

Far-right Sweden Democrats poised to make gains in general election

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The official narrative ahead of Sweden's parliamentary elections tomorrow is that the Scandinavian country, overrun by refugees, is no longer able to fund public spending and welfare services.

Whether one follows the campaign of the far-right Sweden Democrats or the governing Social Democrats, virtually identical policies are on offer: a vicious crackdown on immigrants and refugees, hikes in military spending in the face of alleged "Russian aggression," and the strengthening of the police and repressive state apparatus.

As with the AfD in Germany or the National Rally (formerly National Front) in France, this right-wing conspiracy involving the entire political establishment is playing directly into the hands of the Sweden Democrats while disenfranchising the majority of the population. The political elite is widely viewed with contempt. Capitalising on this social anger, the Sweden Democrats are projected to increase their share of the vote to around 20 percent on Sunday from 13 percent in 2014. Some polls even suggest that the party, which emerged out of the neo-Nazi movement in the 1980s, could win the election.

The drive to scapegoat immigrants for all of Sweden's social problems is part of a deliberate attempt to cover up the role of the political establishment, above all its nominal left-wing, in gutting public services and the welfare state. Since the early 1990s, successive governments led by the Social Democrats and right-wing Alliance have carried out an onslaught, including slashing taxes for corporations and the rich, privatising education, healthcare, and welfare services, and cutting back on social benefits.

Although it was the Alliance government between 2006 and 2014 that spearheaded the largest privatisation drive in Swedish history, the groundwork for this assault on working people was laid by over a decade of Social

Democratic rule from 1994 to 2006 under Göran Persson. This included support for a regulation on budgetary discipline following the economic crisis of the early 1990s aimed at clawing back from the working class the billions used to bail out Sweden's financial institutions.

These policies produced a sharp rise in social inequality. Between the mid-1980s and the 2000s, Sweden's GINI coefficient, measuring income inequality, rose by 30 percent. In 1980, the richest 10 percent of the population received 23 percent of total income, but by 2013 this had risen to over 30 percent. Whereas in education the average of 15-year-olds leaving school without any qualification stands at 17.5 percent nationally, it rises to over 50 percent in many suburbs of Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö, where most immigrants live. In Bergsjön, a suburb of Gothenburg, 69 percent of students leave school without a qualification and are effectively condemned to joblessness.

Polls suggest that support for the Social Democrats will fall on Sunday to less than 25 percent, the worst result since 1917. A measure of the collapse in support for Sweden's traditional party of government is that as recently as 1994, the party obtained well over 40 percent of the vote. Now, even with the support of the Greens and Left Party, the "left block" will likely struggle to reach 40 percent on Sunday.

The opposition Alliance is also polling around the 40 percent mark. The Moderates, the largest of the four Alliance members, which advocates further tax cuts for big business, an intensification of the government's hardline anti-refugee stance, and deeper cuts to welfare, is garnering around 18 percent support. The Center Party, which has its traditional base in rural areas but has sought to attract a wider base of support by raising certain environmental issues, is set to secure 12-13 percent. The smaller Liberals and Christian Democrats are expected to pass the 4 percent threshold required for parliamentary

representation.

Over the past four years, Stefan Löfven's Social Democrats have led a minority coalition with the Greens, which has relied on informal support from the Stalinist Left Party in parliamentary votes. However, the decline in support for the Social Democrats meant that even this three-party coalition could not secure a majority in parliament. Löfven, who first came to prominence due to his role in enforcing pay cuts and reduced working hours following the 2008 economic crisis as the leader of the IF Metall trade union, has only remained in power due to the tacit acceptance of the right-wing Alliance parties. Following the 2014 election, the Alliance struck a deal with Löfven that committed the government to fiscal restraint and the opposition to abstaining on government budget proposals.

The so-called December Agreement was reached in behind-the-scenes negotiations after the Alliance parties united with the Sweden Democrats to block the Social Democrats' first budget and threaten a snap election. It was cynically portrayed as a means of stopping the rise of the far-right and offering political "stability." The deal effectively ensured that the far-right party's refugee policies became government policy. It also continued to enforce the regressive tax regime and spending restraint on public services imposed under Reinfeldt between 2006 and 2014, while handing Löfven the majority he needed to press ahead with an anti-refugee clampdown and military spending hikes.

The December Agreement formally collapsed in the autumn of 2015 after the smallest member of the Alliance, the socially conservative Christian Democrats, withdrew, but this changed very little. The Alliance parties continued to effectively endorse the Social Democrats' right-wing agenda by agreeing that each Alliance party would table their own budget proposal in parliament, ensuring that none of the four would secure a majority.

The leading conservative parties openly backed the government on critical votes. In late 2015, Löfven fully embraced the Sweden Democrats' vicious anti-immigrant line when his government ordered the effective closure of Sweden's borders to asylum seekers. In a dramatic reversal of the country's relatively open asylum policy, the Social Democrat-Green coalition imposed temporary residency permits for refugees and invested hundreds of millions in accelerating the asylum process to increase deportations.

Last year, Löfven's Social Democrat-Green coalition concluded an agreement with the Moderates and Centre

Party to hike military spending by over 8 billion kronor (\$1 billion) between 2018 and 2020.

In March 2017, the Social Democrat government reintroduced the draft, and made no secret of the fact that this was a step in the preparation for Swedish involvement in a major war.

The Social Democrats, Greens, and Left Party, no less than their right-wing opponents, are fully committed to Sweden's close alliance with US imperialism and NATO. Under successive governments, the Swedish army has been integrated ever more into NATO command structures, although the country retains its formal opposition to joining the military alliance.

The ruling elite is determined to continue to pursue its right-wing agenda following Sunday's vote, but is concerned that the electoral vote may produce an unstable outcome. If both official blocks obtain around 40 percent of the vote and the Sweden Democrats take 20 percent, none of the traditional coalitions will be able to form a government.

One possibility that has been raised is that Löfven could seek support from the Center and Liberal parties. Alternatively, a significant section of the Moderates is pushing for direct collaboration with the Sweden Democrats. During the Moderate-led Alliance's second term in office between 2010 and 2014, the Sweden Democrats backed the government on 80 percent of parliamentary votes.

Whatever the composition of Sweden's next government, it will preside over a further shift to the right in Swedish politics characterised by intensified attacks on refugees and social spending, and an explosion of militarism.



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