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Germany:

Merkel triumphs ... what now?

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The conservative Christian Democrat parties (CDU/CSU) and their Chancellor Angela Merkel were the winners of the federal elections in Germany which took place on September 22, 2013. With 41.5 % of the votes they scored 7.7% more than in the 2009 elections. Why? In Germany, Merkel's policies are not seen as confrontational. There are even references to a "social-democratisation" taking place under Merkel, with such examples being given as the retreat from nuclear power after Fukushima, the abrogation of compulsory military service, the improvement of the status of same sex couples and the relative opening to themes of social justice.

Add to this the weakness of the alternative proposed by the SPD led by Peer Steinbrück, a frosty technocrat and an avowed partisan of agenda 2010 and a symbol of the high living aspirations of politicians close to the business world, who was not capable of credibly transmitting the messages of the SPD concerning social justice. The SPD nonetheless gained 2.7 % to reach 25.7%.

The parties who did not reach the 5% threshold necessary to gain parliamentary representation together scored nearly 15% of the vote: the FDP won 4.8%, while the new Alliance for Germany (AfD) scored 4.7 % after centring its campaign on exit from the euro, while other small parties scored around 5 % collectively.

Of 61.8 million Germans on the electoral register, 71.5% voted. In 2009, it was 70.8%. Even if the candidacy of the new forces energized some voters, electoral abstention remains significant and witnesses to the degree of erosion of the credibility of the political system.

The defeat of the FDP was spectacular. If it succeeded in obtaining representatives with 5 % in the Land of Hesse (which held a regional election parallel to the federal ballot), at the federal level it lost 9.8% in comparison with 2009 and failed to obtain representation in the Bundestag. Its loss of 400,000 votes mainly benefited the AfD, which also took some 300,000 votes from Die Linke and a little less from the CDU/CSU. The AfD concealed its chauvinist motives by claiming that exit from the euro would be in the interests of the economically disadvantaged European countries. Die Linke should ask itself whether it has been capable of clearly articulating its opposition to EU policies inside the Troika.

Another spectacular fact of these elections was the 8.4% scored by the Greens. They only lost 2.3% in relation to the elections of 2009, but after Fukushima and the big anti-nuclear mobilizations the polls gave them more than 20%.

The Left Party (Die Linke) became the third biggest force in the Bundestag with 8.6%. In 2009 Die Linke had won 11.9% so it could be seen as a defeat. In fact, given that in spring 2012 it was below 6% in the polls and that it had since then lost all the elections in the Länder of western Germany, it did quite well. In the Land of Hesse, Die Linke scored more than 5% for the third time. Also, in the western Länder where it is much weaker than in the east, Die Linke scored an average of more than 5 %. So we can say that Die Linke has consolidated its position and is rising electorally by presenting a certain number of social, democratic and anti-militarist demands, without however clearly formulating an overall alternative to the power of capital.

What will the strategists (or rather tacticians) of the parliamentary parties do now? In the Bundestag as in the Landtag of Hesse, the representatives of the SPD, Greens and Die Linke have a majority, which would allow them to overthrow the CDU/CSU and form a government. But the SPD and Greens do not want a coalition with Die Linke. And if the latter makes advances, it stresses at the same time its profound divergences. To govern with the SPD and

Greens at the federal level, Die Linke must accept the participation of the Bundeswehr in global military interventions. For the moment, that is not imaginable. The most realistic hypothesis seems then to be a “grand coalition” of the CDU/CSU with the SPD. The tradition of a left-right opposition thus becomes more distant in Germany.

Difficulties of a governmental coalition

For the CDU/CSU, its electoral triumph was relative because of the loss of its preferred partner, the FDP. In the final phase before the elections, the latter had relied on what are known in Germany as “borrowed votes” (“Leihstimmen”) hoping those who wanted Merkel as Chancellor would vote for the FDP. The CDU/CSU did not accept this, saying that each party should fight to maximize its vote. And now they have two options, to compromise either in the area of the minimum wage (SPD) or on energy policy (Greens). And the CDU/CSU does not yet know if one of these two options could be realized or if new elections are needed.

The breakthrough of the AfD, which nearly broke through the 5% threshold, is threatening for the CDU/CSU. The list of leaders and candidates for this formation includes university lecturers, lawyers, doctors, and leading company managers. The AfD is accused of being a disguised far right formation, and not only because of its anti-euro position. For example, one of its posters inveighs against “immigration in our systems of social protection”, which is a typical theme of the far right populists and neo-Nazis. The leaders of the AfD responded to this by citing the programme of the Bavarian CSU, where the same miserable and revolting words can be read. The Christian Democrats fear that a new political formation could in the medium term eat up the votes of their right wing.

In the SPD, the debate rages between those who tend to the “responsible” solution of being once again the junior partner of the CDU/CSU and those who reject this option. The candidate for Chancellor, Peer Steinbrück, has himself very clearly come out against this option and said that he will not again be a minister under Angela Merkel. Now a good number of city sections and prestigious regional representatives of the SPD (like Hannelore Kraft, minister-president in North Rhine-Westphalia) have publicly rejected a CDU/CSU-SPD coalition.

