

## Germany: the failure of the coalition talks

Artur Ciechanowicz

Less than two months after the general elections, Germany is in a state of political crisis. The talks between the potential coalition partners, which have been going on for several weeks, have been broken off by the liberal Free Democratic Party. On 19 November, their chairman Christian Lindner announced the decision to end negotiations, stating that his party could not accept the proposed compromise. In his opinion, the draft document setting out the courses of action of a proposed government made up of the CDU/CSU, the FDP and the Greens contained too many points which were vague, contradictory, or even harmful. However, the main drawback of the document, according to Lindner, was that it did not guarantee any landmark changes, including in the fields of education and taxes. From the FDP's point of view, participating in such a government would run the risk of losing the trust of the voters. Lindner's decision took politicians from the other parties involved in the talks by surprise. However, it was consistent with what he had said during the election campaign. He announced at that time that the FDP's objective was not to form a part of the government at all costs.

Representatives of the CDU, CSU and the Greens strongly criticised the FDP's decision, accusing Lindner of jeopardising the results of many weeks' work. Both the Christian Democrats and the Greens argue that the negotiating parties had been very close to reaching an agreement on the most disputed issues (migration policy, climate protection and taxes). Yet, from the very beginning the coalition talks had been marred by a lack of trust between the participants, and any agreement would only have been reached with great effort.

### Commentary

- The resumption of talks on a 'Jamaican coalition', which had hitherto been treated as virtually the only government option, is unlikely. It does not seem plausible that the FDP's decision was simply an extreme negotiating argument aimed at forcing concessions from its future partners. In that scenario, the FDP would have problems justifying another change of heart. In the present situation, the creation of a minority government is more likely. The FDP has announced that it is willing to support such a government to the extent that it would be compatible with its political programme. However, it is not a foregone conclusion that the Greens would be interested in joining a minority government with the Christian Democrats. Also, Angela Merkel has for now ruled out the possibility of running a minority government as being inherently unstable and incapable

of responding to the challenges facing Germany. Excluding three brief transitional periods, a minority government is not a solution that has been practiced in post-war democratic Germany.

- In the face of the failure of the 'Jamaican coalition', one purely theoretical solution is to return to the concept of the grand coalition with the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats. So far, the SPD has ruled out such a scenario, and does not seem willing to change its stance, even if Merkel resigned from the Chancellorship. Some prominent SPD politicians (such as Sigmar Gabriel, the Vice Chancellor and head of the foreign ministry) believe that a CDU/CSU-SPD government would be the best option for Germany.
- The deadlock in the coalition talks could lead to early elections. These would have to be preceded by a complicated procedure in which the President plays the most important role. The German constitution provides that the President should propose a candidate for Chancellor to the *Bundestag*, who must receive the votes of a majority of the members of the parliament. If the candidate put to the vote is not elected, *Bundestag* may elect a Chancellor within fourteen days after the ballot by the votes of more than one half of its members. If no-one is elected within this period, a new ballot takes place, in which the person who receives the largest number of votes is elected. If the person elected receives the votes of a majority of the members of the *Bundestag*, the President must appoint him within seven days after the election. If the person elected does not receive such a majority, then it is up to the President to appoint them or dissolve the *Bundestag*, and new elections will be held within 60 days of the dissolution. President Frank-Walter Steinmeier is sceptical of the idea of new elections, but the lack of will among the parties to reach an agreement may mean there is no other way to avert the crisis. The current state of support for the parties in opinion polls indicates that early elections would not clearly alter the balance of power in the *Bundestag*, and might only prove beneficial for the national conservative AfD party. A new vote may not solve the problem which confronts the German parties, especially the Christian Democrats under Angela Merkel, who has now held the office of Chancellor for twelve years.