

Germany's presidential election – image failure of the governing party

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On 30th June the Federal Assembly chose Christian Wulff (CDU) for the office of the president of Germany. The early election forced by the unexpected resignation of Horst Köhler was treated as a tug-of-war between opposition parties and the governing coalition. In the public debate the victory of a candidate supported by CDU/CSU/FDP was even considered to be a condition for the legitimacy of the government's continuation. Wulff's victory only in the third round is yet another image failure of the German governing coalition which is wrestling with acute internal conflicts additionally deepened by a drastic fall of support and the eurozone crisis. The difficulties with pushing for a common candidate by Chancellor Angela Merkel have deepened the mutual distrust of the coalition partners. Due to competition among particular coalition parties and no consent on the cabinet's priorities, cooperation between the Christian Democrats and the liberals until the end of their term will be limited to the most urgent projects. However, coalition breakdown is not to be expected now, though it had been forecast by German media.

Election results

Christian Wulff, the CDU/CSU/FDP coalition candidate was elected only in the third round, where he received 625 of 1242 votes of deputies to the Federal Assembly consisting of Bundestag MPs and representatives of German federal states. His main rival, the independent Joachim Gauck supported by the SPD and the Green Party received 494 votes. The early election has raised a lot of emotion in Germany. It resulted mainly from the surprising resignation of Horst Köhler following criticism of his opinion on the Bundeswehr's participation in foreign military missions. The second factor was the opposition parties putting forward the candidacy of Joachim Gauck, who enjoys social and media support. Gauck, one of the democratic opposition leaders in the former East Germany and then the Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Archives, is also very popular among the coalition's parties. The arithmetic division of votes indicated the strong likelihood of Wulff's victory already in the first round, yet many coalition electors voted against their own candidate, contrary to instructions from the party whip. The forced victory of the coalition's candidate is an image failure of the government. The lack of support for Wulff was first of all an expression of the electors' dissatisfaction with the governing method of Chancellor Merkel and the never-ending conflicts among the coalition partners, and not a vote of no confidence towards the candidate himself. The deadlock taking place in the German

government will become further entrenched due to the Christian Democrats and Liberals blaming one another for disloyalty.

Conflicts in the “dream coalition”

The start of the CDU/CSU/FDP government's work was accompanied by extremely high expectations resulting from the apparent similarities of their programmes. There was a common belief that cooperation between the Christian Democrats and the Liberals will be more efficient than the work of the Great Coalition of 2005–2009 (a lot of key reforms were not to be completed as a result of too great discrepancies between the CDU's and the SPD's programmes). The hope was additionally fed by leaders of the future government, who spoke of a “dream coalition”. However, programme differences proved to be of substance, which was already noticeable during the very difficult negotiations over the coalition agreement. This prevents the completion of key government intentions, e.g. the reform of the tax system (the firm objection of the Christian Democrats to the tax reduction consistently pushed by the FDP), the reform of the health care system (a dispute between the CSU and FDP on the shape of the reform presented by the Liberal minister of health) or the extension of nuclear power plants' life cycles (no unanimity among the Christian Democrats on the legitimacy of extending them).

The consequences of the conflict on the government's work

Disputes held in public, which slow down the government's work, as well as objections to Chancellor Merkel on her inability to take decisions, e.g. during the debate on granting financial aid to Greece, have resulted in the downturn of the CDU/CSU/FDP coalition. Support for the government has decreased since the Bundestag election in 2009 by nearly 12 percentage points, and for Chancellor Merkel – by 17 percentage points. The Liberals are in the most difficult situation, as their popularity fell by nearly 10 percentage points (to approximately 5%) and some of whose local politicians publicly demanded a change in the party's leadership. Low support for the government will additionally hinder the realisation of ambitious plans from before the Bundestag election, all the more so as a result of May election to North Rhine-Westphalia parliament through which the coalition lost its majority of votes in the Bundesrat.

The coalition conflicts should not paralyse the government's work totally or result in a breakdown of the coalition, as this is not the interest of any of the parties making up the coalition. As examples show –the bill passed in 2009 whose aim was to stimulate economic growth through tax credits for citizens, the bill granting financial aid to Greece, the extension of the Bundeswehr's mission in Afghanistan and the budget savings plan accepted in June – the coalition partners can unite and achieve understanding in the name of necessary short-term reforms. The government will however have to give up on its key projects such as a comprehensive reform of the German welfare state and the reform of the tax system.

Appendix

Germany's new president

Christian Wulff, aged 51, a lawyer. A CDU member since 1975, since 1984 a member of the management board of the Christian Democrats in Lower Saxony, 1994-1998 the president of the party in Lower Saxony. 1998-2003 a vice president of the federal CDU.

He was part of the conservative faction of the CDU, the 'Andes Pact' established in the 1970s by a group of young Christian Democratic politicians (among them Roland Koch, Peter Müller, Günther Oettinger and Hans-Gert Pötering). The politicians from this circle are considered to be critical of Angela Merkel. After the CDU won the parliamentary election in Lower Saxony in 2003, Wulff took the position of prime minister of this federal state which he held until 30 June 2010. Despite severe austerity measures introduced as early as in his first term in office Wulff was a very popular politician in his federal state (supported by approximately 60% of its population).

He earned social support among other things due to the stance he took in the dispute with the European Commission over the law on Volkswagen that guaranteed Lower Saxony a package of 20% of the shares of the company. This package enabled Lower Saxony to block other shareholders, in case they had plans to move production to other countries which would mean job losses in Lower Saxony. In 2007 the European Court of Justice deemed the law contrary to the EU principle of the free flow of capital and ordered this legislation to be changed. As prime minister of Lower Saxony, Wulff intensified cooperation with the Federation of Expellees, which was manifested by relaunching conventions of Landsmannschaft Schlesien in Hannover and funding them or giving support to the establishment of the Centre against Expulsions in Berlin. Wulff was also in favour of keeping the candidacy of Erika Steinbach for the membership of the board of the Foundation Escape Expulsion Reconciliation.

Despite the fact that the support given to Christian Wulff in pre-election polls was lower than that of his rival Joachim Gauck, over 80% of Germans questioned after the election think that Christian Wulff will make a good president. It cannot, however, be expected that Wulff will be a charismatic politician who expresses his opinion in all public debates. His presidency is likely to be based on the priorities that he embraced already as the prime minister of a federal state and which were included in the coalition agreement with the present German government. As could be heard in Wulff's first speech after he was sworn in as president of Germany on 2 July 2010, these priorities are the following: education, the policy of integration aimed at both immigrants and the societies of western and eastern parts of Germany that are still not entirely unified.