

Austrian Chancellor Kurz toppled following vote of no confidence

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On Monday, the Austrian parliament sacked the right-wing government led by Chancellor Sebastian Kurz (Austrian Peoples Party—ÖVP) following a vote of no confidence. The opposition Social Democrats (SPÖ) had introduced the motion of no confidence in a special sitting of parliament. The SPÖ was able to achieve the necessary majority by voting together with the former government partner of Kurz, the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ).

Not only was the Kurz administration the shortest reigning government in the history of modern Austria, it was also the first ever government to be brought down by a vote of no confidence. The end of the ÖVP/FPÖ coalition marks the culmination of a severe government crisis in the Alpine republic. At the same time, it is indicative of massive political upheavals taking place across Europe.

The dismissal of Kurz came just ten days after the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* published a video that made clear that FPÖ leader and Vice-Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache was guilty of bribery and corruption. Strache then resigned from office and the right-wing coalition broke apart. Following the sacking of the interior minister, Herbert Kickl (also FPÖ), other FPÖ ministers resigned from their posts.

Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen responded by appointing an interim government led by Kurz, with four “non-aligned” experts taking the place of the FPÖ ministers who had resigned. This administration lasted just five days.

The Austrian president supported Sebastian Kurz and appealed to other parties, in the name of stability and the preservation of state power, to allow him to stay in office until the parliamentary election in September. After considerable hesitation, however, the Social

Democrats decided to call a vote of no confidence.

Van der Bellen, a former member of the Green Party, was elected president in 2016 with the votes of the SPÖ. His main rival at that time was the FPÖ candidate Norbert Hofer.

Following the vote of no confidence, Van der Bellen dismissed Kurz and commissioned the finance minister, Hartwig Löger (ÖVP), to take over the affairs of government. He is to remain in office with the other ministers until a new chancellor is appointed. Forming a new interim government should take no longer than a week, Van der Bellen declared.

As was the case with the so-called Ibiza video, the vote of no confidence carries all the hallmarks of an internal conspiracy. All of the parties in parliament are engaged in bitter infighting, but there is no avenue within the political system for the working class to assert its own interests. All of the various factions in the ruling elite are tacking to the right, and in the election campaign that has already begun following Kurz’ dismissal there is every indication that these parties will shift even further to the right.

With the exception of a seven-year period, the Social Democrats headed all Austrian governments between 1970 and 2017. It was their right-wing and anti-working class policies that enabled the far-right FPÖ to flourish. In the meantime, the SPÖ is so despised and its policies differ so little from those of the ÖVP and FPÖ that the party was unable to benefit from the government crisis in the European elections held on Sunday.

At 23.5 percent, the SPÖ fell slightly below its 2014 European election result and well below its 2017 National Council election result. The ÖVP, on the other hand, gained several percentage points, with 35.4 percent, while the FPÖ gained 1.6 percent compared to

the previous European election. Its total of 18.1 percent represented a loss of 7.9 percent compared to the 2017 National Council election.

The new SPÖ leader Pamela Rendi-Wagner embodies the profound political crisis racking the SPÖ. A trained physician, she joined the SPÖ only in March 2017 and was appointed health minister in the then-SPÖ-ÖVP government. She now supports a government of “experts” until the election planned for September.

There are many signs that the ÖVP and FPÖ coalition will return to power in the autumn.

In his resignation speech, Kurz praised the balance sheet of the outgoing coalition, which has brutally proceeded against refugees, tightened up labor laws, cut social benefits and lowered corporate taxes. Kurz immediately plunged into the election campaign. On Tuesday, an ÖVP spokesman declared that Kurz would turn down positions both as head of the ÖVP parliamentary fraction and as member of the National Council in favour of taking to the road across Austria “to win the support of the people for a continuation of his course.”

Several ÖVP and the FPÖ politicians have already called for a renewed coalition in the autumn. “Of course, the FPÖ has the clear goal to participate in a new coalition government after the election in September,” declared the Freedom Party councilor of Lower Austria, Gottfried Waldhäusl. “We want to help shape politics in Austria at the highest level,” he added, and “continue governing Austria with the ÖVP.”

The ÖVP and FPÖ continue to work together closely at state level. Manfred Haimbuchner, the FPÖ leader in Upper Austria, where all parties represented in the state parliament are involved in the administration, said: “In Upper Austria the trust between government partners and the will to work for the country is intact. Therefore, I can assure you here and now that, irrespective of today’s vote of no confidence, there will continue to be close cooperation with the ÖVP in future.”

For its part, the SPÖ is using the vote against the Kurz government to strengthen its own cooperation with the FPÖ. Against the background of its dramatic electoral defeats in recent years, the SPÖ has repeatedly strived for alliances with the far-right.

On Sunday, the SPÖ lost its former heartland Burgenland to the ÖVP for the first time in 60 years. The party retains control only in Vienna. Under these

conditions, Burgenland’s prime minister, Hans-Peter Doskozil (SPÖ), affirmed the alliance he struck with the FPÖ in 2015. “It’s clear the situation is difficult,” he said. But he did not want the situation at the federal level to influence Burgenland. Many other SPÖ politicians also advocate a new federal coalition with the FPÖ.



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