There are different reasons for this, and the most important for the SPD leaders is probably at the tactical level: the fear of having no possibility of preserving a party profile in such a constellation and again experiencing a serious erosion of its electorate. Maybe the SPD leadership will attempt to up the ante “already, it is not just demanding changes in the minimum wage and an adjustment of taxes on high incomes in the governmental programme, but also the same number of ministers as the CDU/CSU” and opt for the “responsible” road. But it isn’t certain.

In the Green party, heads are down. Their result is seen as a serious defeat. Responsibility is assigned to the leadership of the party and the Bundestag fraction and above all to Jürgen Trittin, accused of taking the party “too far to the left”. This concerns primarily tax policy - the Greens demanded higher taxes not only for the wealthy, but also for the more prosperous layers in the broadest sense of the word (nearly one third of the population would have been affected) which is a significant part of its electorate. The polls show that the Greens lost votes among these layers.

The debate inside the Greens could then lead them to the right. It should not compete too much with Die Linke in terms of social policy, it is argued. It should go more towards “the political centre of the electorate” with themes linking ecology and economy. And it should emerge from the prison of an alliance at any price with the SPD, whose non-majoritarian character had already been very clear before the elections (since the option of including Die Linke is excluded).

But that does not mean that the hypothesis of a “black-green” government (CDU/CSU plus Greens) is a very likely hypothesis. First, the Greens like the SPD had very clearly ruled out this option during the electoral campaign.

Secondly, there are reasons to say that this would be “too soon”, given the hereditary political-cultural alienation of the most conservative wing of the parties of the Union and above all the Bavarian CSU. Thirdly, the divergences on energy policy remain sizeable, above all so far as coal is concerned. That said, as with the SPD, nobody can foresee the outcome of the negotiations to form a government, which will probably take several weeks or even months.

Die Linke had readjusted its profile before the electoral campaign. There was a choice between the more “realist” approach of Gregor Gysi towards the SPD and the Greens and the more confrontational approach incarnated by Oskar Lafontaine. At the party congress it was Gysi who triumphed. Invoking the “end of public disputes damaging to the party” he emerged as the sole principal spokesperson of the party at the federal level. Sahra Wagenknecht was number two behind him. If she is popular and has a good media profile, it should also be said that she has watered down her “left” profile inside Die Linke, speaking for example of the heritage of Ludwig Erhard and the social market ideology which should be revived to combat neoliberalism.

Of course, the Die Linke spokespersons attacked the SPD and Greens, denouncing the fact that these parties prefer a Merkel government to a government based on the majority of the SPD, Greens and Die Linke in the Bundestag. Janine Wissler of Die Linke in Hesse says the same thing. She is on the left within Die Linke.

But, above all at the federal level, the realization of the dream of the partisans of “Realpolitik” inside Die Linke does not seem very realistic for now. This is not only because of the categorical “no” of the SPD and Greens. Also, the polls show that only a small minority of the German electorate favour a “red-red-green” coalition. And the main leaders of Die Linke, even the more “rightist” like Gysi, in the context of a party with several organised currents, stress the significant divergences between Die Linke and the SPD/Greens.

The most significant of these divergences concerns foreign policy. Die Linke is against the participation of the Bundeswehr in military missions “outside the zone” and also missions under UN cover. It is also against arms exports, which are important for German capitalism. There are also divergences in the area of social and economic policy, although these could be subject to various compromises. In the event of a compromise on foreign policy, Die Linke would sacrifice positions with deep support in its own electorate and party. That doesn’t go only for its left currents, but also for example its base in eastern Germany: if in this electorate the tendency is to the Realpolitik of governmental participation, hostility to an aggressive world role for the Bundeswehr remains dominant. But in the medium and long term, the trend towards this Realpolitik at the federal level (and not only at the level of the Länder, where Die Linke co-governs Brandenburg), gets stronger. Only popular mobilization for solidarity based solutions, including for wage earners and the jobless in the economically weakest countries in Europe, could reverse it.

Results of the federal elections of September 22, 2013:

CDU/CSU, head of list Angela Merkel: 41.55 %, 311 seats out of 630 (+ 72)

SPD, head of list Peter Steinbrück: 25.74 % (192 seats (+ 46)

Die Linke, collective head of list: 8.59 %, 64 seats (- 12)

Alliance 90-Greens (heads of list Katrin Göring-Eckhardt and Jürgen Trittin): 8.44 %, 63 seats (- 5)

FDP, head of list Philipp Rösler: 4.76%, 0 seats (- 92)

AfD, head of list Bernd Lucke: 4.70 %, 0 seats (± 0)

Pirate party, head of list Bernd Schlömer: 2.19%, 0 seats (± 0)

NPD, head of list Holger Apfel: 1.28 %, 0 seats (± 0)

Others: 2.75 %, 0 seats (± 0)