

Swiss election campaign reveals profound social divisions

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National elections are due to take place in Switzerland on Sunday, October 21, involving both chambers of parliament, the National Council and the Council of States. The current election campaign is the filthiest in the history of the country. The Swiss People's Party (SVP), led by the right-wing populist Christoph Blocher, has left its mark on the campaign with its thoroughly xenophobic slogans.

The most extreme example of the racist campaign conducted by the SVP is a poster that shows three white sheep on red soil with a Swiss cross, using their hooves to drive a fourth, black sheep beyond the border. The UN special ambassador for racism has officially intervened to protest the poster.

Parallel to the election campaign, the SVP is collecting signatures for a referendum "for the deportation of criminal foreigners." The party calls for the deportation of persons without a Swiss passport who are condemned to terms of imprisonment or accused of abusing the social security benefits system. In the case of underage adolescents, the entire family is to be deported.

An election video by the SVP had to be withdrawn when the young actors appearing in it sued because they had not been informed that the video was for SVP propaganda purposes. The short film, entitled *Heaven or Hell*, is nevertheless still being shown at SVP election meetings.

The film begins with the statement: "If Red-Green wins, then Switzerland will go broke." It shows violent scenes accompanied by horrifying music: A young person injects heroin and is then involved in a deadly traffic accident. The handbag of an old woman is stolen, school children are beaten and young women are intimidated and threatened with a knife. There is then a smooth transition to pictures of Muslims living in Switzerland, women wearing headscarves with numerous children, men lounging around and doing no work, interspersed with captions such as "Pension cheaters" and "Stop abuse!"

The film ends with the slogan, "SVP—my home, our Switzerland," depicting an idealised stereotype: well-dressed and satisfied urban dwellers, employees, railwaymen, farmers at work, researchers, Swiss banks, the army—and last but not least, the countryside, comprising picturesque lakes, mountains and postcard scenes. The message of the film is that the preservation of such harmony is entirely dependent on a harsh campaign against immigrants and those dependent on social security benefits. The film is revoltingly blunt in its message of hatred.

The election campaign of the SVP, which in terms of its propaganda and financial expenditure was the most expansive ever, has polarised the country. When the SVP organised a march in Berne on October 6, the medieval heart of the town was thrown into chaos. Young demonstrators opposed the SVP march, while the police reacted with tear gas, water cannon and arrests.

In the past, Swiss parliamentary elections were a rather inconspicuous affair. Regardless of the election result, the composition of the government remained the same. Between 1959 and 2003, the seven-member Federal Council (the Swiss government) was formed from the

four largest parties according to a "magic formula"—two from the Liberal-Democratic Party (FDP), two from the Social-Democratic Party (SP), two from the Christian-Democratic People's Party (CVP) and one from the Swiss People's Party (SVP). Since 2003, the SVP has occupied two seats in the Federal Council and the CVP just one.

The government presidency changes in annual rotation. Decisions are made on the basis of a majority and then presented to the public jointly by the parties. Government members remain in office until they decide to resign. In the event of new elections to the Federal Council, so many criteria have to be fulfilled—party membership, representation according to language, religion and constituency—that the election has more in common with a puzzle game than with a serious political decision.

At the same time, the authority of the federal government is limited. Many powers rest with the parliaments and governments of the 26 cantons (electoral districts) or with the municipalities. Popular referendums on important laws and decisions take place on a regular basis.

This so-called concordance democracy is the specifically Swiss form of social compromise, which prevailed in all western European countries during the post-war period. The fine-tuned system of federalism based on mutual consent held together a country that lacked the linguistic and geographical conditions for a nation and which is characterised by profound social and cultural differences.

Switzerland, with its 7.5 million inhabitants, has four official languages (German, French, Italian and Romansh) and two main religions (Roman Catholic and Protestant), which fought a civil war just 160 years ago. The country is home to the headquarters of major international banks (UBS, Credit Suisse) and global companies (Nestlé, Novartis, Roche) coexisting alongside rural areas where folklore is still a part of everyday culture. Highly developed branches of industry (mechanical engineering, precision mechanics, chemicals) are complemented by primitive forms of agriculture in the mountains.

Neutrality in connection with its banking codes made Switzerland wealthy. This neutrality made it possible for the country to trade with all sides during two world wars while its pledge of banking secrecy made it a point of attraction for large fortunes from all over the world. With a total of 3.3 trillion Swiss francs in customer deposits, the Swiss bank UBS remains the biggest single trustee of wealth worldwide. In addition, the country's natural beauty has encouraged a lucrative tourism industry.

As long as it was possible to protect its borders, the country was able to ease social tensions on the basis of its accumulated wealth. While the Swiss welfare state was never as extensive as in European countries with a strong workers' movement, unemployment was low and wage levels remained relatively high. Agriculture was highly subsidised and protected against imported goods.

