

German government crisis intensified by president's resignation

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3 June 2010

The unexpected and sudden resignation of President Horst Köhler on Monday afternoon has further intensified the crisis of the German government. It is the second resignation by a top-serving politician in just one week. Five days earlier, Hesse Minister President Roland Koch (CDU) gave up his post in a deliberate affront to Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU).

But Köhler's resignation is much more significant. Although the functions of the German president are mainly of a ceremonial nature, as head of state he nevertheless embodies the authority of the state and of the entire political system. His task is often seen as maintaining people's confidence in the state and official politics in times of social and political crisis.

For this reason, the very manner in which Köhler resigned—without forewarning, without preparation and with immediate effect—created a political shock. Even the chancellor, the foreign minister and Köhler's statutory replacement—the president of the upper house of parliament, Jens Böhrnsen (SPD, Social Democratic Party)—were only informed two hours in advance.

Köhler then explained his decision in just three short paragraphs at a press conference called at short notice, and left his office immediately. He mentioned as the reason for his resignation the massive public criticism of an interview about the *Bundeswehr* deployment in Afghanistan.

On his way back from a visit to German troops in Afghanistan, the president had connected international military operations to Germany's economic interests. He literally said that “a country of our size, with its export-based economy and associated dependence upon foreign trade, has to realise that, when in doubt, or in emergency situations, it is also necessary to deploy our military forces to protect our interests.”

The defence of economic interests by military means has been an established practice for some time, but no leading politician has previously stated this for fear of aggravating public opinion. The media heavily criticised Köhler for doing just that, depicting him as a “babbler”, not mature enough for his position and unable to control his own remarks.

In his resignation speech, Köhler did indeed admit that his statement “could have led to misinterpretation”, but nevertheless considered the critique as *lèse-majesté*. “This criticism is entirely unjustified. It shows no respect for my

office”, he said in justification of his departure.

The entire resignation episode was suffused with an atmosphere of panic, such as occurs only in times of acute social crises. The journalists who were present were so bewildered that not one of them could even pose a question before Köhler took his wife's hand and left.

The resulting press reactions were indignant. “Probably no one has ever done so much damage to the office of the federal presidency as Horst Köhler did this Monday”, commented Kurt Kister, the deputy chief editor of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, under the headline “Köhler's desertion”. “He tossed away the highest position in the country just because he felt insulted.”

Other newspapers responded in similar fashion. Since then, there has been no end to speculations about what could have led to Köhler's sudden step-down. His thin-skinned character was given as a reason, along with his difficult personality and that he was never a trained politician.

Personality characteristics may have played a role, but they cannot ultimately explain why Köhler, after five years in public office, suddenly gave up his post. To really understand such a panicked action, one has to consider the surrounding circumstances—a climate of uncertainty, tension and great anxiety.

The resignation of Köhler is a manifestation of the crisis of the government of Angela Merkel (CDU) and Guido Westerwelle (FDP, Free Democratic Party), who “invented” him as a president. The previously publicly unknown financial expert, who had made a career in the Finance Ministry, as president of the savings banks and head of the IWF, was chosen to stand for president by the then leaders of the Opposition in 2004 during a private meeting in Westerwelle's flat. The idea was that he would pave the way for a conservative-liberal coalition to replace the incumbent Social Democratic-Green coalition.

In the end, Köhler was elected, but the conservative-liberal coalition did not materialise. In the general election of 2005, it lacked sufficient majority votes, so Merkel formed a grand coalition with the SPD. When, in 2009, the CDU eventually did form a coalition with the FDP, they were faced with a barrage of economic, social and foreign policy problems, which they were neither prepared for, nor able to address.

The deepest international economic crisis since the 1930s shattered all the certainties upon which German politics had been based since the end of the Second World War: orientation to Europe, close ties to the US, social consensus, a strong currency. Even the European Union and its common currency, central to the strategy of German foreign policy over the last 20 years, are now in question.

Chancellor Merkel has reacted to this with zig-zag course of action, bringing upon herself criticisms of being indecisive and ineffective. For a long time, she opposed financial help for highly indebted Greece, thus putting the existence of the euro at risk, only to make a sudden U-turn and agree to a bailout package of the unprecedented sum of €750 billion. And while she had anchored a public borrowing limit in the constitution under the Grand Coalition, she has hesitated until now to implement the concomitant public spending cuts. In contrast to her predecessor, Gerhard Schröder, she committed herself to a policy of close cooperation with the US, only to find that economic antagonisms with the transatlantic power are getting ever sharper.

Horst Köhler acted as a political and economic advisor to Merkel, but was just as clueless as she was. At one point he would speak in favour of stringent public spending cuts, at another point he would rage in a populist way about the “monstrous” financial markets. In between were long periods of silence. Leading civil servants deserted his office, and there were numerous reports about the chaotic conditions in the presidential office.

Meanwhile, the star of the CDU/Liberal coalition was plunging like a falling comet. It has lost its majority in the upper house of parliament, and support in opinion polls has fallen to 40 percent. Conflicts within the government parties have intensified. In this climate of general crisis, Köhler announced his resignation, thus delivering yet another blow to the chancellor.

According to information on Spiegel Online, Merkel was shocked by Köhler’s decision, and by the obstinacy that he showed. She had tried in a telephone call “with unusually dramatic words” to persuade him to change his mind. She warned him that such an unprepared and unplanned step could trigger a constitutional crisis. The confidence of citizens in the highest state office and in politics in general could be badly damaged, she emphasised. She told Köhler that he was laying himself open to attack, if people couldn’t understand his reasons for resigning. She implored him “many times” to rethink his decision. But he remained adamant.

It is hard to predict how this political crisis will develop further. It is not to be ruled out that the CDU/Liberal coalition, or even Merkel herself, will fall by the wayside. In leading industrial circles, there are loud voices calling for the return of the SPD or the Green Party to political responsibility to firmly implement social spending cuts.

In any case, such crises are dangerous, as long as the working

masses have no political voice of their own. The last years of the Weimar Republic were characterised by the decline and collapse of the bourgeois parties, until the economic, military and political elite finally decided to make Hitler chancellor. The failure of the SPD and the KPD (German Communist Party), who had split and paralysed the working class, instead of uniting it against the Nazis, made this possible.

Today, the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party are once again determined to defend the capitalist system with every means at their disposal. They are prepared to take up government responsibility, to carry out budget cuts and to implement the related spending cuts against workers, the unemployed and pensioners.

So long as the working class does not intervene independently, the “solution” of the crisis will inevitably take on an increasingly reactionary and authoritarian form. The public debate about the introduction of “citizen’s labour”—a form of forced labour to be imposed on unemployment benefit recipients—is a sign of this, as are the proposals being made for massive cuts in social spending. And discussion about deploying the military in defence of national economic interests, kicked off by Horst Köhler, will continue after his departure.

The resignation of Köhler, the trailblazer for the CDU/Liberal coalition, is symptomatic of a deep crisis in ruling political circles. But this affords no grounds for complacency. Rather, it should act as a spur to build a new party that shows a way out of the crisis in the interests of working people. That is only possible on the basis of a programme that replaces capitalism with socialist society, a society that organises production to meet social needs and not the profits of banking and business concerns.



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