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The CDU/CSU-FDP Coalition: The First 100 Days (February 4, 2010)

After the first hundred days of the CDU/CSU-FDP coalition, everyone agreed that the government had gotten off to a bumpy and disappointing start. The author of this piece joined the chorus of critics. The quarrels within the coalition, he argued, were not only the result of ideological disagreements. For him, one important question was the partners' understanding of the roles played by the citizen and the state as well as the position of the various parties in the changed political landscape of the Federal Republic of Germany.

One Hundred Days of Black-Yellow¹: Less than the Sum of Its Parts

“Merkel II” has been in office for one hundred days and many Germans are dissatisfied with it, particularly those who expected more determined political leadership from the chancellor than from the [preceding] shotgun marriage between the SPD, CDU, and CSU.² And the crucial test for the Black-Yellow coalition is yet to come.

No new coalition has ever gotten off to a smooth start in Germany, not even the “Red-Green project” led by Gerhard Schröder. It would certainly be wrong to claim that the CDU/CSU-FDP alliance has sat on its hands during its first hundred days in office. It has lowered taxes for the taxpayers, increased social assistance for those in need of it, and listened to the doubts of the doubting Thomases, all the way to the Hindu Kush. But it has received mostly poor grades for its efforts. These have not only come from the “antagonistic media” often invoked by the FDP chairman. Now even politicians in the Party of High Income Earners³ have conceded that the coalition has had a rocky start. This has been no honeymoon – even the spin doctors know that.

Every Bundestag election is followed by a sobering up, for both the people and their leaders. A coalition cannot fulfill all the promises made by party leaders during the election – this was something people understood about the Grand Coalition. But many Germans are dissatisfied with “Merkel II,” not only those who voted against it, but also – to an unusual degree – those supporters who expected the chancellor to lead a more determined and unified government than the preceding one, which resulted from a shotgun marriage between the SPD, CDU, and

¹ The political parties in Germany are commonly identified by their traditional colors: black for the CDU (and CSU), red for the SPD and the Left Party, yellow for the FDP, and, of course, green for the Greens. Thus, Black-Yellow refers to a coalition between the CDU/CSU and the FDP – trans.

² A reference to the Grand Coalition, 2005-2009 – trans.

³ A reference to the FDP – trans.

CSU. Disappointment is spreading in the conservative-bourgeois camp, although it is focused more on the last election's wunderkind, the FDP, than the CDU/CSU.

No Comment from the Chancellor

No one expects grand talk of a historical mission, but this coalition, which calls itself “Christian” and “liberal,” has not even managed to explain why it should be leading the country instead of anyone else. The vice chancellor at least appears to have realized what's missing for many FDP and CDU/CSU followers, but he has yet to fully explain what his subsequent demand for “intellectual and political change” is supposed to mean, assuming it is not limited to tax reform. From the chancellor, no comment. She views the ideological drivel with suspicion.

But even in a pragmatic age, there are voters – particularly in the bourgeois-conservative camp – who expect the government to at least offer the prospect of values-based leadership. Yet instead of leadership, this coalition offers disunity, and to a much greater degree than might be expected from a group of likeminded individuals. So far, the CDU/CSU-FDP alliance can best be described as a whole that amounts to less than the sum of its parts. Anyone who tries to count these parts is more likely to come up with thirty rather than three.

Deeper Causes

The ongoing weakness of the coalition is not only attributable to the partners' previous histories, to a coalition agreement that is full of non-decisions, or to the superfluous actions of new government members who have just achieved their dream goal. The causes lie deeper. All three coalition parties are in search of themselves. This is evident from the contours of the conflicts, which often cut across party lines. The CDU and CSU, plagued by their vanishing cohesion, are desperately trying to reinvent the *Volkspartei*, or the large mainstream party – and are even willing to broaden their platform, if all else fails. The CSU has not yet overcome the shock of having lost the absolute majority in Bavaria and being forced into an alliance with a party with which, unlike the Bavarian SPD, it never sympathized at all.

The FDP is doing everything in its power to move out of the niche of a special-interest party. These efforts played a central role in the string of successes it enjoyed in the lead up to the last Bundestag election. These successes are threatening to come to an end in May. This is why the “Mövenpick”⁴ party has been particularly hurt by the low blows from SPD chairman Sigmar Gabriel. By trying to offer something for everyone, the CDU, CSU, and FDP are not only watering down their platforms, but also competing more intensely with each other than they have in the past. And this competition isn't eliminated by the fact that the party leaders occasionally come together for a meal of steak tartar.

⁴ A reference to the controversial donations the FDP received from August von Finck, part owner of the Mövenpick Group – trans.

The Magic Formula for “Fair” Cuts

Of course, the people do not always make things easy for their leaders. They do not swear political loyalty for a lifetime or across generations. Existing social milieus are dissolving and social classes are drifting apart. At the same time, there appears to be a growing inclination to give the state responsibility for all aspects of one’s existence. Many Germans would apparently rather do without tax cuts than lose the customary levels of state-supported welfare. But even if the social welfare state didn’t need to shrink, it could still never do justice to all the people’s expectations. There has never been a government in this country that found the magic formula for “fair” cuts.

The Black-Yellow coalition still faces a crucial test. This will come after the elections in North Rhine-Westphalia, when spending cuts will have to begin. Then it will become evident whether the CDU/CSU and the FDP, despite their differing views on the roles played by the people and the state (which underlie the dispute on health insurance and tax reform), are capable of halfway consistent policies that can withstand attacks from the left. After all, these leftwing parties are their true political opponents, even if the coalition partners have differing opinions on who constitutes their political opponents, now and in the future.

Source: Berthold Kohler, “Hundert Tage Schwarz-Gelb: Weniger als die Summe” [“One Hundred Days of Black-Yellow: Less than the Sum of Its Parts”], FAZ.NET, February 4, 2010.

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