

The expected shock of the German elections -“That will certainly produce a new balance of forces”

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As expected and based on numerous pre-election polls, Angela Merkel has secured her fourth term as German Chancellor. Yet despite the relatively strong performance of the German economy, the result of Sunday’s election shows a sharp swing to the right. It is part of the growing political and social polarisation overtaking Europe, created by anti-migrant and anti-establishment sentiments. After Brexit and Le Pen, even politically and economically stable Germany is showing signs of instability, even if relatively contained so far.

In response, German social movements like ATTAC Germany have declared that the continuation of the prevalent politics that resulted in the rise of right-wing populism is not an option. “Racism and right-wing extremism must be decisively opposed and now bold concepts for social cohesion and global solidarity must be advanced”, they write.

The end of the ‘radical centre’?

The two biggest German parties got their lowest share of the vote since the end of World War II. The parties of the centre-right (Merkel’s party, the Christian Democrats/Social Union or CDU) and centre-left (the Social Democrats or SPD) suffered significant losses – the CDU lost 8.5% points from the 2013 election and finished with 33%, while the SPD lost 5.2% points and ended with 20.5%. The voter turnout was 75%.

Many analysts from Germany and outside have described Angela Merkel as one of the most interesting politicians of our time. As the longest-serving elected leader in Western Europe today, she is also the most experienced. She operates with an almost scientific manner, she is experimental and at the same time like a seasoned chess player, and is frequently able to successfully anticipate the political outcome of her strategic moves and those of others. In the mid-2000s she recovered from the early losses of her party’s attempt at ‘soft Thatcherism’ and, thanks to German economic recovery, led her party and Germany under the politics of ‘radical centrism’ – melding ideas from the left and right of the political spectrum.

It is noteworthy that under Merkel’s government, many of the traditional positions of the Left have been put into law since 2005: the introduction of a minimum wage and some minimal re-regulation of the labour market, abolishment of compulsory military service, implementation of a socially liberal

family policy encouraging higher labour market participation for women, a gradual transition out of nuclear power and, most recently, marriage equality for all genders. Many Germans did not expect that all these reforms will be realised under a CDU leadership.

Shifts at the bottom

The big winner of the election was the anti-immigrant, ultra-nationalist, anti-Muslim, Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland - AfD) which polled 12.6%, compared with 4.7% in 2013 and entered the German parliament (Bundestag) for the first time. The UK Independence Party has responded by inviting the AfD to attend its party conference [1] - its most high profile meeting - in Torquay today. Nigel Farage, Brexit's main campaigner, attended a rally for the far-right party in Berlin in the run-up to the election and received a standing ovation [2]. He shared the stage at the rally with Beatrix von Storch, a granddaughter of Hitler's finance minister.

The other major gainer was the corporate-friendly, neoliberal Free Democrats (FDP) which polled 10.7% compared to 4.8% last time and re-entered the Bundestag. Both Die Linke (Left) party and the Greens polled almost the same as last time with 9.2% and 8.9% respectively.

Not surprisingly, the SPD has announced that it will not enter into another 'grand coalition' with the CDU, as it felt the backlash for having partnered with Merkel's government in the last parliament. What is also revealing is that the SPD particularly lost support in areas of West Germany where there is high unemployment. This shows that the poorer sections of German society do not see the SPD as representative of their interests or as presenting a viable alternative to the status quo.

Is the 'Merkel effect' trumped by the 'Trump effect'?

Will Merkel's CDU continue its radical centrist model of governance? Who will be able to take advantage of the cracks in the centrist status quo? Will it be the Left or the Right, and in which direction will the German society be pulled? Which new political conflicts will this give rise to?

Merkel has succeeded politically by abandoning many traditional conservative positions, which has enabled her to side-line left and liberal criticisms. She considerably toughened German asylum laws in the wake of the refugee crisis, without appearing inhumane. She secured the EU's external border and at the same time presented a stable Germany that left its borders open within the EU and allowed refugees in. Economically, she secured German stability by externalising socio-economic problems - making Europe's southern periphery, especially Greece, Portugal, Italy, and to a lesser extent Spain, carry the costs of the Eurozone crisis [3].

The fact that 90 elected fascists will enter Germany's parliament for the first time since they entered in 1933 and lost power in the Second World War is very significant. Despite the internal ideological conflicts and the different shades of the far-right inside the party, this signals the normalisation of previously unacceptable ideas of racism and far-right German nationalism. It is part of the global rise of the culture of hate that is reflected in the election of Trump and other hard-right leaders around the world. And it requires an honest and realistic analysis of why current relations between different sectors and people in our society give space for right-wing populism and ultra-right politics. In Germany and elsewhere progressive movements are faced with new challenges from this "new normal".

More than ever we need a deep rethinking of the strategies and options that we in the progressive movement have prioritised over the years. Are we now reaping the consequences of what Arundhati

Roy rightly criticised as “the NGOisation of resistance” [4]?

One of the biggest mistakes taught to us by history is that of underestimating the Nazis. This doesn't mean that the German progressives downplayed the AfD, but rather that now is the time for European progressives to start the important work of assessing the balance of forces in Europe and crafting new strategies in organising and mobilisation. We must find progressive solutions to the social and economic crisis that is alienating people. If the far-right is not defeated in the near future, they will further consolidate their power and transform society in ways that could be irreversible.

Speaking of balance of forces, there is one big consequence for the AfD entry to the Bundestag (German Parliament). One specificity of German politics, which makes it different from most parliamentary systems around the world, is that parties get proportional funding based on their representation in the Bundestag, which can be used for their political work, and for the operations of think-tanks/foundations associated with the parties. The AfD, with their entry to the Bundestag, will now have access to resources that they could use to fund and set up new think tanks and institutes that will spread their far-right and alt-right politics. They could also use those resources to fund initiatives of their partners – possibly including UKIP – in Europe and elsewhere. On the other hand, the reduced funds of the SPD will mean a reduction on the available resources that the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and affiliated institutions can grant to the work of strengthening trade unions and other socially-oriented initiatives worldwide.

That will certainly produce a new balance of forces that could further shape our global politics.

Dorothy Grace Guerrero, 29 September 2017

P.S.

* <http://www.globaljustice.org.uk/blog/2017/sep/29/expected-shock-german-elections>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/sep/25/senior-member-of-germanys-far-right-afd-to-address-ukip-conference>

[2] <http://news.sky.com/story/farage-says-germany-should-revolt-against-eu-as-he-joins-far-right-afd-election-rally-11026278>

[3] <http://www.globaljustice.org.uk/news/2015/jul/10/cancel-greek-debt-projected-german-embassy-london>

[4] ESSF (article 42088), [The NGO-ization of resistance – “Real resistance has real consequences. And no salary”](#).