

The Washington Post

Monkey Cage • Analysis

Is Merkel on her way out? Yes, but not quite yet.

By Dan Hough November 22 at 2:22 PM

Last weekend, Angela Merkel and her prospective government were supposed to announce to the world that everything was on track. But on Sunday evening, the liberal FDP (Free Democratic Party) made a dramatic departure from the coalition negotiations. Germany isn't in crisis, but it is facing a new set of challenges. Don't bet against Angela Merkel and the political class being more adept at meeting them than many fear.

Germans went to the polls on Sept. 24, and since then Angela Merkel has been trying to deal with the political fallout. Her Christian Democrats (CDU) and their regional partner the CSU garnered the most votes, 32.9 percent, but that performance was very much under par, down 8.6 points from 2013. She's since been trying to cobble together a coalition with the liberal Free Democrats and the Green Party ever since.

In Germany, that takes quite a long time. Any new German government agrees not only on principles but also on a detailed coalition agreement. It was widely hoped that the new government would be in place by Christmas, although it would not have been particularly unusual if detailed talks had taken until January. In the meantime, the previous government remains formally in place to oversee day-to-day affairs.

Germany has a political culture of consensus

All that was blown out of the water when Christian Lindner led his FDP delegation out of the negotiating room on Sunday to announce that “it was better not to govern at all than it was to govern badly.” Skeptics claimed the Free Democrats were never genuinely interested in governing in such a makeshift coalition in the first place.

Where does Germany go from here? As I (alongside Simon Green and Alister Miskimmon) argue in the soon-to-be-published third edition of “The Politics of the New Germany,” the process of forming German governments has previously been long, drawn out and decidedly technical. The parties focus on detail and on nailing down compromises on paper. With the collapse of negotiations, raw politics burst back into the room.

But that doesn’t mean that Germany is lurching toward instability. Far from it. British political scientist Gordon Smith once talked of Germany’s politics of centrality and culture of consensus. Those have not vanished with the FDP’s behavior on Sunday. Angela Merkel has already indicated in interviews that she views this as simply another challenge to overcome. She reacted as she always does; she’s down-to-earth, workmanlike and nothing if not pragmatic.

In practice, no one knows what the next German government will look like. Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the German president, has tried to push all four parties back to the negotiating table, but it’s unlikely they’ll be able to paper over the cracks. There is a chance that Germans may have to vote again early in 2018, but that’s still not the most likely outcome.

That’s because there are a variety of other, evolving options out there. The German political class will work through these in the days and weeks to come. One underlying principle will guide their thinking: the norm of consensus politics. As long as that norm exists, Germany’s international partners need not be too perturbed. Angela Merkel’s time is undoubtedly

coming to an end, but after 12 years in power, that should not be too surprising: Few democratic leaders last longer than that.

In every challenge there's an opportunity

Over the last two decades Merkel has proven remarkably adept at sidelining her internal rivals. Some underestimated her; others lost out in internal power games. She can think strategically and find solutions where none are immediately apparent.

Given that, Merkel may see a CDU/CSU minority administration as the best way to play a bad hand. In parliamentary systems it's normal that no party wins a majority of the seats in parliament. Once the results are in, parties come together to work out which of them working together can command a majority in the legislature. That majority then elects a leader (in Germany's case a "chancellor") that looks to implement an agreed program. Merkel's problem is that she can't get prospective partners to agree on what they want to do.

Merkel could try to govern with only a minority of parliamentarians (a "minority administration") backing her. That's tricky, but not impossible. Much of Germany's day-to-day business can plausibly be completed by such a minority administration. On bigger questions she would need to appeal either to the direct interests of specific actors — on environmental issues, turning to the Greens, for example — or to the need to be "staatstragend" — awkwardly translated as "statesmanlike" — in helping Germany do justice to its national interests. The results would not be what Merkel might ideally want, but the culture of consensus on which German politics is built would mean that it could very plausibly work for a short time, meaning months rather than years.

During that short time Merkel and the CDU would be able to select her successor. A centrist like Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, for example, would be a Merkel-esque replacement. Kramp-Karrenbauer is the longtime leader

of the Saarland regional government with a reputation for competent governance. Outsiders such as Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, the charismatic former defense minister who has taken time out of politics after a plagiarism scandal, could be groomed for a return.

The point is that we don't need to know who the replacement is yet. The CDU/CSU would give itself time to think strategically about the future.

The same, of course, would apply to the other parties. Martin Schulz led the Social Democrats (SPD) to a dismal 20.5 percent of the vote in September, and he may fancy another bite at the apple. Manuela Schwesig, the leader of the SPD in the north region of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, is nonetheless being groomed for greater things and she may end up leading the party into battle. The SPD is currently coming under pressure to be take on governmental responsibility alongside the CDU, but it's been scared too much; it'll stay on the opposition benches until the next election, no matter when it is.

We know that Germans did not want to see the negotiations fail, but in every challenge lies an opportunity. In Germany, there is a deep-rooted norm of consensus politics, and a deep bench of competent politicians and parties ready should Merkel step down. That doesn't mean that Merkel will necessarily be able to create a coalition out of the rubble of last weekend. But it also doesn't mean that Germany is in crisis. It's simply dealing with an unforeseen challenge. And the chances are that it'll deal with it pretty well.

Dan Hough is a professor of politics at the University of Sussex and chair of the International Association for the Study of German Politics.

 **0 Comments**

Your profile is incomplete

Before you can contribute to our community, please visit your

Profile page in order to complete your profile.

Comments

My profile



Comments on this page are powered by new software that we're creating in partnership with The Coral Project. To read more about what's new and what's

coming, [go here](#).

You can email feedback to comments@washpost.com.

Otherwise, comment below as usual.

Please read the rules in place before joining the discussion.

All comments (0)

Viewing Options ▾

