

Switzerland: Right-wing populist Blocher voted out of government

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The voting out of Justice Minister Christoph Blocher augurs the end of the Swiss system of government that has been in place over the last 48 years.

On December 12, the new Swiss parliament elected the seven-member Federal Council—which constitutes the executive government of the country. All seven incumbents were re-elected with the exception of Blocher who surprisingly did not receive enough votes to be confirmed to his post. In his place, members of parliament elected Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf, who like Blocher is a member of the Swiss People's Party (SVP), but is regarded as liberal in contrast to Blocher's right-wing populism.

The 51-year-old Widmer-Schlumpf, the Finance Minister in the canton of Grisons, had not even run for the post. She was elected by the combined votes of the Social Democrats (SPS), the Christian Democrats (CVP) and the Greens, who had secretly arranged the vote for Widmer-Schlumpf.

Despite substantial opposition from her own party, Widmer-Schlumpf accepted the result after one day of consideration. The SVP immediately expelled Widmer-Schlumpf and the second SVP minister Samuel Schmid from its parliamentary fraction, and declared that the party would go into opposition.

The head of the SVP, Caspar Baader, accused the assembled members of parliament of destroying the proven Swiss system of government on the basis of a "short-sighted delirium of power." The SVP would now function as a political opposition and exert pressure on the parliament and government through initiatives and referenda, he said.

Blocher explained that he was torn "between relief, disappointment and indignation". "I am leaving the government, but not politics," he exclaimed in parliament. During his term of office, there was "much

mudslinging and cover-ups which nobody was supposed to see"—all in the name of Concordance, good relations among colleagues and official secrets. Now he could finally say what he thought without restriction of any kind, he threatened.

The Swiss government now finds itself in the strange situation whereby the SVP occupies two of its seven minister posts, but these ministers do not have the support of the party's parliamentary fraction, and the party as a whole has adopted a position of outright opposition. The consequence will be increasing political instability.

In the parliamentary elections held in October the SVP received nearly 30 percent of the vote and is now the biggest parliamentary group in the National Council, where it has 62 of the 200 seats. Even if the liberal wing of the party breaks away and gives its support to Schmid and Widmer-Schlumpf, a systematic opposition by the right-wing majority around Blocher would utterly disrupt the Swiss Concordance system.

The so-called "Concordance democracy" is the specifically Swiss form of social compromise, which prevailed in all western European countries in the post-war period. Political decisions are not made in an open struggle between rival political parties, but rather through a finely balanced system based on seeking a common consensus. A central component is the all-party government, which has existed since 1959 in a barely changed form. According to the so-called "magic formula," the Liberals, Social Democrats and Christian Democrats could each fill two minister posts with one post for the SVP. The magic formula was changed for the first time in 2003, when a second SVP minister, Blocher, entered the government. The CVP lost one seat at the time.

One of the unwritten rules of Concordance

democracy is that ministers are always re-elected until they decide to stand down of their own accord. Blocher is only the fourth minister to be voted out of office in the 159-year history of modern Switzerland, and only on three occasions in the last 50 years has someone been voted into a post without the approval of their own party. On these occasions, the party in question was the Social Democrats, which in each case bowed down to the will of the other parties.

The first real cracks in the Concordance system emerged with the ascendancy of Blocher. Increasing social tensions could find no means of political expression in a system where all of the main parties—including the Social Democrats—work together, and Blocher took advantage of this.

With unrestrained populist demagoguery, he directed social fears into chauvinist channels. Xenophobia, law and order, and the rejection of the European Union are the cornerstones of his programme. In terms of economic policy the multibillionaire puts forward ultra-liberal positions: tax reductions, a restrictive budgetary course, cuts to social and other public expenditures. Blocher developed the conservative, land-based Protestant SVP into an aggressive party able to capture votes in the cities on the basis of expensive campaigns requiring considerable financial means.

The vote against Blocher led to rejoicing inside and outside parliament. About 1,500 demonstrators celebrated the result in front of the Bernese Parliament building. In the council chamber, the Greens and Social Democrats embraced each other. Such euphoria, however, conceals the basic fact that Blocher owes his rise to prominence to the bankruptcy of these parties, who do not dare to confront his right-wing nostrums, and, who in one fashion or another promote nationalism. This was so obvious that it became the subject of numerous political commentaries during the election in October.

The way in which Blocher has now been voted out—via secret agreements behind the scenes—will do little to weaken him. In fact, it provides him with an aura of martyrdom and anti-establishment credentials. The Greens, who increased their support to nearly 10 percent of the vote, have no representation in government after withdrawing their own candidate, Luc Recordon, to ensure Widmer-Schlumpf's election.

For her part, Widmer-Schlumpf is by no means a left-

winger. The daughter of a former minister does not belong to the Blocher wing of the party, but she lives in close proximity to his chemical factory and maintains good relations with him. Even the conservative *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* stressed that there was nothing left about Widmer-Schlumpf : “In terms of finance and economic policy, she defends a strictly bourgeois policy, which may well become a source of dispute among those who voted for her.”



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