

Right-wing Alliance inflicts defeat on Sweden's social democrats

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Sunday's parliamentary elections in Sweden saw the right-wing Alliance achieve victory, with 49.3 percent of the vote and 172 seats. They fell just short of a majority, meaning that Prime Minister Frederick Reinfeldt will need support from outside his coalition.

The Social Democrats dropped to an historic low, with just over 30 percent of the vote. Although final results will not be available until Wednesday, when postal votes are counted, the decline represents the worst result for the Social Democrats since 1914. As an illustration of the sharp decline the traditional party of government has undergone, at the 2002 elections over 40 percent of voters backed the Social Democrats.

As a whole, the opposition Red-Green Alliance received the support of 43 percent of the vote, with the Greens support increasing slightly. Social Democrat leader Mona Sahlin summed up the sentiments of the opposition: "We had a bad election, a very bad election. We were unable to win back voter support".

The vote for the Alliance was not an endorsement of its policies. Although the Moderates' support rose to 30 percent, the other three parties fell back with the Christian Democrats, receiving less backing than the far right Sweden Democrats.

The result means that the right-wing has secured a second term in office for the first time in over 80 years, ending an era in which the Social Democrats dominated politics. The party's decline reflects the end of a whole period in which it was possible to advance a perspective of national economic regulation coupled with a relatively generous welfare state. Since the 1990s, the Social Democrats have turned away from the defence of the welfare system and government intervention in the economy. Under the leadership of Göran Pärsson, who led the Social Democrats as prime minister until 2006, the welfare state was

systematically undermined as the way was prepared for a vast privatisation of state-owned companies, which the Alliance launched on taking power.

The move of the Social Democrats to the right, replicated by social democratic parties internationally, brought a corresponding decline in its support amongst working people. From a position of unchallengeable dominance in parliament, Sunday's result saw the party virtually neck and neck with the Moderates, who only eight years ago were receiving less than half of the vote of the Social Democrats.

The decline of the Social Democrats was the main theme in the press on Monday, with *Dagens Nyheter's* editorial entitled, "The end of an era". The *Svenska Dagbladet* declared that Sweden's political system had been altered fundamentally, with the main features being "a centre-right government without a majority, a crashed social democracy, and a kingmaker party with roots in the far right".

This was in reference to the return of MPs from the far right Sweden Democrats for the first time. The party received 5.7 percent of the vote, surpassing easily the 4 percent barrier for seats in the Riksdag (parliament). With 20 seats, the party could hold the balance of power, although Reinfeldt has consistently ruled out cooperating with the party, which espouses anti-immigrant chauvinism.

Instead, Reinfeldt hinted that his previous hostility to collaborating with the Greens could be set aside when he reached out to the party on Sunday night. Centre Party leader Maud Olofsson echoed this, stating that what was required was an "opposition that faces up to its responsibilities"—a comment clearly aimed at the Greens.

Olof Manner, an analyst with Royal Bank of Scotland in Stockholm, stated that he expected negotiations to

take place in spite of statements Sunday by Green co-leader Maria Wetterstrand expressing opposition. As Manner pointed out, such statements were part of the bargaining process. “It goes with it. It does not change the situation”, he said Monday.

Expressen reported that Reinfeldt may drop two ministers from his previous government, Financial Markets Minister Mats Odell and Infrastructure Minister Asa Torstensson. If confirmed, the latter dismissal could be an attempt to win Green party support, since the party has focused on infrastructure spending to deal with environmental problems.

Peter Eriksson, the co-leader of the Greens with Wetterstrand, was quick to make clear that talks with the Alliance were possible. He told *TT* on Monday, “We have to be able to talk with each other after an election result which is uncertain. But it is reasonable that we wait until the election result is complete”.

He went on to warn that Reinfeldt’s proposal to govern in a minority “worries me”, adding, “they underestimate the problems in the (current) situation”.

The Greens are utilising the far right vote to justify collaboration with the Alliance and possibly all the major parties. Eriksson proposed that all of the parliamentary parties except the Sweden Democrats should be involved in negotiations. “If Fredrik Reinfeldt gets in touch, then we will suggest that deeper and broader contact is taken with all the Red-Green parties,” he commented. “We think it is reasonable that the largest party in the parliament (the Social Democrats) should also take part.”

Prior to Sunday’s vote, the Greens had indicated their willingness to back a rightwing government. In a vote of its regional party heads, a majority of 18-8 supported a plan to back the Alliance, which was again framed as a means of keeping out the Sweden Democrats. Although Eriksson maintained that the Greens would continue to campaign for a Red-Green victory, the decision and the campaign as a whole demonstrated that no substantial differences separated the Greens from the Alliance parties.

For their part, the Sweden Democrats have sought to assure Reinfeldt and the Alliance parties that they are willing to enter talks, and that they will not cause problems for a minority government. Party leader Jimmie Akesson met with the speaker of parliament on

Monday, and stated afterwards that he was awaiting contact with the Alliance.

If these manoeuvres fail, and the only means by which the Alliance can gain a parliamentary majority is through the support of the far right, this would happen in order to avoid calling fresh elections.

None of the parties wanted to raise the issues confronting working people, most notably the global economic crisis. All sought to portray Sweden as an exception that had avoided and would continue to avoid the full impact of the capitalist crisis. On this basis, both the opposition and the Alliance put forward a number of spending commitments and tax breaks to the electorate. No reference was made to the fact that the fortunes of Sweden’s economy are closely bound to that of Europe, or of how the deepening of the crisis will impact upon Sweden.

When this takes place, whichever combination of parties sits in government, they will be compelled to press ahead with the type of austerity already seen around the world. It is for this reason that a government with a workable majority in the Riksdag is being pursued with such urgency.



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