

Germany: New elections in North Rhine-Westfalia

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Last week, the state parliament in North Rhine-Westfalia (NRW) unanimously agreed its dissolution. Early elections will now be held on 13 May in Germany's most populous state.

Following the end of the coalition government in the Saarland and the resignation of federal President Christian Wulff, this is the third unscheduled election so far this year. The hectic manner in which the ruling elite is changing horses midstream and forging new coalitions points to the fierce class battles that are now on the agenda throughout Europe.

The state executive in NRW has employed deceit and manoeuvres to bring about the early elections. It wants to establish a more stable coalition in order to prepare for the upcoming social attacks on the general population. But the significance of these events goes far beyond NRW.

Up to now, the Social Democratic Party-Green Party minority government of Hannelore Kraft has relied on the Left Party, which supported its budgets in 2010 and 2011. In the coalition's first year in office, the Left Party supported 300 government motions. Last year, the SPD-Green coalition increasingly came to rely on the votes of the Free Democratic Party (FDP), which, facing low poll numbers and the fear of new elections, was prepared to grant almost all concessions.

The government was in the comfortable situation with the 2012 budget that both the FDP and the Left Party had pledged their support, subject to a few amendments.

The FDP had initially abstained on the first vote in the budget and finance committee. After criticism from the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), FDP parliamentary chair Gerhard Papke devised a plan whereby the party would vote against the individual ministerial budgets on the second reading, and then, after negotiations with the SPD and Greens, would finally give its agreement in the decisive third reading in late March.

The Left Party announced a similar procedure, after

Prime Minister Kraft failed to invite the party for talks, despite the offers of the Left Party parliamentary leader Wolfgang Zimmermann.

Despite this secure position, the state government decided to initiate the dissolution of parliament and force new elections. First, it signalled approval for the plans of the two opposition parties, only then, just one day before the vote, tabling a legal opinion, according to which the plans of the FDP and Left Party contravene the law. According to the legal report drawn up by the state administration, it is not permissible to reject the individual ministerial budgets and then later pass the state budget in its entirety.

On Tuesday morning, state President Eckhard Uhlenberg (CDU) was informed about it and handed a written legal paper. Uhlenberg then informed the parliament presidium and the heads of the parliamentary factions of all parties.

Neither the FDP nor Left Party were able to overturn their planned action within a day. The Left Party wanted to consult its membership at a state convention at the weekend regarding how to vote on the budget. Therefore, both parties voted against.

Prime Minister Kraft has since used the legal report to declare the budget failed. Without approval, she is no longer prepared to lead the government. Her faction tabled the vote for the dissolution of parliament, which was adopted unanimously.

It is most likely that the FDP will be no longer represented in the state legislature following the elections on 13 May; the Left Party could suffer the same fate too. In a survey by polling organisation Infratest dimap on Wednesday last week, the FDP received only two percent support and the Left Party four percent, putting them both below the five percent hurdle for parliamentary representation.

What most of the media described as being the result of

a "gaffe" or a "breakdown" was actually a deliberate action by the government. The two authors of the legal report, Hans-Josef Thesling and Olaf Schade are not only members of the CDU and SPD respectively, but are also close to their parliamentary fractions, so it is highly unlikely that they are not working together with them.

Until a few years ago, Thesling worked in the State Chancellery, but was still appointed by the then CDU parliamentary president Regina van Dinther to the state administration. Olaf Schade had been legal counsel for the SPD faction and a personal advisor to the current SPD parliamentary vice-president Carina Gödecke when she was manager of the SPD parliamentary group.

The legal report used to justify the dissolution is anything but uncontroversial. The rejection of individual plans in the second reading does not necessarily abort the budget process by itself, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* said, based on the evaluation of various constitutional experts.

Rainer Wernsmann, professor of constitutional law and budget expert who has conducted legal proceedings for both the SPD-Green government and its CDU-FDP predecessor, questions the relevance of the validity of the budget. A breach of the rules of procedure do not make the budget unconstitutional, he says.

The constitutional lawyer Ralph Alexander Lorz (CDU), called the statements in the legal report "mere assertions that are not binding." No one, "apparently had the idea to question it legally."

Taking all this together, it is obvious that the dissolution of parliament is at the behest of the coalition government. The reason for this lies in the fact that the elections are to be used to establish a stable government that is able to push through radical cuts.

The 2011 budget introduced savings of around 620 million euros, and the failed 2012 draft budget provided for cuts running to millions, but the government's plans go much further. The debt ceiling, which the grand coalition in the federal government wrote into the constitution in 2009, requires the states to take on no new debts by 2020.

NRW currently has a budget deficit of nearly four billion euros. Even if the economy remained stable, a further 450 million euros would have to be cut each year. A more realistic prospect is an economic slump and related tax losses, which the government would take as a pretext to impose still deeper cuts to social programs.

Sylvia Löhrmann, the top candidate of the Greens, has already announced deeper cuts in the budget. Löhrmann praised the SPD as a reliable partner in carrying out this

agenda. "We decide together where you need to readjust fiscal consolidation through differentiated savings proposals," she said. Following new elections that gave the SPD and Greens a majority, the coalition would push through even more radical attacks on social rights.

But the events of last week cannot be explained solely from NRW. The participation of Christian Democrat Thesling in issuing the legal opinion and the voting behaviour of the CDU parliamentary group indicate that the CDU tolerated the coup, at least tacitly.

In the eyes of many CDU parliamentary deputies, the FDP is no longer suited for implementing the planned cuts at the federal level. Their proximity to the highest financial circles and their arrogance towards ordinary people is far too obvious. The party is largely discredited among voters; in surveys, the FDP receives approval ratings of only three percent.

This has created the fierce clashes between the FDP and the CDU, which have taken on even more brutal forms in recent weeks. If the FPD fails to re-enter the state parliament in NRW, this might provide Chancellor Angela Merkel with the grounds for ending the federal coalition, and a return to a grand coalition with the SPD. The ending of the CDU-FDP-Green coalition in the Saarland also points in this direction.

An SPD-Green majority government in North Rhine-Westphalia could also provide such an alternative for the federal government, in order to push through the cuts and welfare "reforms" of the previous Schröder-Fischer government, and enforce the European fiscal pact against the population in Germany.



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