

Same-same, but different

By Bunn Nagara



Divided lines: Protesters and supporters of Merkel at the final election rally in Munich.

After much talk of changes in German politics amid undercurrents of ditching the current government, the status quo still holds considerable sway for now at least.

THE French have a saying that the more things change, the more they remain the same: *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.

Germans are now experiencing that, plus a dash of *déjà vu*, as they head for the polls today. In the run-up to the elections, the talk on the street and among political parties has been change.

But the largest single block of votes is still expected to go to Chancellor Angela Merkel, dubbed the world's most powerful woman, to give her a comfortable fourth term in office.

Her ratings have seen ups and downs throughout her three terms. Issues have ranged from her government's handling of large numbers of migrants and refugees to security against terrorist threats.

For several months now, her administration has experienced something of an upswing, contrasting with Britain's experience of mistimed elections and referendums.

Still, it has not been a cushy ride: only last October Merkel's ratings dropped to an all-time low of under 30%. That was when the populist far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) capitalised on the immigration issue, and other parties kept their distance from such touchy subjects.

Today, another reason for Merkel's good fortune is that there has been change, but within political parties. This contributed to the upswing for her Christian Democratic Union (and Bavaria's equivalent Christian Social Union), cushioning any lingering pressure for her to quit.

Settling a million asylum seekers from war-torn regions caused controversy and a popular backlash against the CDU-CSU. But she quietly worked to reformat the party position and admitted to a failure to assimilate the arrivals, blunting the Opposition's thrust.

The AfD swung further to the right as a result of the controversy. Party chair Frauke Petry, hoping to inject some moderation into the party for broader mass appeal, appears to have been sidelined by party seniors with more extreme views.

Internally, the fringe AfD may now be in an emotional high, but it is limited self-gratification at best. Germany's electoral system favours a coalition of parties in government over an outright win by any party.

By veering further to the right, the AfD has alienated other political parties that could conceivably partner with it. However, that is not reassuring to German moderates.

AfD realists like Petry are not aiming to win the election with any coalition, but to become the country's third-strongest and main Opposition party. That now appears more likely than ever.

From there, it will have a place in the Bundestag (Parliament) for greater visibility and the ability to pressure the right wing of the CDU-CSU for more regressive measures.

When the AfD was formed in 2013, it captured 4.7% of the vote in that year's federal election, just shy of the 5% minimum required for a place in the Bundestag. When the CDU-CSU was at its lowest point last year, the AfD polled 15% of support although the numbers have since moderated.

Nonetheless, a recent poll put the CDU-CSU at 39%, the SPD social democrats at 23% and the Greens and the socialist Left Party at under 10% each. An Allensbach poll just five days ago put public support for the AfD at 10%.

Many Germans worry about this rightwards lurch and the possible cross-Atlantic populist contagion, following Brexit in Britain, the Trump presidency in the US and the rise of Marine Le Pen's far-right National Front in France.

Petry is an intelligent and ambitious woman whose appeal goes beyond AfD's Euroscepticism and views on immigration. Its stand on issues from education to taxation are designed to capture public support, which opponents ignore at their peril.

But despite some signs to the contrary, Germany's middle ground still appears to hold firm, at least for today's election. Much in German politics in the years to come will depend on Merkel's coalition identity, to be hammered into place. The German system allows for political parties in a governing coalition to be election rivals on the campaign trail. Thus Merkel's chief political partner and rival is the SPD's Martin Schultz.

However, neither the SPD nor Schultz's leadership has been inspiring to the public imagination. The party never really recovered its strength after Gerhard Schroeder's leadership lost out in 2005.

Vital questions include which party will now partner with the CDU-CSU, and which will be the main Opposition party. The SPD hopes to be the first, still, the AfD hopes to be the second, while the Greens and the Left Party may not have a chance to be either.

That leaves options open for a newly refurbished Free Democratic Party (FDP) under new leadership to try for both positions. The FDP was Merkel's governing partner during her first term, then suffered a decline, and now pledges to have learned from its errors.

The electoral situation has been so fluid that the FDP's Christian Lindner is unsure whether the party would be Merkel's main partner or her main critic in Opposition.

He would prefer his pro-EU and pro-business FDP to be the former, but if not then the latter. So although Schultz is Merkel's main rival, his chief rival is Lindner.

Lindner began his campaign as a German Emmanuel Macron, a youngish, fast-rising star who "gets it" and won against some odds.

He is as close to a cult figure as any modern German politician can be. As a darling of liberals, he is touted as a kingmaker in today's election. The problem, however, is that Germany is not France. Where the French may opt for a trendy alternative, not so a more stodgy German electorate.

So the talk in Berlin is that even if the FDP can displace the SPD as the CDU-CSU's main partner, it will still need another party like the Greens to make up a governing coalition.

Compromise is key in German coalition governments, and the social democratic SPD and the conservative CDU-CSU have moderated each other in office.

However, many observers see difficulty in a prospective CDU/CSU-FDP-Greens partnership because the policy differences between the FDP and Greens may just be too great.

Still, politics can make for unexpected bedfellows. That, plus the unifying factor among virtually all non-AfD parties being denial of its road to power and influence.

Much speculation can be ended if the SPD performs well enough to remain in partnership with the CDU-CSU. But Lindner's go-getting profile is hard for Schultz to match, and the SPD cannot claim the kind of success in recent regional elections the FDP enjoys.

Another factor unwittingly helping Merkel may be Turkish President Recep Erdogan's appeal to German Turks to vote against Germany's main parties.

He was upset that German authorities restricted the Turks' demonstration of support for his draconian laws.

If that call finds a response today, it will only be at the expense of the SPD traditionally favoured by minorities rather than the CDU-CSU. The FDP meanwhile hopes to recover the 5% vote it lost in 2013.

Merkel is still tipped to remain Chancellor, even if her coalition partners may change.

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