the state apparatus and limit democratic rights. A parliamentary motion introduced by the ruling ÖVP-FPÖ coalition aims at creating a "National Security Council" in the coming weeks. This body will also include members of the opposition parties, enabling the "Security Council" to act as a kind of emergency government. The Social Democrats and Greens immediately declared their support for the proposal.

One week after the terrorist attacks, the Ministerial Council agreed to extend the law allowing the tapping of private phone calls, the bugging of private dwellings and the use of profiling methods in conducting investigations. Such measures had first been introduced in a limited form by the SPÖ-ÖVP government in 1997, but the initial law has now been sharpened and

the powers of the police and judiciary have been extended.

As anticipated, the most extreme proposals to restrict democratic rights came from the FPÖ. The FPÖ parliamentary faction chairman, Peter Westenthaler, demanded that all types of identification documents should now include fingerprints. This proposal would first apply to the i.d. documents of immigrants and asylum seekers, but would later be extended to all Austrian residents. Chancellor Schüssel put a block on the proposal, but said that fingerprinting all immigrants was “worth talking about”.

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After taking the first steps last year, Schüssel has now called for intensified collaboration between the police and military, the linking of their information networks and that both should be prepared for joint operations at home. This won Schüssel the full support of the Greens, who until now had more or less rejected such measures and posed as defenders of civil liberties. Now Green politicians like Peter Pilz agree with the need to strengthen domestic security in order to protect Austria from terrorists.

Behind the slogan “Fight Terrorism”, all Austria’s parties are moving further to the right and the entire political establishment is closing ranks. SPÖ leader Alfred Gusenbauer is a typical example. During a speech in Vienna, he stressed the “civilising effects” the US terrorist attacks were having on Austrian domestic policy and demanded that “petty-minded squabbles” be put aside to make way for a “renaissance of cooperation” between all parties.

Indications that Islamic fundamentalists apparently committed the terrorist attacks are also grist to the mill of the extreme right, with the government thereby attempting to justify its racist policies. Jörg Haider, state premier of Carinthia and de facto FPÖ head, called for asylum rights to be further restricted. He demanded that Europe should only accept asylum seekers coming from states that are part of the European Union, although this would practically exclude all asylum seekers.

Asylum seekers from other countries should wait outside Europe until they have been accepted. He cynically demanded an “agreement” with those third countries in which asylum seekers would be

“deposited”. Haider claims that the growing number of refugees and asylum seekers coming from Afghanistan—mostly women, children and old people fleeing because of the military threat to their homeland—represent a danger for Europe, which had to defend itself against terrorists “seeping in”.

Although Chancellor Schüssel and other ÖVP politicians publicly disagree with such proposals, pointing to international laws, behind closed doors the coalition government has long been discussing a further crack down on immigration rights.



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