

German government receives a drubbing in the presidential election

By Stefan Steinberg
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“Debacle for German Chancellor Angela Merkel,” “fiasco for the German government”—such were the phrases widely employed in the German press to characterize the result of the election of the German president held on Wednesday.

The fact that Christian Wulff, the candidate of the ruling coalition consisting of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU) and the Free Democratic Party (FDP), was voted into office only after three rounds of balloting is seen as a huge setback for Merkel.

The government was forced to choose a presidential candidate on short notice following the surprise resignation of the former president, Horst Köhler, a month ago. As the only reason for his resignation, Köhler cited the manner in which he had been treated by the press following his declaration that one of the reasons for the war in Afghanistan was to secure economic interests.

After a barrage of criticism from the press and political circles for expressing this truism, Köhler declared that the response to his remarks “lacked the necessary respect for my office.” He has refused to elaborate further on his grounds for quitting as president, but it is widely speculated that frustration with the work of the government and with his own limited powers to intervene in political life prompted his resignation.

In a move designed to limit the damage to her government, Chancellor Merkel moved quickly to select a replacement and decided upon the prime minister of the state of Lower Saxony, Christian Wulff (CDU). This lackluster career politician has been dubbed in the press “a sheep in Wulff’s clothing.”

Then, in what was portrayed by much of the media as a “brilliant tactical move,” the opposition parties—the

Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens—selected their own opposing candidate for the post. They chose the former church minister, rabid anti-communist and right-winger Joachim Gauck. Flanked by leading members of the SPD and Greens, Gauck conducted a brief but highly publicized speaking tour which made clear that he enjoyed considerable support not only from the opposition parties, but also from deputies within the ruling coalition.

At the same time, the media moved into action. Newspapers and magazines across the political spectrum published a series of profiles presenting Gauck as a “freedom fighter for citizen’s rights” and “the people’s choice as president.” An Internet campaign on his behalf claimed to have won the support of tens of thousands. In fact, a public demonstration on his behalf in Berlin this week rallied just a handful of supporters.

As the presidential election neared, government whips sought to rally support behind the government’s candidate. With a comfortable majority of 21 in the Federal Assembly which elects the president, Chancellor Merkel hoped for a smooth and speedy vote in favour of her candidate.

In the event, the election turned out very differently. In the first round of voting, Wulff received 600 votes, with 499 for Gauck. The candidate of the Left Party, journalist Luc Jochimsen, received 126 votes. As a result, the government’s candidate lacked the necessary absolute majority.

Merkel’s coalition of the CDU, CSU and FDP has a total of 644 delegates in the Federal Assembly. This means that 44 government delegates declined to vote for the government’s candidate. Since no candidate had obtained the necessary majority, a second round of voting was quickly set into motion.

In the second round, Wulff increased his total by 15 votes (615), while Gauck lost 9 votes (490). The Left party candidate received 123 votes. For a second time, Wulff lacked an overall majority. At least 29 members of the Federal Assembly aligned with the government had refused to support Wulff.

It was only in the third round of voting and after an election process lasting nine hours that Wulff finally won sufficient votes for his candidacy. Wulff polled 625 votes against 494 for Gauck. The Left party candidate had withdrawn from the race. Wulff was elected on the basis that the successful candidate requires only a simple majority in the third round of voting.

The election was by secret ballot. It is therefore not possible to identify which delegates from precisely which parties rebelled against the government. However, irrespective of the motives of those individuals voting against the government's candidate, the size of the rebellion indicates the profound dissatisfaction within influential sections of the German ruling elite with the current government.

The same media forces which promoted Gauck have been criticising the policies of the Merkel government for some time. Not only are the government coalition partners divided amongst themselves, the individual parties within the coalition are torn by conflicts.

The austerity package introduced by the Merkel government has been criticised as too divisive and containing too many loopholes. Merkel's foreign policy has also been subjected to growing criticism—in particular, her drawn-out response to the euro crisis, which antagonised Germany's European neighbours and eventually ended in a rescue package far larger than originally contemplated.

Wednesday's election was a clear warning to the Merkel government that its life span is limited should it prove incapable of overcoming its internal divisions and intensifying its attacks on the working class.

With their selection of the right-winger Joachim Gauck, the SPD and Green Party have signaled that, in alliance with the trade unions and possibly the Left Party, they are prepared to play a greater role in ensuring the implementation of austerity measures and the restoration of Germany's influence abroad.

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