

Berlin elections: What does the “BIG Party” represent?

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The Berlin state elections have witnessed the participation of a new party, which is aimed in particular at voters of immigrant origin. The Alliance for Innovation & Justice (BIG) is campaigning for votes especially in troubled neighbourhoods with a high proportion of immigrants. As its name implies, the party is seeking to present itself as progressive, but in fact it advocates a very conservative programme.

The party is gaining support in response to the xenophobic theories of the social democrat Thilo Sarrazin, against which it argues on its posters. According to its own account, and despite its relatively short life span, it already has 1,000 members.

Although the BIG Party campaigns for “equal opportunities, equal treatment and recognition in all areas of life”, claiming that it wants “to give a voice to disadvantaged immigrants and the unemployed”, its executive staff are mainly Turkish-born entrepreneurs, small businessmen and the self-employed.

It maintains close links to Islamic organisations and associations, even if it does not present itself as an Islamic party, and advocates a multicultural society. In matters of national security and sexual morality, BIG puts forward extremely conservative positions, similar to those found on the right wing of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

The BIG Party is fully committed to capitalism. It rejects anything that even hints of socialism. It is against this background that its claims should be considered to represent “all citizens living in Germany”, and that it favours the equal treatment “of all people in our country”.

Real equality and solidarity between people of different backgrounds is only possible on the basis of a socialist programme that is directed against social inequality and the dictates of the banks. BIG tries, however, to win workers from immigrant communities to a party that holds religious values and represents the interests of a layer of emerging Turkish entrepreneurs. In this way, BIG divides the working class.

BIG is clearly oriented to the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP), as is indicated by the similarity of their names. The AKP of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has won votes in the slums of the big cities and among religiously oriented sections of the population. As a party of government, however, the AKP aggressively advocates the interests of the Turkish bourgeoisie in economic, domestic and foreign policy.

BIG’s programme: Conservative Islamic policies

The BIG Party was created by the merger of three regional voters’ associations in Cologne, Bonn and Gelsenkirchen, which had won two council seats in the municipal elections in 2009 in Bonn and Gelsenkirchen. It was founded in Cologne in 2010 and participated in the state elections in North Rhine Westphalia; with a vote 0.2 percent, it failed to clear the 5 percent hurdle required for representation in the state legislature.

Its supporters and power brokers at the time of its formation, according to *Der Spiegel*, included the Union of European-Turkish Democrats (TSO), which is regarded as the “European arm” of the AKP. In the state elections in North Rhine Westphalia, it called on all ethnic Turkish voters to support BIG. The Islamic Community in Germany Association also supported BIG.

Even Milli Görüs and other Islamic organisations have presented sympathetic reports about the BIG Party or call for its election.

The party has seven state associations and 35 district organisations. According to its website, its members come from 21 different nations. It also claims that 20 percent of its members are of German origin. Sixty percent were born in Germany but have immigrant parents, while 20 percent are immigrants.

Its programme raises some issues where immigrants are obviously disadvantaged.

For example, it calls for community schools and more bilingual schools, and advocates Turkish be taught as a second language in the classroom. It argues that this would also be good for business with the rising economy in Turkey. It calls for longer joint schooling and early childhood language development and promotes the education for women. In North Rhine Westphalia, however, it also supported the CDU and Free Democratic Party university policy of increasing autonomy and privatisation, as well as the policy on tuition fees.

In economic policy, BIG rests partly on Islamic ideas, such as an interest-free banking system. It justifies this demand with the need for fairness and denies any religious motivation. The promotion of small business is one of its key demands.

Its positions on marriage, the family and family policy are very similar to those of conservative CDU supporters. For example, BIG argues that the special protection of the family must remain as the backbone of society. “Here we hold the same position as the CDU.”

In Berlin, BIG is campaigning against sex education being included in the curriculum in primary schools, which is also intended to include age-appropriate lessons about same-sex love and relationships.

A pamphlet in German and Turkish warns against “gay lessons”, in which the Berlin school authorities want to teach first-graders words like “Dark Room” and “masturbation”. “The promotional display of gay lifestyles in the classroom undermines the right of parents to pass on their own values. We are no longer allowed to decide what we want to protect our children from”, it states.

The Kreuzberg candidate Ismail Özkanli used Facebook to recruit “dynamic members and students” to distribute leaflets against “gay lessons” and to protect the children of Berlin against “immorality”.

BIG Secretary General Amin Thomas Bongartz clearly expressed the party’s views on domestic security in the North Rhine Westphalia elections. According to him, the existing security laws with their restrictions on personal freedom and fundamental rights were “very good”, saying they were “capable of further development”. The individual should “submit” to the overall interest of domestic security. Security is the basis for justice and innovation, he said.

The party leaders: Wealthy and establishment figures

The chair of BIG, Haluk Yildiz, has been a management consultant and is a member of the Bonn city council since 2009. He is a devout Muslim who prays five times a day and is married to a German journalist. He was born in Germany, where his parents worked as doctors for a while.

Yildiz undertook German studies in Turkey, also working part-time as a tour guide, and dealing in machinery and textiles, and chartering aircraft. In Germany, he studied business and later comparative religion and Islamic studies. By his own account, he was also active in the banking sector and as a consultant.

Yildiz first became a practicing Muslim in Germany in the 1990s. As he said in an interview with the *Kölner Stadtanzeiger*, religion was for him decisive in the “search for identity in a foreign country”. He has been a founding member and initiator of several Muslim organisations.

He founded the Islamic Student Association in 2001 and in 2006 the Council of Muslims in Bonn. The latter was founded at the premises of the Muslim Social Alliance (MSB), whose chairman Hassan Özdoğan was a former board member of the Islamist movement Milli Görüş, and is a close associate of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Özdoğan is also chair of the European-Turkish Democrats (UFDT), which supports BIG.

According to Yildiz, the controversy over the cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed led to the founding of the Council of Muslims. The founding members of the council also included two well-known Islamist mosque associations. Yildiz believes extremist Muslims should not be marginalised, but engaged in discussion.

In 2009, the Alliance for Peace and Fairness (BFF) emerged from the Council of Muslims, and is one of the three founding organisations of BIG. The BFF took part in local elections in Bonn, winning two seats on the council.

BIG’s lead candidate in Berlin is Misirlioglu Ismet, the long-time head of the Berlin office of the orthodox Islamic charity “Islamic Relief”.

A graduate electrical engineer, he was born in 1966 in Samsun, Turkey, and has lived in Germany since 1984. He enjoys an excellent reputation among his co-religionists, and was one of the initiators of the Round Table of Muslim Organisations in Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg. Islamic Relief is an international organisation that manages the so-called zakat. These are alms payments made by wealthy Muslims as required by the Koran. Islamic Relief is also calling for the election of BIG.

Most of BIG’s other candidates come from better-educated and relatively affluent middle class layers, and BIG does not seem to be short of money, if one examines its election campaign material.

Its list of candidates includes:

No. 2 on the party’s slate in Berlin is the dentist Prof. Dr. Ismail Özkanli. He was awarded the title of professor by the rather dubious World Information Distributed University in Brussels.

The constituency candidate in Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg Ibrahim Yadikar operates as a businessman and entrepreneur.

The homepage of Yusuf Bayrak, who ran as an independent candidate in Neukölln for the Bundestag in 2009, links to a “variety of world merchandise traders” and other businesses. He earns his living as an importer of goods from China, and is considered a devout Muslim and representative of conservative values.

Party chair Yildiz says that the voters would only accept so-called “successful migrants”. Those who have not demonstrated success in German society had no chance in politics, he states.



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