State elections in Upper Austria and Tyrol

Austrian voters reject government's attacks on welfare state

Markus Salzmann
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The regional elections in Upper Austria and Tyrol on September 28 were not only another disaster for the right-wing Liberal Party (FP), but also made apparent the widespread rejection of the anti-social policies of right-wing/conservative ÖVP/FP (Austrian Peoples Party, Austrian Freedom Party) coalition government. These were the first elections following the pension cuts carried through by Chancellor Schüssel's (OVP) government despite mass protests.

The election results were clearly a blow against the FP. In Upper Austria, the party lost 12 percent of its vote, only gaining 8.4 percent. The Peoples Party (43.4 percent) got about the same vote as they had received five years ago, and it is expected that Joseph Pühringer (ÖVP) will remain prime minister of the region. Both the Greens, who now are the third strongest party with 9.1 percent, and the Social Democrats were able to gain from the losses made by the FP. They improved their vote by 11.3 percent and obtained a total of 38.3 percent.

The selling of the steel company Voest-Alpine, which had been agreed to by the Austrian government a few weeks before, had a decisive influence on the election results. Although the SPÖ (Austrian Social Democratic Party) had only timidly criticised the complete privatisation of the company, it was able to gain votes among outraged workers. A statistic of the election shows that many people who had voted for the FP previously now voted for the Social Democrats. In the districts where many Voest workers live, the losses of the ÖVP and FP as well as the gains made by the SPÖ were especially high. The Greens mainly gained votes within the suburbs of bigger towns, the so-called Speckgürteln, where the majority of the population are in the high-income bracket.

In Tyrol, the rejection of the government's policies was expressed in the turnout for the elections—only 60.3 percent, an all-time low. In 1999, 80.5 percent of those entitled to vote had gone to the polls.

Under these conditions, the Peoples Party (ÖVP) won 49.9 percent of the vote and achieved an absolute majority of mandates (20 of 36), but they lost votes in absolute figures. The FP also had massive losses in Tyrol, only receiving 8 percent of the vote (compared to 19.6 percent in 1999).

The setback for both government parties in Tyrol was beneficial for the Social Democrats and the Greens. The SPÖ won 25.9 percent, and the Greens achieved their best ever election result (15.5 percent). The Greens in particular were able make remarkable gains in major cities. In Innsbruck, for instance, they obtained 26.9 percent.

Chancellor Schüssel (ÖVP) reacted with extreme agitation to this clear rejection of his government. He stressed that regional elections will have no influence on his policies, and that the social attacks—so-called "reforms"—will continue as planned.

Since the Second World War, no Austrian chancellor has confronted such a widespread opposition as Schüssel faces today. The overwhelming majority of the population rejects his political course. But while the chancellor is faced with popular opposition, he is being criticised within his own party for seeking confrontation instead of compromise. Following the outcome of these elections and growing governmental crisis, Schüssel is afraid that he might not have much time left; he is therefore stepping up the pace of his offensive against social gains. Together with his

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minister of financial affairs, Heinz Grasser (independent, former member of the FP), he is planning further cuts in pensions, continued privatisation of public companies and a radical reorganisation of the health services.

Widespread public opposition is also the reason why the majority of ministers of his own party are opposing Schüssel. His radical reform course is seen to be a danger for their secure majorities in regional parliaments. They also criticise Grasser, whose plans for social redistribution and tax cuts are creating financial difficulties for regional governments. The enormous loss of votes by the FP could lead to the collapse of the ruling coalition.

The rapid decline of the FP has brought the party to the verge of collapse. The FP is characterised by mass resignations and severe internal quarrels. The weekly magazine *profil* has already run the headline "Life before death."

In this situation, and immediately after the elections, the call for a "strong man" was loud inside the party, demanding the return of former party leader Jörg Haider. Together with some of the party's leading members, including Thomas Prinzhorn, all regional leaders of the FP more or less openly demanded the resignation of party chairman Herbert Haupt.

But at the moment, it is unclear whether Haider will answer to the call. Although he attacked the leadership of the FP and demanded the replacement of Haupt, his initial response has been to appoint his own sister to a leading position in the party and announce his readiness to lead the FP talks with the ÖVP over planned tax reforms.

Haider made clear the extent of the problems confronting his party when, in an interview with *News*, he described the FP as "bankrupt" and speculated that it is best to "wait for the end and then to initiate a new beginning without any old bias." This is the reason why he is concentrating on the regional elections in Kärnten, which are to take place next March.

Haider aims to lead his election campaign in opposition to the right-wing/conservative government in Vienna and thereby against his own party. His electoral material contains no reference to his party, the FP or the color blue, which is associated with the FP. The content of the FP's election campaign in Kärnten will be a populist attack on the neo-liberal policies of Schüssel and Grasser. If Haider wins that election, he could attempt to reorganise the party from Kärnten.

This would not be the first time in the FP's history this has happened. In the middle of the 1980s, before the elections in Kärnten, Haider launched an offensive against the former chairman of the party and vice chancellor, Norbert Steger. When the federal government fell apart, Haider toppled Steger and took over the chairmanship of the FP. Then he changed the party, which had had a liberal orientation under Steger, into a staunchly right-wing populist party that rapidly won ground in the 1990s under his leadership.

But in contrast to the 1990s, the party has for the most part politically worn itself out. In the past, as an opposition party with right-wing populist slogans, it was able to channel social discontent for its own reactionary ends. As a ruling party, this is becoming more and more impossible. The most important function of the FP was to shift the whole political spectrum in Austria to the right.

Under these conditions, the recent regional elections show a new political development. The Greens are offering their services to Schüssel as replacement for the FP. Several commentaries after the election spoke of a "conservative-Green option."

High-ranking representatives of the ÖVP, like regional president Josef Pühringer, regard the Greens at the moment to be a more stable partner than the FP for the job of implementing attacks on the social fabric. The Greens have already signalled that they would agree to a coalition government with the conservatives.

During the coalition negotiations following the last parliamentary elections, the Greens had already offered to take the place of the FP. If the Greens do participate in the state government of Upper Austria, it would strengthen the advocates of an ÖVP-Green coalition in Vienna.

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