

Germany: The end of the Social Democratic-Green coalition in Lower Saxony

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Seven weeks ahead of Germany's federal election, the Social Democratic-Green coalition government in the state of Lower Saxony is facing collapse. At the end of last week, Green deputy Elke Twesten announced she was switching to the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). The state government in Hannover led by Minister President Stefan Weil lost its majority of one as a result.

The loss of a majority in Lower Saxony is a serious setback for SPD chairman and chancellor candidate Martin Schulz. Since he assumed leadership of the party, the SPD lost an election in Saarland it believed it was certain to win and also lost votes in Schleswig-Holstein and North Rhine-Westphalia. If the SPD and Greens lose the early election in Lower Saxony, scheduled for October 15, only 2.5 million German citizens, living in Hamburg and Bremen, would be governed by a red-green coalition. At the beginning of last year, it was 40 million people. The SPD is in government in different coalitions in four other states.

It therefore seems increasingly unlikely that Schulz will become chancellor after the federal election on September 24. Even a coalition of three parties, including the SPD, Greens and Left Party, or SPD, Greens and Free Democrats, would be insufficient according to current polls. The latest survey from Infratest Dimap put the CDU/Christian Social Union (CSU) on 40 percent well ahead of the SPD (23 percent). Meanwhile, the Left Party, Greens, FDP and Alternative for Germany (AfD) all secured around 8 percent.

There is much to suggest that Twesten's switch to the CDU was brought about by a deliberate plot. Twesten, who secured her seat on the state list, justified her decision by saying that she had not been nominated as the candidate for her constituency, Rotenburg/Wuhme, near Bremen. Many media commentaries spoke of "betrayal," "injured pride," and "the desire for revenge of a political backbencher."

While Twesten's decision reportedly took the Green caucus fully by surprise, she had been holding talks with the CDU about it for weeks. She allegedly told two witnesses of an "unmoral offer" from the CDU. Rumours are circulating that her move was bought with career promises and offers of

lucrative posts, which both the CDU and Twesten dispute.

Just a day after Twesten's move, the right-wing *Bild am Sonntag* tabloid intervened. It reported with great fanfare that Minister President Stephan Weil allowed Volkswagen to review a 2015 government statement on the emissions scandal before its release. The CDU and FDP subsequently demanded Weil's immediate resignation.

It is undoubtedly objectionable that Weil, who sits on the VW supervisory board (the state of Lower Saxony holds a 20 percent stake in the company), and is actually supposed to hold VW accountable, allowed his government statement to be altered by Volkswagen. It underscores the incestuous relationship between the state government, VW management, and the IG Metall trade union and works council, which has even survived the emissions scandal.

But the CDU and FDP had long been informed of this practice. The state government confidentially informed the state parliamentary economics committee about this in September 2016 without the CDU and FDP representatives raising any objections. When they held power in Hanover, they maintained no less of a close relationship with VW.

The *Bild* newspaper's decision to dig up this scandal now to weaken Schulz shows that powerful political forces are at work. The newspaper, owned by the Springer publishing house, has close ties to leading figures within the CDU and other parties. Five years ago, it played a decisive role in the campaign against then German President Christian Wulff (CDU), who subsequently resigned and cleared the way for Joachim Gauck. Gauck then introduced the foreign policy shift towards the revival of German militarism.

This time around, the goal is also to bring about a further shift to the right in foreign and domestic policy. Although this is barely being discussed in the election campaign, this is because militarism and the strengthening of the state apparatus are deeply unpopular. A shift in policy is therefore being urged all the more determinedly in the relevant committees. For example, the German Society for Foreign Affairs (DGAP) published a 40-page dossier at the end of July on "Foreign policy challenges for the next federal

government,” which reads like an instruction manual for the implementation of German militarism’s great power ambitions.

However, the continuation of the grand coalition is seen by many as a barrier to this course. The SPD is fully on board with this agenda. In 1998, together with the Greens, the SPD paved the way for the German army to engage in foreign interventions. In 2014, then foreign minister and current President Frank-Walter Steinmeier took the lead in the foreign policy shift, and his successor at the Foreign Ministry, Sigmar Gabriel, is following suit as a hardliner on foreign policy.

But the grand coalition is too cumbersome and sluggish for the aggressive agenda now being demanded. The same applies to Chancellor Angela Merkel, who has spent two-thirds of her 12 years in power in coalitions with the SPD and is increasingly being described in the media, like Helmut Kohl at the end of his period in office, as someone without vision and goals, other than winning the election. *Der Spiegel* dedicated the entirety of its latest issue to an appeal for the emergence of a strongman.

While the CDU cannot replace Merkel in the short term, after the election “the real election campaign,” the “struggle over the post-Merkel era,” will begin, as the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* predicted. “It will certainly be the case that after Merkel’s election victory, all of the criticisms saved up against her will emerge; the current enthusiasm for Merkel’s experience will give way to the tiredness of a government lasting forever,” the paper wrote.

Within the CDU/CSU, right-wing circles that Merkel sidelined and weakened due to tactical considerations are prepared to make their move. One example of this was the holding of a highly publicised lecture in Munich last month by Karl Theodor zu Guttenberg (CDU) on geopolitical perspectives for Germany, which won strong praise from CDU/CSU circles. Guttenberg was forced to resign his post as defence minister six years ago following accusations of plagiarism in his doctoral thesis and Merkel’s failure to defend him.

Another CDU/CSU politician making a comeback is Friedrich Merz. The former chairman of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group was removed from his position by Merkel several years ago and has since been serving as chairman of the supervisory board of the German subsidiary of BlackRock, the world’s largest wealth management firm. *Handelsblatt* published a full-page guest commentary from Merz a few days ago, in which Merz demanded the adoption of a more decisive and hard line towards the United States.

Bitter struggles are raging within the US ruling class, although the big-business parties share broad agreement on the deepening of the assault on social and democratic rights,

and the pursuit of an aggressive foreign policy. The same is true in Germany. The political conflicts revolve around the issue of which form of coalition can best impose these policies in the face of growing resistance within the population.

The SPD and Greens also support a political shift to the right. Their declining support is not the result of intrigues by the CDU, but due to widespread opposition to their right-wing policies. The last red-green federal government under Gerhard Schröder enforced the Agenda 2010 social reforms and a comprehensive tax reform, which threw millions into poverty and enriched a tiny minority. The SPD is no less determined than the CDU and even the AfD to strengthen the police, suppress left-wing protests (as at the G-20 in Hamburg) and agitate against refugees.

Twستن’s switch from the Greens to the CDU shows how similar all of the parties are. Twستن explained that she has always been a declared supporter of a CDU-Green coalition. She defended herself against the accusation of betrayal with the argument: “My basic outlook is bourgeois and I won’t have to compromise that in the CDU.”

This could also be stated emphatically by Winfried Kretschmann, who has led a coalition government with the CDU as minister president in Baden-Württemberg for six years. He also has a “bourgeois outlook” and does not have to compromise it in his cooperation with Thomas Strobl, the son-in-law of Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble. That is to say nothing of Boris Palmer, the Green mayor of Tübingen, who constantly agitates against refugees in the style of the AfD.

The Greens have always been a party of the privileged middle class. They have moved to the right at the same pace as the social gulf between their base and the working class has deepened.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei is the only party standing in the federal election on a socialist programme and not defending the interests of the major banks and corporations, the military, and intelligence services.



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