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Germany on a Political Seesaw



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While Americans teetered, arguing as to which side gained more in the elections, Germans have been balancing on a seesaw of their own – which can also have decisive consequences.

Seated precariously on the descending side are the ruling parties of the Grand Coalition – GroKo in German journalese. When on October 14th the Christian Social Union (CSU) in Bavaria, the unique one-state subsidiary of Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU),” got the worst result anyone could recall in a state election, the blow sent shock

waves through the whole country. It was still the strongest party in this biggest German state but must now share cabinet seats with an equally conservative local breakaway party. All exertions of its fading king-pin, Horst Seehofer, who tried to win points by attacking and insulting his ally Angela Merkel from the right, failed miserably. So did his attempts – he’s still Federal Interior Minister – to save the head of the Bureau to Protect the Constitution (like the FBI), who had become all too openly pro-fascist. It looks as if the amused-smiling Seehofer will soon follow his appointee into involuntary retirement and right-wing Bavarian loud-voiced pride – recalling old Texas in a way – was reduced to a rather hoarse croak.

Two weeks later came the next blow. The wealthy state of Hesse, with its center in Frankfurt/Main, was a stronghold of the Social Democrats (SPD) for decades. Then they were pushed out by the Christian Democrats, often using racist stereotyping propaganda. The state elections on October 28th shocked them both. The SPD was reduced to a pitiful relic, under 20 %, while the CDU got its worst result in 50 years.

These state-level shocks were no less staggering at the federal level. Merkel, seeing her personal aura dwindle like a fading rainbow, took a step fully unthinkable just a few years ago. She has always been both chancellor and head of the CDU, an indispensable tie she always claimed. But at its congress next month she will step down as party leader. She can remain “queen mother” of the national government until 2021, if it stays in power, but the odds against it and her are grating downward. With its current rating of 27 % the CDU-CSU is still the strongest but not by much.

Three main rivals are pushing to succeed her as party leader – and maybe even more? Jens Spahn, 38, currently Minister of Health, has always been a major right-wing opponent of Merkel. Never popular despite all his efforts, the public has spurned him in the polls.

Annegret Kamp-Karrenbauer, 56, from Saarland, is the party’s general secretary and closest to Merkel’s center-leaning position on many issues. (Her name makes her no favorite with headline writers – the end part was added with her husband – it’s his name. They often call her AKK.

She is running neck and neck with Friedrich Merz (62). Back in 2002 Merkel jockeyed him out of his leadership hopes and he switched from politics to business, where he did far better. He is chairman of the board of the German section of BlackRock, Inc., the global investment management corporation, the world’s largest asset manager with \$6.29 trillion in assets in 30 countries. It’s called the world’s largest shadow bank. Its German section faces charges of covering up millions – or billions of tax frauds. But Mertz is backed by

powerful men in finance, politics, the media. Criticism too: “If he wins out there needn’t be any more lobbyists – he’s Mr. Lobbyist in person.” He’s also on the board of HSBC, Europe’s largest bank, which has had more scandals than it can count – in Mexico, South Africa, South Asia, the USA. It paid a \$1.9b fine for a drug scandal in 2012 (about five weeks of its annual profit) but Obama’s Attorney General Holder saved the culprits from jail cells.

Friedrich Merz as the knight in shining armor rescuing Germany’s slithering economy while strengthening its armed forces; what a frightening nightmare!

On state and federal levels the other partner in the Grand Coalition, the SPD, is sinking so quickly it threatens to fall off my metaphor see-saw entirely. After barely reaching 20 % in last year’s election it now stands at 14 %. And though the membership of Germany’s oldest party – who haven’t yet quit – are desperately calling for a change in policy if not in leadership, the latter, headed by Andrea Nahles, 48, stubbornly orders them, like the captain in Pete Seeger’s song, “to push on!” But quitting the coalition, as they demand, could mean new elections – and new dangers.

If the ruling parties, CDU, CSU and SPD, are losing so rapidly, who is on the upward-swing? The bigger menace is the Alternative for Germany (AfD), now with representatives in every state legislature after its gains in Bavaria and Hesse. They were not as big as the AfD hoped and most people feared – but there were no big Hurrahs! In national polls it is surpassing the Social Democrats. While some of its leaders try to sound civilized and win points in the all too generous media, others betray again and again its fascist nature; ranting against Muslims and immigrants but promoting big business goals like lower estate taxes or more weaponry and soldiers. If people like Merz take over the CDU and the economy falters, they could form a coalition with the AfD in a frightening parody of 1931-33 events.

