

German government coalition talks stall

Peter Schwarz
20 November 2017

After four weeks of talks, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Christian Social Union (CSU), Free Democratic Party (FDP) and Greens failed to reach agreement on a so-called Jamaica coalition by Thursday evening. German Chancellor and CDU leader Angela Merkel had set the November 16 date as the deadline for the conclusion of exploratory talks. Two months after the federal election, Germany remains without a new government, and it is entirely unclear when one will be established.

The negotiating teams separated early Friday morning after 15 hours of talks, having reached no agreement on any essential points in dispute. Several meetings of party committees organised to discuss the result were cancelled. The talks began again at midday on Friday, without a deadline for their conclusion being set.

The views on if and when an agreement will be reached diverge wildly. Deputy FDP leader Wolfgang Kubicki said, “We are so far apart on the issues in dispute—immigration, combatting climate change, finance policy, internal security—that I currently can’t imagine how we can come together in such a short time.”

“We are convinced that we can come together if we want to come together,” said CSU leader Horst Seehofer. He added, “We will do everything humanly possible to determine whether a stable government can be formed.” Green Party parliamentary leader Katrin Göring-Eckhardt proclaimed over Twitter, “We are ready to talk and hope there will be a result.” At the same time, she did not exclude the possibility that this would not be achievable.

If the talks fail, President Frank-Walter Steinmeier will assume a decisive role. He has the task of presenting a candidate for the post of chancellor to parliament. If this candidate does not receive an absolute majority in the first round, and another candidate fails to secure a majority within two weeks, deputies can elect a candidate in the third round with a relative majority. The president then has the option of accepting them within seven days as chancellor, or dissolving parliament. There has never been a minority government in the history of the German Federal Republic.

Steinmeier could use his position to force his party, the Social Democrats (SPD), to continue the grand coalition

with the CDU and CSU. Such a coalition would have a clear majority in parliament, with 399 of 706 seats. However, the SPD has insisted thus far on going into opposition, not least because the right-wing extremist Alternative for Germany (AfD) would be the largest opposition party in parliament. But this opinion could change. Almost all parties are afraid of new elections.

The rapidity with which the SPD could change course is shown by the latest developments in Lower Saxony. After having bitterly fought each other during the election campaign, the SPD and CDU reached a deal just four weeks later on the formation of a grand coalition.

The reason for the crisis of the Jamaica coalition talks (named after the colours in that country’s flag, the black, yellow and green of the CDU/CSU, FDP and Greens) is not the political differences between the participating parties, which have long collaborated in all conceivable combinations at the state level. It has much more to do with their political instability. Under the pressure of growing geopolitical tensions and sharp social conflicts, the political system which enabled three or four parties to guarantee stable “left-wing” and “right-wing” majorities is breaking apart.

As all of the established parties move further to the right, they are fracturing. This not only finds expression in the entry of the AfD into parliament, which now has seven parties for the first time, but also in sharpening conflicts within the parties. Within the CSU, which achieved its worst election result in its history, a bitter dispute is raging over leader Horst Seehofer, who risks losing his position as Bavaria’s minister president. Bitter faction fights are also ongoing within the CDU, SPD, Greens and Left Party.

Under these conditions, the issues in dispute among the Jamaica coalition negotiators, whose parties share considerable common ground, are becoming questions of prestige. This is shown very clearly on refugee policy, which was debated for 12 of the 15 hours of negotiations on Thursday.

The CSU, which fears competition from the AfD in next year’s Bavarian state elections, is insisting on an upper limit on immigration, while the Greens, eager to avoid losing

liberal voters, oppose this. In practice, this amounts to the CSU seeking to write an overall limit for immigration into the coalition agreement, whereas the Greens prefer the formulation “management of immigration.”

Both options amount to the same thing, as has been shown in practice. In states where the Greens are in government, refugees are bullied and deported just as ruthlessly as in other states. The Greens’ ranks include Baden-Württemberg’s Minister President Winfried Kretschmann and Tübingen Mayor Boris Palmer, two hardliners on the issue of refugee policy.

The same applies to other issues being haggled over by the Jamaica coalition negotiators. A 61-page document containing the results of the exploratory talks thus far, which was leaked to the press on Thursday and contains disputed points in brackets, reveals widespread agreement on core points.

For example, the Jamaica parties agree that what is required is “a new balance between the best possible security for our country and civil freedoms and rights.” Translated into plain language, this means that civil rights will be sacrificed in the name of strengthening the security and surveillance apparatus. To this end, they plan to hire 7,500 new federal police officers and 5,000 at the state level, coordinate police and security services more closely, strengthen the federal domestic intelligence agency, extend video surveillance, and control the EU’s external borders more effectively.

The massive military build-up and foreign interventions launched by the previous government will also be continued and expanded. The paper pledges on the issue of defence to make “available to soldiers the best possible equipment, training and support.”

“We want to make the German army more UN-capable and suitable for Europe,” the document continues, “and for this purpose toughen it up in the following areas: digitalisation, deployment and transport capabilities, unmanned reconnaissance, tactical mobile communication.”

The paper explicitly endorses an “Africa strategy” and the continuation of the military intervention in Mali. In Iraq and Syria, it strives for the development of the intervention against ISIS into a permanent military presence, with a mandate that “makes a contribution to the new focus on capacity-building within the NATO framework, strengthening reliable and politically controlled security structures throughout Iraq.”

On finance policy, where differences over detail exist, the coalition parties agree to table “budgets without new debt for the coming four years”—meaning the continuation of the austerity policies associated with long-serving Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU).

Nonetheless, ruling circles are concerned that due to internal differences, a Jamaica coalition will not prove stable enough to enforce its anti-worker and militarist programme in the face of mounting social and political opposition. An increasing number of press articles are being published accusing the Jamaica parties of not going far enough on the issues of the strengthening of the military and state apparatus at home and abroad.

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published an article last week headlined, “Jamaica is putting German security at risk.” The author, Wolf Poulet, was a German army officer from 1963 to 1994, last as a colonel in the general staff, and now runs a consulting firm.

He accused the Jamaica alliance of failing to deal with the “future capabilities of our country, under conditions of increasingly dangerous developments of the complex global situation.” The key issues at stake are “Will the new government plan, introduce and finance effective measures to reestablish the German defence capabilities required in Central Europe in time? Will Germany permanently be willing and capable of consistently realising ‘the right to material self-assertion’ (i.e., the right to wage war), as every state is entitled to?”

According to Poulet, “The most important of all questions is not being asked: how much time and what means must be utilised so that the combat power and capability of the army, air force and navy to deploy is adequate?” It is “obvious” that there is not enough daring “to explain this demand to the traditionally ‘peace-oriented’ Greens and frame it politically.” As the devil evades the holy water, so the emotive words “combat power” and “increase in deployment readiness” are being avoided.

It remains unclear how long the process of forming a new government will drag on and what its final composition will be. However, one thing is certain: it will be the most right-wing government since the founding of the Federal Republic, combining massive attacks on democratic and social rights with militarism and war.



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