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The political impasse in Germany

The complicated electoral system is not the culprit. The problem lies in the fractured verdict in the 24 September elections to the Bundestag

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Federal elections to parliament—the Bundestag—were held in Germany on 24 September. It has been 11 weeks but no government has been formed so far. Indeed, talks among political parties for the most plausible coalition have collapsed. Obvious questions arise. Which political parties will form the government? How long will this take? Is it possible that no government will emerge? Answers are elusive. It would seem that there is a political impasse in Germany.

The elections produced a highly fractured verdict. The percentages of the total votes polled by each of the main political parties were as follows: Christian Democrats (CDU) plus their Bavarian sister party Christian Social Union (CSU), 33%, Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), 20.5%, Alternative for Germany (AfD), 12.6%, Free Democrats (FDP), 10.7%, Die Linke (DL, the Left), 9.2%, the Greens, 8.9%, and others, 5.1%. The number of seats for each of the seven parties in the Bundestag is: CDU/CSU (246), SPD (153), AfD (92), FDP (80), DL (69) and Greens (67).

Some might attribute this situation to the complex electoral system in Germany which is a mix of direct elections and proportional representation. Every four years, voters elect members of the Bundestag, which in turn elects the next chancellor. Citizens cast two votes: one for a candidate in their constituency and one for a political party. The Bundestag is meant to have 598 seats. There are 299 federal constituencies in Germany; the people of each elect a member of parliament directly. The remaining 299 seats are distributed among political parties in accordance with the proportion of votes polled by them, based on lists drawn up by parties. Parties that poll less than 5% of the vote do not get any such representation.

The system is complicated further by split votes as persons might vote for a candidate from one party in the first vote and for a different political party in the second vote. Thus, a political party might get more representation in the Bundestag than its share of the total vote. The system seeks to correct this by creating an overhang of extra seats in the Bundestag to ensure that every candidate elected directly gets a seat while political parties still get proportional representation in parliament based on their share of the total vote. Thus, the Bundestag elected in 2017 has 707 members, while the Bundestag elected in 2013 had 631 members. But the electoral system is not the culprit. The problem lies in the fractured verdict.

It is instructive to compare the election outcome in 2017 with that in 2013. The main losers were the partners in the grand coalition between the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats, traditional rivals in German politics, who cohabited as an odd couple for eight years. The vote share of CDU/CSU dropped by 8.5 percentage points from 41.5% to 33%, slumping to its lowest level since 1949. The vote share of the SPD dropped from 25.7% to 20.5%, its worst performance in a long time. Taken together, their

share of the total vote dropped sharply from two-thirds to around one-half.

Angela Merkel's brave refugee policies were an important reason for this decline but not the only one. Anti-incumbency after 12 years was no surprise. There was also voter fatigue with a tired coalition. Both partners paid a price for the grand coalition, as their core supporters or constituencies saw little difference between them. People turned to narrower, more distinct, parties with clear, rather than diffused, agendas.

The biggest gainer was the AfD. Its vote share jumped from zero to 12.6%. On debut, it became the third largest party in the Bundestag. The support for this nationalist-populist-right political formation came from the anti-refugee, anti-immigrant, anti-European Union (EU) voters. It grabbed 20% of the vote in the former Communist east. Its probable leader in the Bundestag, Alexander Gauland, stated "we have the right to be proud of the achievements of our soldiers in the two world wars", contesting how Germany views its Nazi past. But as many as 60% of the AfD voters said they were driven by disillusionment with the other parties.

The FDP was also a gainer. Its vote share more than doubled, from 4.8% to 10.7%. Its number in the Bundestag jumped from zero to 80. This pro-business, Eurosceptic party on the right has a growing appeal among traditional conservatives. The Left (DL) and the Greens retained their core political support. Their share of the total vote rose by 0.6% and 0.5%, respectively. Their numbers in the Bundestag rose from 64 to 69 and from 63 to 77, respectively.