But the main winners in the shift of voters in Bavaria, Hesse or nationally have amazingly been the Greens. Readers in the USA or elsewhere should not see them as an almost radical group, well to the left. They started off like that, but that was decades ago, before seven years in the government with the SPD tamed them fully, with both passing some of the worst anti-working class legislation in years and taking Germany into its first post-unification war – against Serbia. It has not been in the government since 2005, but it has not changed much in those past fifteen years.

The Greens stress environment above all, but have decided that this does not require conflict with big business, which must simply be convinced that ecology and profits can

be combined. One need not look over to the Koch Brothers to question this; Volkswagen-Daimler-BMW emission cheating and the merger of Monsanto and Bayer, two of the world's worst killers of butterflies, salamanders and songbirds (and both companies once among the world's worst murderers of human beings – from Auschwitz to Danang in Vietnam) – should give rise to a few doubts.

True, the Greens are for women's and LGTSB rights, usually good on immigrant questions – at least until they lead governments, as in their happy bond with Daimler in Stuttgart and with the forest-axing RWE energy giant near Aachen. They have proved quite willing to join on state level with the right-wing CDU, as in Hesse, and can no longer claim a description as leftwing.

The cause for their sudden upward swing in popularity is because millions do not feel represented by the present government, but rather betrayed by both Merkel and the SPD. Right-wing protest leads then to the AfD. Others, for better or worse, turn in protest to the Greens.

A genuine alternative should really be the LINKE, the Left. The two state elections brought an increase in voters, but only a small increase, especially in Bavaria, where they again failed to reach the 5 % minimum for membership in the legislature.

A problem in western Germany rests in decade-old prejudices against any party connected with the East German GDR, a form of anti-Communism regenerated almost every evening by the media. In eastern Germany there are two special obstacles. Millions had high hopes that unification would bring the “blossoming landscapes” promised by Helmut Kohl. But for many the blossoms are thistles and poison ivy. If any jobs then too often insecure, low-paid, part-time, and speed-up jobs plus worries about pension levels and their children's future. Some are led to believe that alleged “advantages” for refugees and immigrants mean losses for themselves and their monolithic white German culture. All too few see the LINKE not as a fighter for their rights and needs but, often in state governments or eager to join them, rather as just another part of the “establishment”.

The correct answer to this, it would seem, would be a tough fight by the LINKE against the powers-that-be, the gentrifiers, exploiters, giant tax-cheaters and – indeed –their whole system.

A possible move in this direction was launched by a top LINKE leader, Sahra Wagenknecht, with a collective movement, Aufstehen (Stand Up) aimed at winning angry, dissatisfied people from all parties or no party. But instead of complementing the LINKE,

it is currently facing a split, partly based on personalities, which threatens to break up the LINKE, leaving the national stage to the rightists. I, too, have been worried and skeptical. Last Friday “Sahra” made a magnificent speech to a thousand adherents next the Brandenburg Gate. It was an amazingly important date in German history. One hundred years ago German sailors, then shipyard workers, then soldiers joined and, braving all odds and weapons, launched the German revolution which ended the rule of the Kaiser and World War One, but which was soon betrayed and beaten. In the years that followed the same forces which had beaten them back, the giant industrial and financial concerns, the 1 %, built up Hitler and his Nazis. 80 years ago, on November 9th 1938, they began the violent extermination of the Jewish population; a few years later they went on to kill up to 27 million people in the Soviet Union– plus tragic numbers of Roma people, Poles, Yugoslavs, Italians... and Americans.

On that same date 29 years ago, East Germans cheered as they poured through the Berlin Wall and rejoiced at unification. Their jubilation was fully understandable. Only a minority feared that new freedoms, far more commodities and travel chances also opened the barriers for the return of those same business interests they had ejected after 1945. Now back with greater strength than ever, they began again, slicing at working people’s rights and spreading eastwards, building armies, training parachutists and drone experts. And, while looking slightly askance at their crudity, as in earlier years, they allowed murderous bands of stiff-armed, Hitler-tattooed thugs to open the path to new rounds of killing. This see-saw game can find a very terribly finale.