

Right-wing minority government takes shape in Norway

Jordan Shilton
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An agreement has been signed between the Conservatives, led by future Prime Minister Erna Solberg, and the far right Progress Party to form a minority government. It is due to take office later this month, after outgoing Prime Minister and Labour Party leader Jens Stoltenberg presents the 2014 budget.

The agreement emerged after two weeks of talks between four parties, the Conservatives, Progress, the Liberals, and Christian Democrats. Though Solberg had originally sought for all four parties to form a coalition, the Liberal and Christian Democrat parties will instead back the government from the outside, giving it a parliamentary majority. Reports suggested that the two smaller parties had been unwilling to cooperate more closely with Progress, which is entering government for the first time in its 40-year history.

The agreement made public on September 30 makes clear that the incoming administration will be one of the most right wing in Norwegian history.

The government has committed itself to spend only 4 percent of the country's oil fund annually. The fund, which invests proceeds from the oil and gas sectors on the stock markets across the globe, is worth an estimated US \$750 billion. Most of this 4 percent is to be used to cut taxes, with the Conservatives making clear their desire to slash wealth tax, which they view as excessive. Inheritance tax is also to be reduced.

There will be a major privatisation drive, which will include increased private ownership in the public sector and attempts to reduce the 30 percent of stocks on the Norwegian stock exchange that are in the hands of the state. The basis for privatising public services has already been laid by the outgoing Labour government. It introduced new management structures into many public services during its time in office and attacked the pay and pension rights of public sector workers.

The deal contained many of Progress's anti-immigrant positions, including an attack on the right of asylum. In future, refugees coming to Norway will be accommodated in closed centres during their asylum application, and the terms on which asylum will be available are to be curtailed. The agreement commits the new government to prevent families from coming to live with their relatives in Norway. These measures build on the policies of the outgoing Stoltenberg government, whose anti-immigrant initiatives have helped create one of the most restrictive immigration systems in Europe.

A sped-up administrative procedure to allow refugees to be deported more efficiently will also be implemented. Even for those granted the right to stay, the terms under which Norwegian citizenship will be offered are being tightened to include compulsory tests in the Norwegian language and citizenship classes.

Progress is already stepping up its anti-immigrant rhetoric. The party avoided some of its more overt chauvinist appeals in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks by fascist mass murderer and former party member, Anders Behring Breivik in 2011, an event which saw Progress's popularity drop sharply. But in a press conference recently, Progress leader Siv Jensen returned to a theme which Breivik expressed in his writings prior to his attack, claiming that Norway faced the threat of a "creeping Islamisation."

The coalition statement also asserted that immigration to Norway was a drain on the country's welfare state and social services and would have to be restricted. This chauvinist poison, propagated by Progress for some time, was also accepted by the two smaller parties who did not in the end join the coalition. It will be used to whip up anti-immigrant sentiment by blaming them for the inevitable attacks to the social welfare system

Solberg's government is going to undertake.

Another key plank of the incoming administration's agenda will be a vast expansion of the police and security services. The Conservatives and Progress agreed that personnel in the police force had to be increased, and Jensen has previously demanded stronger punishments in the justice system. She told the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in July, responding to a question on the most important concern in the election campaign, "Security will be the decisive issue. Because we are the only guarantee for the rule of law and order again in Norway in future. The government has completely failed on this point."

The coalition partners made some additional concessions to the smaller parties who they will rely on for support in parliament. One of the most significant came in education policy, where they pledged to enforce the call of the Christian Democrats for Christianity to be taught in all state schools as a mandatory subject.

Formal coalition negotiations will now begin between Progress and the Conservatives based on the agreement, in order to determine who will assume responsibility for the different areas of government and to work out a detailed programme for the coalition. Jensen is tipped to be the next finance minister, and Progress will almost certainly push to lead government policy on immigration.

Some within ruling circles responded with concern at the choice by Solberg of a minority government, rather than political opposition to the inclusion of Progress.

In a country where minority governments have been a relatively common occurrence, such concerns are not merely over the additional hurdles facing the government in passing legislation in parliament. Ruling circles are fully aware that unprecedented cuts to social spending and attacks on workers' pay and working conditions will be required by the incoming government, and they fear that a minority government could become bogged down in parliamentary negotiations, delaying the adoption of the necessary and unpopular measures.

The new government will face no opposition from the outgoing Labour Party, and its coalition partners, Socialist Left and the Centre Party. The coalition has carried through attacks on the pay and working conditions of public sector workers, in collaboration

with the trade unions. Last year, they imposed arbitration on striking oil workers to enforce measures which undermine their pension rights and increase the retirement age.

Earlier this year, the unions blocked a second strike in the public sector, again over questions of pensions and pay. The Stoltenberg government's adoption of many policies in immigration first promoted by Progress prepared the way for the further integration of the far-right party in to the mainstream of Norwegian politics.



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