EUROPE 24.01.2019 | Clemens Bomsdorf

United against the far right

Sweden's unorthodox new government is united against the Sweden Democrats. But will its set-up make it too unstable?

Read this article in German.

Swedish tabloid *Aftonbladet* hit the nail on the head with the blunt statement that 'it's taken all of autumn and half the winter for Sweden to get a new prime minister – and it's the same one as before.' Just like German voters perplexed by the length of time it took to form a government after the 2017 election, Swedes are not used to interminable negotiations after polls day. And now that, after this autumn and winter of discontent, there's already the question as to how many season the new administration in Stockholm under the Social Democratic Prime Minister Stefan Löfven will even live to see. The doubts stem from gifted negotiator Löfven's decision to do something almost unheard of in Sweden: work with an alliance of parties from both sides of the country's traditional political fault-line, referred to as the two 'blocks'.

As such, his minority administration with the Greens (*Miljöpartiet*) can, in principle, count on support from two parties across the left-right political divide, the Centre Party (*Centerpartiet*) and the Liberals (*Liberalerna*). Due to the fact that Swedish government formation runs what is called 'negative parliamentarianism', it was sufficient for the two parties to join the Left (*Vänsterpartiet*) in not voting against Löfven in order for him to carry the confidence of the house. Indeed, the *Riksdag* has seen plenty of minority administrations. They are therefore not inherently unstable.

For the last 15 years, the Centre and Liberals have been part of a right-of-centre alliance with the leading conservative party, the Moderates (*Moderaterna*). Their decision to leave it is of historic importance. 'To begin with, Löfven's government will be on shaky foundations because the Social Democrats (*Socialdemokraterna*) and the Greens have fewer seats than before,' says Tobias Etzold, political scientist and chairman of the Forum for North European Politics. He adds that 'both parties, however, and those supporting their administration, have a clear shared

goal: keeping the right away from power and avoiding fresh elections. That has brought them together in a spirit of pragmatism and is, as such, not a bad starting point.'

Sweden's political compromise

It's almost unthinkable that this new approach would have come about unless both the Left and the Liberals had been faced with a common political opponent in the form of the extreme right, incarnated by the Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*). They, in contrast to far-right parties in neighbouring Denmark and Norway, have their roots not in radical liberalism, but in Nazi organisations. In view of this, both the Left and, above all, Annie Lööf, head of the Centre Party, made it very clear that they would not be prepared to be part of a government which would rely on Sweden Democrat support. That's an idea to which the other conservative parties in the now defunct right-of-centre Alliance were more open. That was why, even during the election campaign, Lööf had already half-refused to join an *Allians* administration. After several rounds of talks around various coalition options failed, the Centre and the Liberals realised that, in order to limit the influence of the right-wingers to the greatest possible extent, they would need to support the Social Democrats.

What's more: with the Social Democrats' poor election showing in early September (the party hadn't done so badly since 1918), these two relatively minor right-of-centre parties have been able to press several important concessions out of the new government: tax reductions and reforms liberalising both employment law and rent controls are three points in the 73-point cooperation agreement which the Social Democrats would have preferred not to have to agree to.

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Yet put simply, the power dynamics do not leave the main party of government any choice. What's more, with the well-meaning Swedish welfare state, the road to hell can be paved with good intentions, as demonstrated by sporadic scandals about cheap rent-controlled apartments being sublet to the benefit of wealthy (and, not infrequently, left-wing) flat-hunters. Allowing market forces to play a limited role here would certainly not be the worst course of action and could even create a fairer system – fairness being a core tenet of social-democratic policy.

The same applies to the Liberals' attempts to increase the degree to which sums spent on services provided in the home (cleaning, childcare) can be set off against tax: while wealthier households are certainly more likely to buy in help and benefit from the fiscal break, this also creates more jobs for low-qualified workers. When it comes to employment law, Denmark is working proof that there need not be a contradiction between easy hiring and firing and strong social security as long as the loose employer obligations are accompanied by relatively generous unemployment benefits. This is an approach which brings together liberal and social democratic policy. In questions of migration, the agreement specifies that a committee will be set up, leaving the Left and the Centre the opportunity to roll back some of the more repressive anti-immigration measures taken since the 2015 surge in refugee arrivals.

New alliance are unavoidable

In political scientist Etzold's view, all of the parties who are part of them minority administration, whether directly or indirectly, can be located somewhere on the progressive political spectrum. While this does not apply so strongly in terms of economic policy, when it comes to a range of societal questions – active, local-level environmental protection, the decentralisation of political power, and an open, liberal-minded stance on immigration and integration – the parties have a good deal of common ground.

Comparing the Swedish situation to Germany, Etzold offers advice for the latter: 'It's time to start working to the full extent of what is permitted by political arithmetic rather than letting ideological borders get in the way,' he says. 'Whenever there is a majority for one, three-way coalition options such as CDU/CSU (right-of-centre parties of government) working with the Greens and the Liberals should be attempted – both at regional and federal level.' There might be a risk that all parties are being forced to 'stick to the lowest common denominator', but such coalitions also have the opportunity (indeed, in order to survive, the imperative) to pursue policy in such a way that broad swathes of the population see themselves represented.

The fact that the new government in Stockholm has been given a punning portmanteau – Lööfven – isn't a clunky implication that the leaders of the Social Democrats and the Centre Party get along particularly well, but rather testament to the disproportionate amount of power now exercised by the minor Centre Party. For the government to be a success, Löfven, Lööf & Co. will have to cooperate deftly; and the Social Democrats will have to understand that they actually have less power in government than they would if they were propping up a right-of-centre administration.

If the government they lead is successful, however, they might just succeed in the aim which has bought this unusual grouping together: limiting the influence of the extreme right. Nevertheless, *Aftonblad* columnist Linnea Swedenmark is right when she writes that 'while the Sweden Democrats have once again been denied power and the battle has thus been won, the war is still on. Spring will see a key struggle play out,' she adds, referring to the European Elections in May 2019. That gives the Liberals and the Left in Sweden time to show voters that, together, they are a better alternative than a purely conservative government – or one which is dependent on the Sweden Democrats for support.



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