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Collapsed center, far right advance : The shock at Germany's election result on Sunday is sinking in across Europe

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The centre has collapsed and the result is a serious advance for the far right. Hope is not lost, though, argues Kevin Ovenden

For the first time since 1953 a far right, extreme racist party with a large fascist wing has entered the German parliament. That was expected given the polls.

But the Alternative for Germany (AfD) did better than predicted and took 12.6 percent. It is now the third party in the German parliament with 93 seats.

A bigger shock was the performance of Angela Merkel's centre-right CDU and its Bavarian sister party (CSU). The supposed iron chancellor of Europe took her party to its worst performance since 1949, falling to 33 percent - a loss of 8.5 percentage points on four years ago.

Though still the largest party and in talks to form a new coalition, Merkel has been significantly weakened. The centre-left SPD has suffered a disaster with its worst result ever. It got barely over 20 percent and immediately ruled out going back into the "grand coalition" which has bled its electoral support over the last four years.

Merkel now has to form a conflicted coalition with the free market liberal FDP (who got 10.7 percent) and the Greens, on 8.9 percent.

The SPD has pursued the kind of centrist politics promoted by a voluble core of Blair-era MPs in the British Labour Party. They should behold the result. Indeed, across the European continent from Ireland to Greece, Blair-Brownite politics is sinking labour-type parties everywhere.

The only major exception to the decline of the centre-left is the British Labour Party. And under Jeremy Corbyn, it is the only one with a leader and policies aimed squarely against austerity and offering some radical change for working people.

It is the only one also with a party leadership that has had a strong relationship with social movements for radical change - against austerity, racism and war.

That, not mythologised German stability and prosperity, is the exception in Europe. Indeed, Germany now expresses the political turmoil we have seen in other countries - most recently France. The two traditional governing parties lost 14 percent of the vote between them, polling 53 percent combined.

There is a fragmentation of the party political system, with seven parties in the parliament.

And there is a polarisation. The far right has been able to gain frighteningly from it. The radical left Die Linke slightly improved its vote to 9.2 percent, despite a squeeze earlier this year.

Die Linke's overall vote masks a significant regional and demographic shift. It lost heavily in the former East German states, which had been the party's bedrock but where it has been more governmentally oriented and appeared as a conventional party. It lost a third of its vote in Saxony.

That was offset by substantial gains in parts of West Berlin and the west of the country. Despite a huge anti-left witch-hunt following the G20 protests in July, Die Linke won 12.2 percent in the city of Hamburg. It gained votes compared with the recent regional election in North Rhine Westphalia to take 7.5 percent.

But its decline in the rustbelt eastern states enabled the AfD to make an historic advance - concentrated in exactly that region, where it polled 23 percent.

That was not through direct voter switch from the radical left over to the far right, as liberal theories of "populism" would have us believe: politics as a horseshoe, with left and right close to one another and "centrists" representing progressive democracy.

The AfD did gain 400,000 votes directly from Die Linke, according to exit surveys. But it got 1.2 million from those who did not vote in 2013, 1 million from the CDU, about 700,000 from neo-Nazi and fringe parties, and about 400,000 from the SPD.

Its vote profile illustrates the nature of the party and how it has evolved out of a radicalisation on the right of politics to then be able to penetrate popular disaffected layers.

The AfD was founded in 2013 by free market economics professors as a Thatcherite eurosceptic party opposed on nationalist grounds to the bailouts of Greece and other countries at the height of the eurozone crisis.

It drew support from hardline traditional CDU circles and elements of the free market Liberals. It was not enough to cross the 5 percent threshold at the 2013 election, where it polled 4.7 percent.

Over the next two years it sharply radicalised in an overtly racist direction as a faction led by Frauke Petry ousted the founding leadership and put Islamophobia, not euroscepticism, at the centre of the party's programme.

It mingled with the anti-Muslim Pegida street protests and was well positioned to mount a campaign of racist agitation in response to the large refugee flows in 2015.

But there was nothing automatic about the arrival of largely Muslim refugees propelling the AfD forward. The dominant national mood in Germany in the summer of 2015 was to welcome the refugees, who Merkel pragmatically allowed in when she realised there was no way to stop the human tide which had fled war-torn Syria.