The globalisation of production, the growth of the European Union and the end of the Cold War have thoroughly undermined this system. Profound divisions have emerged in Swiss society, and the rise of the SVP is a direct result of this.

Compared with surrounding countries, the unemployment rate in Switzerland is still comparatively low (3.3 percent) and wage levels high. But the overall numbers are deceptive. Social uncertainty, precarious employment and poverty have increased enormously.

Jobs have shifted to the service sector, in which part-time work, marginal forms of self-employment and low wages are very common. In 1971, 46 percent of all persons employed worked in industry with the same percentage in the service sector. Today the percentage working in industry has dropped to 24 percent, while in the service sector it has risen to 72 percent. The agricultural sector's share halved in the same period, falling from 8.2 percent to 4.1 percent.

The numbers of underemployed have greatly increased. In 2004, the figure of 178,000 officially unemployed was supplemented by an additional 378,000 underemployed; in reality, 13 percent of the active population were seeking full-time work.

According to one study, 7.5 percent of the active population comprise the "working poor"—i.e., they have work, but do not earn enough to live and support their families. The number of "working poor" is particularly high in the retail trade, personal services, agriculture and the hotel trade. Average wages in these sectors have fallen by 12 percent since the 1990s.

The number of insecure jobs has also increased. Unlimited work contracts have been replaced by temporary contracts, and part-time work has also increased. According to the welfare organisation Caritas, one tenth of all men's jobs are precarious and one fifth of all women's jobs are at risk.

Caritas also reports that 1 million people—i.e., one seventh of the Swiss population—were affected by poverty in the year 2005. This included 200,000 pensioners, 600,000 adults and more than 200,000 children and young people. Two years earlier, Caritas put this figure at 850,000. In Zurich—a stronghold for Blocher's SVP—23 percent of the population are estimated to be poor or threatened with poverty.

The opening of the borders to the European Union in 2002 has served to increase the pressure on working conditions and wages. The Swiss economy is urgently dependent on foreign workers. One fourth of those who earn their wages in Switzerland do not have a Swiss passport. In the 1960s, the proportion of immigrants was around 15 percent; after 1990, it rose to today's level of 20 percent.

Workers from foreign countries are primarily employed in poorly paid jobs in the building and hotel trades. Under the European Union, these workers are also increasingly employed in highly qualified jobs in medicine, training and management. Thousands of skilled German workers and university graduates are currently working in Switzerland.

At the same time, the tensions and fears unleashed by the social crisis are unable to find any progressive political outlet. The trade unions and Social Democratic Party are a firm component of the Swiss concordance system.

For half a century, the SP has been a loyal member of the bourgeois all-party coalition. Seventy years ago, on the eve of the Second World War, the trade unions signed a pact with the country's business federations in which they agreed to refrain from strikes and any other sort of militant measure and pledged to resolve all conflicts by mutual agreement with the bosses. Since that time, this armistice has more or less remained in place. Strikes in Switzerland are a rarity.

Under these conditions, Blocher's SVP has been able to channel social tensions and anxieties in a chauvinist direction.

The SVP incorporates all the divisions and contrasts of Swiss society in a bizarrely exaggerated form.

Christoph Blocher himself is a multibillionaire and one of the richest men in the country. The seventh of 11 children of a village priest, Blocher worked at first in agriculture, then studied law, made a career in the chemicals enterprise Ems-Chemie, and in 1983 became the major shareholder in the company. As an internationally active entrepreneur,

Blocher enjoys the support of major banks and other sections of big business.

Blocher's economic programme is "ultraliberal" in a free-market sense and calls for reductions of taxes, a strict austerity course, and reductions in social and other public expenditures. Predictably, he vehemently defends the Swiss system of banking secrecy against the European Union. He favours subsidies only in the agricultural sector in order not to offend the farmers.

The SVP election campaign is sponsored by donations amounting in the millions from financial heavyweights. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, which speaks of the "highly-professional election campaign" of the SVP, writes that the party has "Almost unlimited sums of money from unknown sources at its disposal—certainly not donated from its largest group of voters, those less educated and below-average earning Swiss."

The president of the board of directors of the Swiss bank UBS, Marcel Ospel (one of the country's highest paid managers, with 24 million Swiss francs per year), is a personal friend of Christoph Blocher and recently invited him to attend his wedding. Also sitting on the board of UBS is SVP national councillor Peter Spuhler. Amongst the media, the newspaper *Weltwoche* has degenerated completely into a mouthpiece for the SVP.

Although Blocher belongs to the circles of high finance and is supported by them, he has made his political career on the basis of a vulgar nationalism, which seeks to exploit the anxieties and prejudices of poorer, predominantly rural social layers. His election campaign appearances to have all the trappings of rural folklore: Swiss flags, costumes, cowbells and a billy goat marching out in front.

The SVP was originally a party of the rural lower middle class, the farmers and craftsmen in Protestant, German-language Switzerland. Its predecessor was the Farmers, Tradesmen and Citizen's Party (BGB), originating in 1936.

