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Throw angst to the wind

Five good reasons for a minority government in Germany

After post-election, exploratory coalition talks came to nothing earlier this month, Germany has wound up in political limbo. The so-called 'Jamaica' option, namely a four-party alliance between the Christian democrats (CDU/CSU), the Greens and the free-market liberal FDP, collapsed last week when the FDP unexpectedly left the bargaining table.

Initially Germany's social democrats (SPD) ruled out another 'grand coalition'. Now, after a week of hand-wringing, they're reconsidering.

Yet there is an alternative to an unloved grand coalition born of necessity: a minority government run just by Chancellor Angela Merkel's CDU and its Bavarian sister party the CSU, or the CDU/CSU in tandem with either the Greens or the FDP. Since the FDP badly dissed the Christian democrats in the Jamaica talks, it is highly unlikely Angela Merkel would have them back. The Greens, on the other hand, hit it off with the conservatives, and are eager to give a black-green minority government a whirl.

There are at least five good reasons for Germany to give a minority government a try:

Rejuvenating Germany's parliamentary democracy

Germany's solid, usually two-party (three if you count the CSU) coalitions and strict party discipline have – contra the original intention of the constitution – shifted the onus of policy- and law-making from the Bundestag to the executive, namely the chancellery and the cabinet. Rarely has the executive in Germany dominated to such an extent as during the Merkel-led grand coalitions.

A minority government in Germany would shift power back to the Bundestag, making it the real forum of law-making and fulcrum of democratic power. The government would have to search for majorities

among the parties and MPs, brokering deals and making convincing cases for the legislation. The opposition parties would have to engage too, either for or against. And relaxing party discipline would empower the MPs, which would bring the demos itself much closer to the legislative process, perhaps addressing some of the oft-heard complaints about distant, intransparent, elitist governance that has propelled the far right.

Marginalising the far right

This is the first Bundestag (German national parliament) ever with a far-right party, Alternative for Germany (AfD), in its midst – a precarious, watershed moment for the country. Indeed, it remains to be seen how the democratic parties will interact with it.

The situation is all the more prickly in the event of a grand coalition. The AfD's 12.5 per cent tally in the September vote made it the third strongest party behind the CDU/CSU and SPD, which means that it would become the leading opposition party in the Bundestag. In this unhappy scenario, the AfD, the FDP, the Greens, and Die Linke (on the hard left) would all find themselves together in one basket – the opposition. The differences between their stripe of critique would bleed into one another, giving the AfD ostensible allies and effectively legitimising it.

But in a minority-led government, the nature and purpose of the opposition would change dramatically. For one, the SPD would be the biggest party. Moreover, no longer would the non-government parties espouse opposition for opposition's sake. On the contrary, they'd have a voice in law-making – that is, every party but the AfD. The far-right group would be the odd-man-out, a powerless, side-lined complainer.

New elections could spell disaster

New elections are, of course, another option, but a very bad one. Firstly, fresh elections could – and probably would – yield much the same result as the September vote, landing Germany back at square one – with the same set of possibilities.

Even gains or losses of two or three points for one party or the other wouldn't alter the situation much: options would remain a grand coalition, Jamaica, minority rule. The fallout from such an expensive, time-consuming debacle could be substantial, further eroding trust in the multiparty system and thus fuelling the fires of the AfD, which would surely feast on the fiasco.

Moreover, the inability to form a new government largely suspends Germany from EU politics, which is at a critical crossroads. Germany is not only the economic powerhouse of Europe, but it has the most votes in the EU institutions. The EU's deep crisis is an existential one that France's president Emmanuel Macron wants to address as soon as possible – with Germany at his side. He's waiting impatiently for Merkel and, until there's a new government, he'll be kept waiting – at least until early next year in the best of conventional scenarios (a grand coalition). New elections would push the date of German leadership in the EU even further into the future. A minority government, by contrast, could be set up quickly (especially if it were black-green) and operable soon after that.

More stable than it sounds

Germany's political system is structurally conservative: a robust, intrinsically durable model that encourages stable majority government. And Germans have grown used to it, as it has performed reasonably well over the decades. Polls show Germans extremely sceptical about a minority government, which they believe is by definition wobbly and weak. A survey from 20 November showed 45 per cent of Germans for new elections, 27 per cent for a grand coalition, and only 24 per cent for a minority government.

Yet, elsewhere in northern Europe, for example in the Netherlands and Scandinavia, minority governments tend to be commonplace, a patchwork of parties and MPs behind different pieces of legislation or policies. These countries run well – and are able to conduct foreign affairs too, even though all major decisions in foreign affairs have to be approved by their parliaments. In Germany, this would mean foreign and security policies – which usually enjoy broad consensus anyhow – would be openly debated, hopefully removing some of the thick fog that shrouds geopolitical decisions.

Mix-and-match Merkel

Despite her many shortcomings, Angela Merkel has proven herself a flexible, unideological politico who can mix and match with a number of parties. And never has this quality been so essential than in a fragmented political landscape that now has six parties. (Back in the 70s, before the Greens arrived on the scene, critics called West Germany 'the two-and-a-half party republic'.) It was Merkel's light touch that made the ostensibly impossible Jamaica coalition possible – until the FDP pulled out the rug from beneath it.
A minority government would mean cobbling together different kinds of

majorities originally considered unthinkable, like that which made up the Jamaica foursome.

The great social democrat and former Chancellor Willy Brandt urged Germans to ‘dare more democracy’. A minority government would do just that. And it’s the constellation that best fits the times.

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