

Germany: Wide divisions among Christian Democrats

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The ferocity of the recent internal party disputes within the Christian Social Union (CSU) has even surprised some of those involved. In mid-January, when Edmund Stoiber finally announced he would be leaving office as the Bavarian state premier and head of the CSU in the autumn, he hoped to stabilise the situation. But all attempts to bring the crisis under control through high-level talks and appeals for unity have failed.

The CSU, which operates exclusively in the state of Bavaria, is the sister party of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), and they form a joint parliamentary faction in the Bundestag (federal parliament).

The clash over the party presidency between the Bavarian State Economics Minister Erwin Huber and the Federal Economics Minister Horst Seehofer clearly shows how wide the rifts are inside the party—divisions that have been covered up by the party's authoritarian structures and secret dealings.

Most media comments have only dealt with the events superficially and have ascribed the dispute to a personal power struggle, intrigues and political ambitions. However, it is necessary to examine the crisis of the CSU in a wider historical context.

Like the CDU, the CSU developed after the Second World War not as a classical party with a clear programmatic line and a clearly delineated electorate, but as a melting pot of different parties and political currents—a so-called “peoples party” (Volkspartei). It addressed itself to the most varied social layers: farmers and artisans, but also workers and industrialists, traders and small manufacturers, civil servants and intellectuals, students, apprentices and pensioners.

This broad social orientation corresponded to a programme lacking any clear statements, and its nebulous formulations were drafted to be acceptable to

wide layers. It contained, however, two essential ideological attributes: Christian conservatism and hysterical anticommunism.

For many years, the various interests of the different social and regional groupings were counterbalanced through a sophisticated system of political patronage aimed at making concessions to all. Farmers and rural regions received extensive subsidies in the form of structural adjustment funds, and in the 1970s and 1980s, modern industries were established in some of Bavaria's large cities. In the early 1990s, Stoiber developed his concept of “laptop and lederhosen [traditional leather trousers]”—supposedly representing the reconciliation of modern technology and long-established conservatism.

German reunification in 1990 changed the situation in Bavaria, whose political significance at a federal level began to decline. The eastward expansion of the European Union led to the increasing diversion of funds from Brussels into the impoverished rural regions of eastern Europe, with less for Bavaria.

In addition, industrial crises were accumulating, which produced national headlines in the case of the disputed closure of the AEG plant in Nuremberg, the bankruptcy of BenQ and the Siemens scandal. The relatively low level of unemployment cannot hide the fact that the contrast between rich and poor is very great in Bavaria. The above-average cost of living in the large urban centres, particularly in the state capital Munich, has led to a situation in which what remains of the welfare benefit system has been depleted far more rapidly than in Germany's other regions.

These increasing social tensions have found their expression in the conflicts inside the CSU. The lower-ranking party functionaries can no longer dispense subsidies as they did in the past, but now must defend

new and ever more drastic cuts.

In the last state election in 2003, the CSU received 60.7 percent of the vote, the best result in its history, and won a two-thirds majority in the state legislature. But only two years later, in the premature elections to the Bundestag, it slipped to 49.3 percent, the worst losses for the Christian Democrats in all of Germany.

Ever since, the tensions inside the party have constantly increased and are being expressed sharply in the present struggle to succeed Stoiber. Bavarian Economics Minister Erwin Huber and federal Economics Minister Horst Seehofer both have ambitions to become party leader. Despite their long careers under previous CSU party chairmen Strauss, Streibl and Stoiber, they represent different tendencies in the CSU.

Huber embodies the neo-liberal wing of the party, which has increasingly determined the course of the CSU in recent times. In 1988, he was appointed CSU secretary-general by Franz Josef Strauss. Six years later, Stoiber brought him into the state chancellery. One year later, he became a finance minister and then headed the state chancellery.

His absolute loyalty to the party hierarchy and his arrogant and ruthless manner with those lower in the party structure earned him the title “general-purpose weapon.” This former inspector of taxes made a name for himself because he took decisions based exclusively on financial concerns and was resistant to considering other needs and interests.

Huber is the main architect of the austerity measures and “reforms” of the last years, which have, for example, meant substantial cuts in wages for civil servants and public employees in Bavaria. He was largely responsible for the election programme of the CDU/CSU in the last Bundestag elections and participated in the negotiations in Berlin that led to the formation of the grand coalition government with the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

Despite substantial popular opposition to the austerity measures expressed in the considerable loss of votes for the CSU in the last Bundestag election, and although the Bavarian state budget has been balanced, Huber announced that if he were elected party chairman he would continue with the harsh reforms.

On the other side stands Horst Seehofer, who likes to be called the “social conscience” of the party. Although

he is not generally opposed to the reform course, he is concerned that the attacks on the general populace be carried out more cautiously. His popularity among the lower-ranking functionaries in the party apparatus is because these “rank-and-file functionaries” increasingly bear the brunt of the radical pro-market policies. And they hope that with Seehofer in control, they can again gain a more socially minded image.



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