It was in the period after the refugee flows that the AfD was able to make significant headway. Merkel did a disgraceful deal with Turkey's Recep Erdogan to stop the refugees by force.

She continued to make a half-hearted defence of allowing the first arrivals in. But it became more and more tempered with promises not to let in more and to increase the rate of deportations. The mixed message had an unambiguous conclusion - the refugees are a problem.

And her government pressed on with austerity cuts to local services and increasingly precarious

working arrangements for millions of Germans.

This was the breeding ground for the AfD. And it was watered further when in the wake of incidents like the New Year Cologne sex assaults and the terror attack in Berlin mainstream right wing politicians, amplified by the corporate media, returned to themes they had pressed for over a decade - that Muslims do not fit in to liberal societies, multiculturalism has failed, and so on.

This was the context for the AfD's growth, defying simplistic analyses that its support would collapse once Germany and the EU tightened the fortress Europe policy last year.

Not only did it grow, it radicalised further with a strengthening wing that has a fascist perspective and is prepared to break the taboos of German history.

Bernd Hocke declared, for example, that Holocaust memorials are a national shame, and Germany should be "normal" in its national pride. Alexander Gauland, joint lead candidate in this election, said during the campaign that he was proud of the German armed forces of the last century, including during the Second World War.

Not all AfD members share that attempt to relativise Nazism. But the party conference in April would not even debate a motion from Petry putting distance between AfD and the outright neo-Nazis who have gravitated towards it.

The one-time radicalising leader has been outflanked by an even more fascist wing. Immediately on being elected on the AfD ticket, Petry resigned the whip, an indication of the strength of the more extreme faction in the parliamentary cohort.

There is a bigger gap between AfD voters and the fascist core of the party. Some 34 percent say they voted out of commitment to the party, with 60 percent saying they were "against all the other parties".

But that is little cause for the highly complacent responses from some liberal European quarters to the AfD breakthrough.

That has depended on two things. The election campaign was heavily shaped by questions of security and terrorism, pushed by the right wing media and also by mainstream right wing politicians.

Merkel opened her bid for re-election promising to ban the burka, and journalists put AfD themes at the centre of the television debate between her and the SPD's Martin Schulz, with both of them making concessions to the far right.

Second, there was scant difference between the two main parties who had been in coalition together.

The combination meant that anti-Muslim racism could become an organising principle for the AfD to move beyond a hard right base and scoop up disaffected votes.

It will now have 700 full time operatives paid for by the German parliamentary budget. A significant cohort will be out-and-out fascists.

As the Petry resignation shows, tensions between the different wings of the AfD will not evaporate. But they will be assuaged by these resources and the fact that the AfD can now present itself as a shining model to the European far right.

The material resources the AfD has acquired will enable it to build a mechanism to try to harden its voter and membership support.

Its parliamentary presence also means that it will be rubbing shoulders with hard-right CDU and CSU MPs who bitterly opposed Merkel's nods to social liberalism.

SPD leaders on Sunday night were somewhat theatrically invoking their forebear Otto Wells making an anti-Nazi speech in 1933. They forget that it was made after the left had failed to stop the fascists taking state power. It was the last such public speech Wells made.

Much more seriously, activists in Die Linke are trying seriously to address the situation.

Young people took to the streets of Berlin's Alexanderplatz on Sunday night to protest against the AfD as results came in.

Anti-racist activists in Die Linke launched last year the Aufstehen Gegen Rassismus coalition. Its aim is to draw into common action against the AfD and racism the vast layers of the working class and oppressed who oppose them.

And it is also an echo of the British experience of this sharp political polarisation common now across Europe.

It is good to have a party with radical left wing policies. But it is not enough.

Can there be a mass, participatory left wing politics embedded in powerful social movements that can reach those embittered and alienated layers in society who, if not, are given all the reason in the world by the mainstream right and its media to gravitate to racist scapegoating, a false solution behind which lie actual fascists?

Now in the parliament of Germany.

Kevin Ovenden

P.S.

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