

# Neo-fascist rally exposes Finnish government's ties to extreme right

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A rally of around 40 members of the neo-Nazi Finnish Resistance Movement took place last month in the town of Jyväskylä, resulting in over 30 arrests as the extreme right-wing demonstrators assaulted passers-by and clashed with police.

The group, which espouses white supremacism and a united Nordic nation, attacked three people at a department store, before the group sought to proceed towards the city centre. One of the victims was the plaintiff in a case involving Finnish Resistance movement members who carried out a stabbing in Jyväskylä in 2013, suggesting that the individual was deliberately targeted.

The government responded by calling for a general clampdown on “extremist” organisations, including through the expansion of surveillance programmes. “This is a sign that extremist movements are also rising in Finland. It is clear that we must enhance and increase the monitoring of these organisations,” commented Interior Minister Petteri Orpo.

Five members of the Finnish Resistance Movement have been detained pending charges of violent rioting and possession of firearms. This includes Juusu Tahvanainen, the leader of the group, who has a previous conviction for assaulting a politician during the 2011 election campaign. Two members of the Swedish Resistance Movement, a sister organisation in neighbouring Sweden, are also in custody.

Although the authorities sought to cast the incident as a surprise, the truth is that right-wing extremist sentiments have been stoked by the political establishment, above all the far-right Finns Party, which is currently the second largest party in government.

Just a week before the violent scenes in Jyväskylä, Finns Party MP Olli Immonen caused an uproar with a

nationalist and racist online post calling for a struggle to secure Finland for the Finns. Immonen wrote that he was “dreaming of a strong, brave nation that will defeat this nightmare called multiculturalism. This ugly bubble that our enemies live in will soon enough burst into a million little pieces.” He continued, “These are the days that will forever leave a mark on our nation’s future. I have strong belief in my fellow fighters. We will fight until the end for our homeland and one true Finnish nation. The victory will be ours.”

Despite Immonen’s denial that the statement was pre-planned, it came only two days after the anniversary of fascist mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik’s shooting of 69 youth on the Norwegian island of Utøya on July 22, 2011. Police refused to launch a criminal investigation into Immonen’s comments and did not even consider any possible link between his rant and the violent riot that broke out the following Saturday. In a statement released by lead investigator Detective Chief Superintendent Tero Haapala, the police said that Immonen had not targeted a specific group and that he posted comments afterwards to “clarify the content and limit the interpretation” of his ultra-nationalist rant.

Immonen enjoys very public ties with the neo-Nazi group. In June, he posed for a photograph at a ceremony with Finnish Resistance Movement members. After he posted the pictures online, he received merely a verbal warning from the Finns Party parliamentary group leader.

After several days of silence following Immonen’s latest remarks, Finns leader Timo Soini refused to call for any disciplinary action against the MP. “The parliamentary group led by Sampo Terho will decide on that later,” he said. “I think they will go over him with a fine-toothed comb.” Soini dismissed the connection with the Utøya massacre as a

“coincidence,” according to Yle, the Finnish public broadcasting company.

Immonen’s latest outburst drew widespread opposition from the population, with over 15,000 gathering in Helsinki for a rally for diversity. Up to a thousand people gathered to demonstrate against racism in Turku on August 8, to coincide with the Finns party congress held the same day. Finns Party officials were forced to call off a planned rally in the city.

In his address to the party’s 20th anniversary congress, Soini claimed that there was no place for extremists in his organisation. In reality, the party’s ties to right-wing extremists are well known. In late 2013, the Finns were compelled to expel MP James Hirvisaari, who took a picture of a friend performing a Nazi salute at the parliament building and posted it online. In 2012, Hirvisaari defended a proposal by one of his parliamentary aides to mandate that non-Finns wear armbands, to make it easier for the police to identify them.

The Finns entered government for the first time after April’s elections, joining the Centre Party and conservative National Coalition Party (NCP). Soini’s party ran an explicitly xenophobic and nationalist campaign, while the party’s traditional anti-European Union message was toned down.

None of the mainstream parties have raised any criticism of the Finns’ extremist ties. In their reaction to Immonen’s comments, Centre Party leader and Prime Minister Juha Sipilä and NCP leader and Finance Minister Alexander Stubb were careful to avoid associating their coalition partner with such reactionary positions.

The strengthening of the extreme right in Finland comes at a time of growing tensions in the region, as the United States seeks to integrate the Nordic countries into its drive to isolate and encircle Russia. Helsinki has taken a series of aggressive military moves over recent months, beginning with the signing of a Nordic defence agreement in April together with the other Scandinavian countries, aimed explicitly at Moscow. In May, the army wrote to reservists giving them instructions on their deployment in the event of war. and in late June it was revealed that rapid deployment units had quietly been established to patrol areas near the 1,300-kilometre border with Russia.

The political establishment views the encouragement

of right-wing nationalist sentiments as a useful means of scapegoating immigrants for Finland’s deepening economic crisis. Economic output has contracted for three years in a row, and unemployment currently stands at over 11 percent.

Sipilä, a multi-millionaire and former businessman who is committed to devastating austerity measures and deepening the country’s ties with the Western NATO military alliance, justified bringing the Finns into government with the need to form a strong government to implement its programme. One of his headline policies is the slashing of labour costs, which he has vowed to reduce by 5 percent by 2019. He has threatened an additional €1.5 billion in budget cuts if the trade union bureaucracy does not reach a new labour relations agreement with business. Some measures already announced include the freezing of pensions, cuts to day care programmes, and a reduction in funding for education.

The Centre Party-led government was a staunch supporter of Germany’s hardline position in the negotiations over a deal with the Syriza government in Greece. Finland was one of the countries that backed German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble’s proposal to temporarily suspend Greece from the eurozone. A government policy document published on the web site of the Finnish parliament in late July declared that, “a sustainable solution for Greece’s financial problems can be found in the option where Greece is temporarily outside the European monetary union.”

While Soini previously opposed further bailouts, he shifted his position and gave his support last week to the final agreement with Athens. Indicating his determination to force through similarly devastating cuts domestically, he justified his about-face by saying that it was more important to keep the current Finnish government in office than to bring it down over the Greek deal.



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