

US war drive dominates Finnish elections

Niall Green
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Finland's opposition Centre Party, led by Anneli Jaatteenmaki, won a narrow victory over the governing Social Democrats (SDP) in the March 16 elections. The Centre Party took 55 of the Parliament's 200 seats and will lead talks to form a coalition government.

The last weeks of election campaigning were dominated by sharp exchanges on the Finnish government's stance on the war plans of the United States.

Jaatteenmaki accused SDP Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen of moving Finland too close to the US, potentially damaging relations with certain European allies. Jaatteenmaki went on national TV to accuse Lipponen of having pushed Finland into the pro-war and pro-US camp, saying, "The understanding in the United States is that Finland belongs to this coalition that they have set up." A press furore erupted when the US State Department pointedly invited Finnish Embassy officials in Washington for briefings from which Sweden, Germany and France were excluded.

Since the United Nations Security Council passed resolution 1441 in September of last year, Prime Minister Lipponen had been generally supportive of the Bush administration's stance on Iraq. However, as Franco-German opposition to the American war plans hardened, Lipponen has attempted to backtrack.

"We are very careful not to go and support any sides in these disputes," the prime minister stressed shortly before the country went to the polls.

Earlier Lipponen claimed, "Our starting point has been that it would not be sensible to come out in favour of any great power in a dispute in which an agreement can be reached. We support the UN and the UN Secretary-General."

Lipponen found himself out on a limb and in danger of alienating key allies within Europe. Also prior to the election he said, "There are two main concerns. First, what will happen to the European Union and to Euro-

Atlantic relations, and what will happen to the UN, which must also deal with issues other than the Iraq crisis. These are extremely important questions for a small country."

Following the delineation of Europe into "Old" and "New" camps by US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, the Finnish ruling elite has been struggling to decide which camp to join. The SDP showed itself as being split over whether or not to support a US attack on Iraq. Much of the party, including members of Lipponen's government, voiced concerns about being perceived to be in the "New Europe" camp. The country's SDP President, Tarja Halonen, insisted that there was no ambiguity on the Finnish position. Finland was committed to pursuing Iraqi disarmament through the UN, but the use of force would be acceptable if authorised by the Security Council. Halonen also stated that Finland's only contribution to an attack on Iraq would be to offer "humanitarian aid".

In contrast to the divided SDP division, the concern voiced by the Centre Party and the Greens that Finland was moving too close to the US found a resonance with an electorate generally opposed to war. The Centre Party gained seven seats from the last Parliamentary election in 1999, giving it a slim lead over the SDP and the Greens won an extra three seats instead of suffering losses, as had been expected.

Although the SDP gained two seats to give it 53 MPs, their partners in government, the conservative National Coalition Party, bore the brunt of voter dissatisfaction losing six seats, while the Left Party and the Swedish People's Party, both closely identified with the SDP, both lost seats.

The Centre Party was also able to capitalise on the SPD's record on unemployment, which has remained at around 10 percent for the last two parliamentary terms while youth unemployment is as high as 21 percent. Jaatteenmaki described unemployment as the

“acid test of the political system,” but proposed deeper attacks on the working class through tax cuts and low wages as the solution.

Despite their apparent differences, political commentators suggest that a Centre Party/SDP coalition government is the most likely final outcome of the extended post election horsetrading, with the new government dominated by the increasingly difficult task of defending Finnish corporate interests through maintaining good relations with both Europe and the US.



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