Merkel, who has been elected chancellor of Germany for three successive terms, and has served 12 years so far, suffered a setback that was described as a nightmare victory. Election of the chancellor needs an absolute majority, which is 354 in a Bundestag of 707 members. Given this outcome, there are only two possibilities of a coalition government. The probable option was a repeat of the grand coalition between the CDU/CSU and the SPD but it was ruled out by the SPD leader Martin Schulz. The other option was a new alliance between CDU/CSU, FDP and Greens. It was dubbed the Jamaica Coalition, as the colours of the three parties are the same as those of the Jamaican flag.

These three parties were engaged in discussions to form a coalition government for almost two months. But the talks were marred by leaks in the media and sniping at each other in public. On 19 November, the FDP leader, Christian Lindner, staged a midnight walkout announcing that the talks had failed to provide a "common vision". In hindsight, this was almost inevitable, partly because of inflexible party positions and partly because of basic differences or conflicting objectives.

Three basic points of contention deserve mention. The first is refugees. The CSU and the FDP, opposed to Merkel on the issue, wanted to limit the number of refugees to 200,000 per year. But CDU sought to make this cap flexible to win over



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the Greens. The second is the EU. The CDU/CSU are pro-Europe. The FDP, with Eurosceptic beliefs, rules out large new transfers to EU member countries in the South and clearly wants Greece to leave the eurozone. The third is environmental issues. The Greens will join the government only if it moves towards banning cars with internal-combustion engines, whereas the CSU is the polar opposite as it will join the government only if it does not. Such conflicting objectives and beliefs, or preferences and prejudices, of political parties might have led to the breakdown of talks.

But the factors underlying the fragmentation of politics in Germany run deeper. There are four that need to be recognized. First, there is a rise of nationalist politics, much like elsewhere in Europe, that feeds on anti-refugee or anti-immigrant sentiment just as it exploits unemployment, insecurity or exclusion. Second, there are concerns among citizens about why, as taxpayers, they have to bear the burden of subsidizing countries such as Greece. Third, there is a disil-

lusionment, if not anger, among people with mainstream political parties, as in France, that have become almost indistinguishable from one another, and are sought to be punished by voters. Fourth, the importance of ideology has diminished as both CDU and SPD have moved to the same centre-space in the political matrix, so that people are attracted by parties that have clear agendas rather than diffused intentions which create choice-less democracies.

The election outcome in Germany mirrors developments elsewhere in rich countries. Brexit was an early warning. It was the first sign of such discontent among people. The election of Donald Trump as president of the US came next. It showed the resentment of people against the establishment in American politics, whether Republican or Democrats. France elected Emmanuel Macron as president. It was an explicit rejection of Republicans and Socialists as the mainstream political parties.

The continuing political uncertainty in Germany is cause for serious concern. It creates a vacuum in the economic and political leadership of Europe at a time when the EU is in crisis, with stress in economies and the rise of populist-nationalist political parties on the far right. Europe as a political project, which is both necessary and desirable for the world, is at risk. It has preserved peace in Europe—a continent with a long history of conflict and wars—for 70 years. Its voice and influence has been a balancing factor, to begin with in the Cold War, then in the unipolar world after the collapse of communism, and now in a changing world order where China aspires, the US withdraws, and Russia fishes in troubled waters.

What, then, are the possible political scenarios in Germany? Under its constitution, Merkel will continue as caretaker chancellor until a new government is formed or a fresh election is called. Following the collapse of the coalition talks between CDU/CSU, FDP and the Greens, there only seem to be two alternatives. The obvious one being talked about is a Grand Coalition, once again, between CDU/CSU and the SPD. It would require Martin Schulz to change his mind or the SPD to change its leader. Of course, this very Grand Coalition, which ruled Germany for eight years, was consciously rejected by the people two months ago. Even if feasible, it would not be correct. The less obvious choice is a minority government formed by Angela Merkel, with the support of either the FDP or the Greens, or neither, since the constitution provides that such a government will continue until the Bundestag elects another chancellor with an absolute majority. It could be a lame-duck government that has to negotiate support from other parties on every issue.

The only option is a new election. It risks another deadlock. But it is the correct choice in a political democracy.

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