

Danish elections: Government remains dependent on far right

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The Danish Liberal-Conservative coalition, supported by the anti-immigrant nationalist Danish People's Party (DPP), achieved the slimmest of majorities in the November 13 elections. The snap poll was called by Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen two years ahead of schedule. In the 179-seat parliament, the alliance achieved 90 seats, one of those made up by the Unionist Party from the Danish Protectorate of the Faroe Islands.

Rasmussen's Liberal Party lost 6 seats, a hostile response in the population to his hard-line approach to immigration and tax cutting, as well as his proposed welfare "reforms." The DPP won a single additional seat, taking its total to 25.

The Social Democrats had their worst election performance in more than a century. The party's ever more open right-wing orientation and adaptation to policies put forward by the Liberal-Conservative coalition was repudiated by many voters, as it lost a further 2 seats to drop to 45.

The big winner of the election was the Socialist People's Party (SPP), which more than doubled its representation in Parliament to 23 seats from 11. This ostensibly left-wing party supports the bloc led by the Social Democrats. But the SPP proclamations in support of human rights and equality won support from growing numbers opposed to the Rasmussen government, the DPP, and those disaffected with the Social Democrats.

Also significant during the campaign was the emergence of the recently founded New Alliance, which was courted by both blocs in parliament as a possible coalition partner. Founded in May with the express aim of providing the Liberal-Conservative coalition with an alternative partner to the DPP and to move politics towards the "centre," it did much worse at the polls than expected, returning only 5 seats, having at one time been expected to reach 10 to 15 seats.

The New Alliance is led by Naser Khader, who came to prominence in Denmark at the time of the 2006 Mohammed cartoon dispute, when the right-wing *Jyllands-Posten* commissioned cartoonists to create the most offensive

images possible to Muslims and provoked anti-Danish demonstrations worldwide.

At the time, Khader formed the Democratic Muslims to oppose Islamic fundamentalism amongst Muslims. His New Alliance party calls for reduced taxes and increased foreign aid. Formerly a member of the Social Liberal Party, Khader founded the New Alliance in May with two members of the European parliament, one from the Social Liberals and the other from the Conservatives. The son of a Syrian and a Palestinian who immigrated to Denmark when he was 12 years old, Khader styles himself as a "fanatical Democrat" and has "democracy" tattooed on his arm.

In the run-up to the election, Khader stated that he wanted "to break up the bloc politics and reduce the influence of the Danish People's Party." His status as an immigrant who had "made it" in Danish society was much promoted by the media, while his rhetoric about increasing foreign aid was designed to give a friendly face to a regressive flat-tax proposal, to be set at 40 percent regardless of income.

Although the election campaign featured Khader and the New Alliance prominently (one commentator described the election as being more about appealing for the support of the New Alliance than about any real differences between parties), voters rejected this "centre" party, having concluded that its real agenda was to serve Danish business and support the attacks on living standards being prepared by Rasmussen.

Rasmussen had called an early election because of high opinion poll ratings and his desire to push through public sector "reform" with a new mandate. He also calculated that he had an opportunity to somewhat reduce his government's dependence on the DPP.

Denmark is currently reported to be facing an acute labour shortage. With unemployment levels at the lowest in 33 years, wages are expected to rise. To prevent this, Denmark hopes to import greater numbers of immigrant workers to expand the available pool of cheap labour. To this end, Rasmussen has in recent months softened his stance to immigrants with children, allowing them more freedom to

seek work in the Danish labour market. He also called for the reduction of the wage level that immigrants are required to earn to be allowed in to Denmark on a work visa from DKK450,000 (60,400 euros) to DKK300,000. Even these limited moves provoked denunciations from the virulently racist DPP.

The government hoped to rely on the New Alliance to create an alternative majority for measures the DPP opposes, while allowing the pressure on tax, welfare and democratic rights to be sustained. With the New Alliance doing less well than expected, Rasmussen has been forced to make somewhat cosmetic concessions to a range of potential allies, including the Social Democrats and the SPP. For example, a climate and energy ministry has been created to placate those calling for a focus on green issues. This department is expected to push plans to renew the Kyoto protocol and organise a UN climate conference to be held in Copenhagen in 2009. He offered other measures, such as a reduction on sales tax for fruits and vegetables as well as increasing Denmark's foreign aid contributions, a measure designed to placate the New Alliance.

Regardless of such minor concessions, the general orientation of the new government is clear. Reducing income tax is one of the main priorities for Rasmussen, and a commission has been set up to begin looking at ways of doing this. Rasmussen noted, "The rewards for working should be increased."

This will mean that public spending can be scaled back. The government has set up a new social welfare ministry to spearhead efforts to "streamline" the welfare system, making cutbacks to fund the tax cuts for the rich while those most reliant on public services and social welfare will be made to suffer.

Social Democrats leader Helle Thorning-Schmidt said of the government's proposed agenda, "There are definitely a number of excellent initiatives and the basis for a broad co-operation. But it depends on whether the government will listen to us, and we will have to test them on that."

Despite presiding over a relatively successful economy in a country with high standards of living compared with many European states, there are growing social tensions within Danish society. On the opening day of parliament, a demonstration estimated at around 50,000 gathered in Copenhagen to call for increased social services and welfare spending in opposition to the government's proposals for cuts.

The government is in negotiations with public service employees who are demanding a pay rise. Reports in recent weeks have exposed frustration among nurses at low pay. This follows closely on from strikes in Finland that resulted in a pay deal with a 28 percent increase over four years.

Politiken newspaper reported that nurses will be demanding a 20 percent wage increase from present base salary levels of DKK24,500 (around 3,300 euros) per month. The nurses pointed to their long working hours to back up their claim.

It is in this increasingly tense social environment that, despite differences with the Rasmussen government, the DPP is continually utilised to channel social frustrations behind its demagogic and racist attacks on both foreigners and democratic rights. DPP leader Pia Kjaersgaard is a hated figure following repeated openly racist denunciations of immigrants in general and the Muslim faith in particular. She requires a constant police guard. Although Rasmussen is now trying to put a little distance between his government and the DPP, it is the DPP's policies on immigration and democratic rights that he has adopted, with the result that the number of asylum seekers has dropped by 84 percent since 2001.

During the election campaign, the DPP infuriated Muslim groups when it used a hand drawing of Mohammed, in a clear reference to the cartoon dispute, printed on a poster that read, "Freedom of speech is Danish, censorship is not."

While the SPP has been the main beneficiary of leftward-moving sentiment in the working class, it has a record of entering governments with, and continues to support, the Social Democrats in parliament. Founded out of the crisis in the Danish Communist Party (DKP) following Krushchev's "secret speech" and the Soviet intervention into Hungary in 1956, it has since its inception been a reformist and nationalist party, embracing various forms of protest and single-issue politics.

However, in recent years, it has gone even further right. It supported a government led by the Social Democrats between 1992 and 2001. During this collaboration, it lent legitimacy to the EU during a 1993 re-vote on the Maastricht treaty by revoking its former opposition and supporting the treaty. It called for a "no" vote in the euro referendum of 2000 on an essentially nationalist basis. A break with all forms of nationalist politics, including the left variety advanced by the SPP, is fundamental in allowing the Danish working class to assert its independent interests, alongside its allies in Europe and internationally.



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