German government in crisis

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31 July 2026

Never before has a German chancellor been as unpopular as Friedrich Merz. After just under 15 months in office, only 18 percent of the population are satisfied with his performance, while 78 percent are dissatisfied. This is the lowest approval rating recorded for a sitting chancellor since polling began in 1998. At the same point in his term, Merz's predecessor Olaf Scholz still had an approval rating of 41 percent, while Angela Merkel's stood at 66 percent.

Dissatisfaction with the government is also reflected in the so-called "Sunday question." If a federal election were held next Sunday, the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) would receive 21 percent of the vote and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) just 12 percent, according to polling agency Forsa. With a combined vote of 33 percent, the ruling coalition would fall far short of a majority. The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) leads with 27 percent, followed by the CDU/CSU, the Greens with 16 percent and the Left Party with 13 percent. The SPD would finish in fifth place.

Merz has responded to the collapse in the government's poll ratings by reshuffling his cabinet and reorganising the leadership of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group. Following the resignation of parliamentary group leader Jens Spahn, Merz installed his close confidant Thorsten Frei, previously head of the Federal Chancellery, as Spahn's successor. Spahn was forced to step down after he and his husband had a child through a surrogate mother in the United States, despite surrogacy being prohibited in Germany and publicly opposed by both the CDU and Spahn himself.

The Federal Chancellery is now headed by former Health Minister Nina Warken, who, according to Merz, demonstrated through her health reforms "that she can lead a ministry and push through reforms even in the face of opposition." Warken has been replaced as health minister by Carsten Linnemann, the former secretary-general of the CDU. Although he holds a doctorate in economics, Linnemann has no expertise in health policy and is regarded as a staunch representative of business interests. His task will be to impose the austerity measures initiated by Warken against widespread opposition.

Merz sacked Transport Minister Patrick Schnieder in a humiliating manner, which sparked a storm of indignation within the Rhineland-Palatinate regional association, where his brother is Minister-President. Schnieder's successor is Steffen Bilger from Baden-Württemberg, a lobbyist for the automotive industry who has made a name for himself as an opponent of environmental regulations. From 2004 to 2007, Bilger was chairman of the youth organisation of the Weikersheim Study Centre, the right-leaning think tank founded by the former Nazi judge Hans Filbinger.

Merz also replaced several state secretaries or transferred them to other ministries.

The reshuffle, which Merz had apparently barely discussed with anyone, exacerbated the crisis. For the first time, the Chancellor is being publicly attacked and called into question from within his own ranks. Tensions within the party are reaching a boiling point. The high-handed manner in which Merz went about his business also offended regional associations in the east and facilitated the eruption of pent-up panic within the party. With state elections in Saxony-Anhalt, Berlin and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania just a few weeks away, CDU office-holders fear for their influence and their positions.

Newspapers close to the CDU paint a dramatic picture. The mood is "abysmal" and "disastrous," reports the *F.A.Z.*: "There is a simmering discontent within the CDU that is at times brimming over."

Bild noted: "Now, the bewilderment over Merz outweighs the concern about damaging his office. The personal risk of publicly criticising the Chancellor is being accepted because remaining silent on the matter is no longer bearable and could cause greater damage. What Friedrich Merz is losing these days is his authority—both as party leader and as Chancellor."

Der Spiegel, which has spoken to people close to the Chancellor and within the CDU/CSU's leadership circles, wrote: "One can now watch as the Chancellor's authority erodes almost by the hour. … Even within the CDU's highest leadership bodies, hardly anyone is willing to bet that the Chancellor will still be in office by Christmas."

According to *Der Spiegel*, citing participants, Wednesday's meeting of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the Bundestag amounted to "political ostracism" against the Chancellor. Although Merz's candidate, Thorsten Frei, was elected as the new parliamentary group leader—succeeding the resigning Jens Spahn—with 92 percent of the vote, almost all participants had nothing but criticism for Merz himself. No one defended him.

The criticism of Merz is not directed at his policies, but at the

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arrogant manner in which he implements them. Merz's critics fear that he is thereby provoking an uprising that threatens not only the government but capitalist rule as a whole. They support his agenda of rearmament and social spending cuts, which has catastrophic consequences for large sections of the population, but, like the Chancellor himself, are seeking the most effective method possible to implement it—even in collaboration with the AfD if necessary.

The government's disastrous poll ratings are a measure of the growing opposition to policies that have no support whatsoever amongst the population. The systematic escalation of the war in Ukraine against the nuclear-armed power Russia, the enormous sums spent on rearming the Bundeswehr (German Armed Forces), the drastic cuts to healthcare, care services, pensions and welfare benefits, as well as the job cuts in the car industry, are meeting with growing resistance.

Only the super-rich are better off under Merz. The number of centimillionaires—those with more than $100 million—rose from 3,900 to 5,000 in his first year in office. In the same year, poverty reached a historic high, with a rate of 16.1 percent, or 13.3 million people.

The crisis facing the Merz government must be viewed in this context. Merz's critics within the CDU and in the media almost unanimously accuse him of "technical errors," "poor communication" and "bungling." Their aim is to make his reactionary policies more effective. In contrast, public opposition is directed against the substance of Merz's policies—against cuts to social services, poverty, unemployment, militarism and war.

This opposition finds no political expression in official politics. The SPD is part of the Merz government and heads two key ministries: Defence and Finance. The Greens support both the war and rearmament policies and are not in government solely because they are not needed to secure a majority. The trade unions are working closely with the government and business associations to push through mass redundancies and cuts to social services and to stifle resistance to them.

This enables the right-wing demagogues of the AfD to exploit to some extent the anger and frustration of the middle classes—and indeed of workers—for their own ends. However, the AfD is not an opposition party; rather, it takes the reactionary policies of the ruling class to extremes. It is no coincidence that it is supported by the world's richest man, Elon Musk, and Trump's Vice-President, JD Vance.

It is only a matter of time before the AfD is brought into government. The other parties are systematically paving the way for it by adopting its inhumane refugee policies and its "law and order" agenda. What is currently still preventing them from forming a coalition government is the fear of massive protests, as well as differences of opinion on foreign policy.

It is telling that even the Left Party, which was on the brink of collapse just a few years ago, is gaining support once again. It is attracting voters and members, particularly among the younger generation, because it speaks out publicly against cuts to social services, militarism and the rise of the AfD.

However, the Left Party is not a political alternative, but rather a lightning rod and a safety valve. It spouts left-wing rhetoric to absorb the growing radicalisation. In fact, it protects the hated federal government, helped Merz to a swift rise to the chancellorship and even voted in the Bundesrat, Germany's second chamber of parliament, in favour of the government's war credits. Wherever it assumes government responsibility, it defends capitalism and supports austerity programmes. In this way, it strengthens the AfD. In Thuringia, where the Left Party held the position of Minister-President for ten years, the far right now enjoys over 40 percent support in the polls.

The vicious circle of militarism, war, social spending cuts and dictatorship can only be broken by an independent working-class movement fighting for the overthrow of capitalism. The Socialist Equality Party (Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei, SGP) is fighting for this perspective in its campaign for the Berlin House of Representatives election on 20 September. The SGP's election statement declares:

> We do not make hollow appeals to the warmongers, nor do we beg for handouts. We organise resistance against redundancies, wage cuts and social cuts, and, together with our sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International, we are building a worldwide movement against war and its root cause, capitalism.

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