Through the 1980s, the conservative SVP—with a electoral share of between 10 and 12 percent—was the smallest of the four parties in the Federal Council. Blocher then transformed it into a right-wing populist protest party, with representation across the country and amongst all social layers, becoming the strongest party in Switzerland, with an electoral share of the vote of 27 percent (in 2003).

Blocher's ascent began in the banking metropolis Zurich, and for some time he encountered the resistance of the party leadership centred in the rural district of Berne. In 1986, he led a successful campaign against plans for Swiss entry into the United Nations, and in 1992 against the entry of Switzerland into the European Economic Area (EEA). Blocher's success in the popular referendum against EEA entry contributed substantially to his rise to prominence.

In 2003, the SVP finally became the strongest party in the Federal Council and forced the break-up of the old "magic formula." The party was awarded a second seat in the Federal Council at the expense of the CVP. Blocher himself entered the Swiss cabinet as minister of justice and police.

Since then, he has assumed the role of cabinet member and leader of the opposition at the same time. As justice minister, he introduced a new Asylum and Aliens law, which strips refugees without a passport of any democratic rights. At the same time, he has publicly attacked the work of the government, in which he sits.

In the process, the concordance principle has been reduced to nothing more than an empty phrase. The other parties, however, lack the courage to break their alliance with Blocher. Instead, they all stare at the SVP like the proverbial deer caught in the headlights.

The cowardice of the SP stands out in this respect. For the past four years, it has sat alongside Blocher in the government and has defended his policies—including laws hostile to foreigners—all in the name of the unwritten rules of "concordance democracy." The Social Democrat Micheline Calmy-Rey has even assumed the post of federal president this

year on the basis of the rotation system. The Social Democrats have never considered the possibility of resigning from government and conducting an open confrontation with Blocher.

Following criticism by the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva of the SVP's racist election campaign and poster, the other government parties rallied to close ranks behind Blocher. *Der Spiegel* commented, "The official statement of the Swiss government, the Federal Council, in relation to the UN is astonishing: 'The SVP campaign for a deportations initiative is protected by the principle of free speech.' "

The other parties reacted to the violent clashes in Berne by expressing their solidarity with the SVP. They promised to "unconditionally defend the right to free speech." Federal President Calmy-Rey told the newspaper *Sonntagsblick* that the right to freedom of assembly could not be endangered by a few hundred extremists. The Bernese city president, Alexander Tschäppät, also a Social Democrat, "vigorously" condemned the violence; saying free speech was the right of everyone in Switzerland, including the SVP.

The SVP responded with renewed rabid attacks on the Social Democrats and the Greens, declaring that the evidence was now in that "left-fascist violence" was triumphant over civil rights. This was "the fruit of Left-Green policies involving many years of featherbedding...and tolerating left-alternative excesses of violence."

Blocher is playing a dangerous game with his campaign for the insulation of Switzerland. The predominance of xenophobia and chauvinism could have repercussions for the country's tourism and banking industries upon which the Swiss economy is so dependent.

Propagating racism in a country like Switzerland, which is marked by linguistic and cultural variety, is playing with dynamite. It could easily backfire and tear the country apart—a process that can now be seen in bilingual Belgium. However, the fears that increasing social tensions could erupt into open class warfare are evidently so pronounced among the country's ruling elite that it is prepared to accept such risks.

At the same time, one should not overrate Blocher's influence. Public opinion polls indicate that the SVP has reached the zenith of its influence. They forecast the party will make either a small or no improvement on its 27 percent vote in 2003. The significance of this figure is also mitigated by the fact that electoral turnout has been less than 50 percent for a long time, while a fifth of the country's inhabitants do not have the right to vote because they lack a Swiss passport.

Blocher therefore only has the support of a small portion of the population, but is able to exercise considerable political influence because of the complete absence of any serious political alternative.

Meanwhile, signs are increasing that the end of concordance democracy is inaugurating a new period of class struggle in Switzerland.

Just a week before the election, militant strikes began in the building industry. On Monday, October 15, more than 5,000 building workers took part in a warning strike at 50 building sites in Berne, Geneva, Neuchâtel and in the Alps. Work stopped in front of the Bernese main station, as well as at the major building sites of NEAT (New Transalpine Railway Tunnel)—the largest construction project in Europe.

Among the approximately 36,000 building workers taking part in a strike ballot, 84 percent voted for a national strike for a new national contract agreement for the country's 80,000 building workers. The building workers are resisting increasing flexibility with regard to working times and the attempt to cut wages for new starters by 10 percent.

To find a progressive solution to its social crisis, Switzerland confronts the necessity of building a new political party that represents the interests of the working population. Any vote in favour of the Social Democrats or the Greens this Sunday will do nothing to stem the danger represented by Blocher. Only an international socialist perspective can provide an answer to the tasks and problems confronting the working population.



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