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Coming End of Merkel's Era: Whither Future European Leadership?

By Frederick Kliem

SYNOPSIS

A small state parliament in Germany's east elected a new state government, triggering a political earthquake in Germany. This has precipitated several high-level resignations, and possibly the fall of Angela Merkel.

COMMENTARY

IN THE small German State of Thüringen, a local election recently shook the foundations of Germany's political landscape and possibly put an end to the Angela Merkel era. The little-known leader of the local FDP, Thomas Kemmerich, was elected Ministerpräsident, or "Minister-President" (head of state-government in Germany's federalist system). The shocking result was brought about by an unofficial quasi-alliance of the centrist parties FDP and CDU with the far-right AfD – hitherto something unthinkable.

Almost immediately, the Thüringen ballot caused nation-wide uproar. FDP and CDU faced the most furious of criticisms from across the country; Kemmerich was forced to resign, closely followed by no one less than the federal-CDU leader and defence minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, the handpicked successor of Chancellor Merkel.

Faustian Pact & Its Consequences

Merkel herself stretched her authority beyond the acceptable by demanding the resignation of a duly elected Ministerpräsident. De jure, the Thüringen election was democratically sound. As extreme as AfD may be, it is a duly elected party and its parliamentarians free to support any candidate they choose.

The de facto taboo lies in the unprecedented election of a government through AfD votes and with the acquiescence of the centrist parties, in violation of the nation-wide consensus to stigmatise the far-right. Worse still, the Thüringen AfD is the most extreme of all AfD chapters, and their leader, Björn Höcke, espouses strong elements of fascism and racism.

Kramp-Karrenbauer failed to discipline the Thüringen chapter to honour the official CDU consensus against cooperating with any extreme party. Afterwards, she called for new state-elections but lacked the power to enforce such demands. Ultimately, the local refusal to follow federal consensus has serious consequences.

Firstly, this farce demonstrated how the rise of small and extremist parties increasingly destabilises Germany's political system, fragments parliaments and makes the anti-extremist consensus of the established big-tent parties increasingly difficult to sustain.

Secondly, it exposed how deeply factionalised Merkel's CDU is. While some support the liberal path Merkel has taken, others are concerned about what they see as a departure from traditional conservative values. Some even openly toy with the idea of cooperating with the AfD, or at least adopting some of their public policy positions.

And thirdly, while Merkel was already on her way out of the German Chancellery, the AfD may just have managed to expedite this process. This would not only be a huge win for the AfD who has always campaigned to achieve Merkel's ouster. It may also end the hope that for the first time in German history a Chancellor leaves on her own terms and in an orderly fashion.

End of Angela Merkel

Angela Merkel has never been the same since Europe's refugee crisis in 2015, which many in Germany and Europe think she badly mishandled. Despite still being popular among Germans, Merkel is the number one target of the intensifying ideological trench-warfare within both country and party.

That Merkel was forced to put her foot down in Thüringen and weigh-in from an overseas trip symbolised just how badly she managed her own power transition.

Chancellor Merkel intends to remain in office until the 2021 elections but transferred CDU party leadership to her chosen heir Kramp-Karrenbauer in 2018. This broke with Merkel's own preference of concentrating leadership of government and party in one person.

This made it impossible for Kramp-Karrenbauer to consolidate a power base in the party and gain the authority necessary to maintain party discipline.

Power Jostling Begins

Several high-ranking CDU politicians will now position themselves to succeed Kramp-Karrenbauer. However, given her experience, it is unlikely that her successor would accept party leadership while Merkel remains Chancellor.

At the same time, Merkel herself has given no sign of contemplating resignation, and the CDU coalition partner, SPD, suggested that they will not continue the coalition under any other CDU Chancellor.

In other words, either the CDU exhausts itself in a prolonged leadership crisis, or, more likely, the government collapses, precipitating early general elections and the end of the Merkel-era.

The Thüringen debacle already is a huge victory for Höcke and the AfD. A far-right populist leader of a small parliamentary group in a small state has brought about the ultimate embarrassment for the establishment.

They have mocked the Thüringen parliament, the FDP and the CDU. Höcke already caused the fall of the CDU leader, and may indirectly trigger Merkel's political demise, too. The AfD have triggered a national crisis, which will probably further boost their popularity.

A European Leadership Crisis?

Merkel was widely considered the most powerful actor in Europe and the shining light of EU politics. The longest serving head of government in the EU has proven time and again her steady hand and acquired a reputation for being Europe's undisputed authority. But Germany has thus far failed to confront the consequences of geopolitical change.

There are powerful voices in Germany urging government and country to think strategically, assume global responsibility and leadership, and prepare Germans for the costs of geopolitical change. However, neither the German population nor a lame-duck government is willing or able to heed this advice.

Later this year Germany will duly assume the rotating EU Presidency; an important function in the EU that demands German leadership. Supposedly with this in mind, Merkel wants to ride out this crisis.

However, with Merkel's failure to secure an orderly transition, Germany will be looking inwards for some time to come, whether she sits out her term or not.

Regardless of how events in Germany unfold, European leadership will be in the hands of Emmanuel Macron. Macron does not have robust domestic support, either, but the French president is full of strategic vision for Europe. And with the end of Merkel, Europe will need French leadership more than ever.

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