

The rise of the Sweden Democrats and the Swedish far right

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30 September 2010

Elections on September 19 resulted in the far-right nationalist Sweden Democrats (SD) increasing its support to nearly 6 percent of the vote, entering parliament for the first time and claiming 20 seats.

On September 20, the day after the Swedish general election, between 5,000 and 10,000 people gathered in Stockholm to protest against the SD's entry into parliament. The Swedish newspaper *Aftonbladet* announced that the streets were filled with outraged people yelling, "No to racists in our parliament!"

Hostility to the SD was displayed throughout the election campaign, with a number of their election rallies abandoned when larger crowds of counter-demonstrators gathered at the planned location.

The day after the demonstration, it was announced that the personal information of 5,700 people who had signed an application expressing an interest in joining the Sweden Democrats had been hacked into and released online.

Faced with such high levels of public opposition, Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt has been forced to state that his right-wing Alliance will not work with the SD. Reinfeldt told *Dagens Nyheter* (*Daily News*): "It is the responsibility of every party in the parliament to do their best in restraining the SD's politics."

This is a call that has been echoed by other party leaders, including the Greens, who have urged Reinfeldt to negotiate with the Social Democrats in order to exclude the far right.

The Sweden Democrats' main goal is a 90 percent reduction of immigration. Immigrants who are already in Sweden would not be able to bring over family members, and many seeking residence will be sent back to their country of origin. This will have an impact on people in serious danger if they return home, with large

numbers of Iraqis, Somalis and Kosovars having settled in Sweden. When asked about its immigration policies, the Sweden Democrats' leader, 31-year-old Jimmie Åkesson, said, "It is not a matter of course that families unite in Sweden. Our opinion is that they might as well unite abroad."

Support for the party came mainly from rural areas in the south of the country. Lower levels of support for the SD were registered in urban areas, the one exception being Malmö, a city with high levels of immigration. In some areas of Stockholm, the party failed even to obtain the 4 percent required for parliamentary representation.

One of the reasons behind the SD's admittedly limited increase in popularity is its attempt to channel public anger over spending cuts into opposition to immigration. In the context of the massive state bailout of the banks, the SD ran on the basis of cutting support for immigrants to provide for native Swedes. In an election advertisement, which was banned by some media outlets, a hobbling pensioner was depicted struggling to keep up with a crowd of burqa-clad Muslim women who were rushing to collect state funds.

Appealing to those workers suffering from the recession, the SD claimed that 78 billion kronor (US\$11 billion) could be saved by the government in four years from money "wasted" on immigration. This money could instead fund increased social spending and a decrease in tax payments by workers. The SD ignores entirely the fact that the cuts imposed by the Alliance government since 2006 have been the direct result of support given to the financial elite during the economic crisis.

Among international demands made by the SD is a complete withdrawal of Swedish troops in Afghanistan

by 2013. At the same time, Åkesson has beaten the anti-Islamic drum, writing in *Aftonbladet*, in October of last year, “Islam is the greatest threat to Swedish democracy since World War II, and I will do everything in my power to stop it from spreading during the 2010 election.”

The party’s past indicates strong links to former Swedish Nazi members. Stieg Larsson, author of the international bestseller *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, published a book in 2001 entitled “Sweden Democrats—the national movement”. Larsson indicated that the Nazi and fascist traditions of the Sweden Democrats have only changed forms from generation to generation and will always be central to its political values.

Before changing its name to Sweden Democrats, the SD was originally a nationalist movement created by Leif Ericsson in 1979 called Bevara Sverige Svenskt (BSS, Keep Sweden Swedish). Ericsson’s successor as party leader, from 1989 to 1995, was Anders Klarström, a former member of a Swedish neo-fascist political party called NRP, founded in 1956.

It is not the first time an anti-immigrant nationalist party has gained seats in the parliament in Sweden. Nearly 19 years ago, an anti-immigrant party called Ny Demokrati (New Democracy), with its leaders Bert Karlsson and Ian Wachtmeister, gained 25 seats in parliament with 6.7 percent of the vote. It coupled its anti-immigrant nationalism with a free market agenda, including calls for government spending cuts and privatisation.

Between 1991 and 1994, it gave tacit backing to the minority right-wing government of Carl Bildt, which relied on New Democracy’s votes in the Riksdag although it refused to enter a formal coalition. As a result, in the 1994 elections, the party secured just 1.4 percent of the vote, failing to reach the 4 percent threshold for Riksdag representation.

The former leader, Ian Wachtmeister, explained to *Dagens Nyheter*, “The Sweden Democrats are in the exact same position as we were. They are experiencing the same bullying by the other parties as we did.”

Whilst this may be the case in public, a deal with the SD is entirely possible. Even if a formal agreement is not reached with Reinfeldt, the possibility of the Alliance governing in a minority with the tacit backing of SD, much like the New Democracy and Bildt in the

early 1990s, cannot be ruled out.



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