

German Chancellor Merkel rebuilds her cabinet

By Peter Schwarz
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Following the resignation of Defence Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg (Christian Social Union, CSU), Chancellor Angela Merkel reconstructed her cabinet last Wednesday. The former interior minister, Thomas de Maizière (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), will now take over the Ministry Of Defence, while the Interior Ministry will go to the CSU parliamentary faction chairman, Hans-Peter Friedrich.

Merkel obviously wanted to avoid drawn-out disputes over the filling of ministerial posts or a larger cabinet reshuffle negatively affecting the two state elections to be held later this month in Baden-Wuerttemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate. In Baden-Wuerttemberg (where the CDU has governed for over 50 years), the CDU and Free Democratic Party (FDP), on the one hand, and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens, on the other, are locked in a neck-and-neck race.

Thomas de Maizière, the new defence minister, is considered to be Merkel's most dependable cabinet minister. From 2005 to 2009, he headed the federal chancellery under the grand coalition and subsequently took over the Interior Ministry. In contrast to Guttenberg, who owed his career to a celebrity campaign waged by the media, de Maizière is seen as an administration specialist, who works quietly but effectively in the background.

De Maizière's acquaintance with Merkel goes back to the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification. At that time, his cousin Lothar de Maizière headed the last East German government and Merkel served as his spokesperson. Thomas de Maizière, who had begun his political career in the West Berlin CDU, supported his East German cousin in the establishment of a prime minister's office and was a member of the negotiating team for the East German-West German unification treaty.

Following reunification, Thomas de Maizière headed several government offices in eastern Germany: from 1990 to 1998 in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, where he eventually headed the state chancellery of CDU prime minister Berndt Seite, and from 1999 to 2005 in Saxony, which became a stronghold for CDU right-wingers under Prime Minister Kurt Biedenkopf.

During his time in Saxony, de Maizière initially oversaw management of the prime minister's office, but went on to become minister for justice and finally interior minister. Operating from these posts, he was involved in a cover-up of the so-called "Saxony quagmire" affair, involving the links of judicial officials, the police and politicians with child abuse and the city's red light district.

That Merkel now entrusts her tried-and-tested devotee with leadership of the Defence Ministry shows how potentially explosive she regards the tasks awaiting him there. The reform of the army, initiated by his predecessor Guttenberg, is still in its infancy. Nothing has yet been decided. Compulsory military service was effectively abolished, but even that has not yet been consolidated in law.

In particular, the closure of military sites and radical reduction of personnel envisaged in Guttenberg's reform concept are sure to trigger bitter conflicts within governing circles and the army. Many municipalities governed by conservative CDU-CSU alliances rely on business generated by local army barracks. If these were closed down, the municipalities would be confronted with a threat to their economic survival.

When the actual content of the military reform becomes more transparent, widespread public opposition can be expected. The downsizing and streamlining of the armed forces is not really designed to secure budgetary consolidation, as is officially

claimed time and again. Its real purpose is the transformation of a defensive army, characterised by routinism, cumbersome command structures and a bloated bureaucracy, into a powerful intervention force, accustomed to shedding blood and incurring losses.

Thomas de Maizière was transferred to this difficult post because he has been close to the military ever since childhood. His father Ulrich de Maizière is known as one of the fathers of the German army. He served in three armies: the Weimar Reichswehr, Hitler's Wehrmacht—where he was promoted to the general staff—and finally in the army of the post-war German republic, serving from 1966 to 1972 as inspector general, the highest officer rank.

Following the transfer of the Defence Ministry from the CSU to the CDU, Merkel had to give the CSU a different ministry in order to preserve the party balance within the coalition. The acquisition of the prominent Interior Ministry by the CSU constitutes a significant political shift to the right.

The CSU has always stood on the right wing of the CDU-CSU alliance when it came to domestic matters. Faced with issues concerning the bolstering of state powers and restriction of democratic rights, it always took a hard line.

The new interior minister, Hans-Peter Friedrich, has until now remained rather politically insignificant. After studying law, he embarked on a low-level career in various state and party posts until he became chairman of the CSU parliamentary faction in 2009. Then, after both the Bavarian finance minister George Fahrenschon and the interior minister Joachim Herrmann had rejected a move to join the national government in Berlin, Friedrich was finally chosen as a temporary solution to the problem of filling the post of a new interior minister.

At his very first press conference, however, Friederich made it clear exactly where he stands politically by attacking Islam and vehemently declaring that Islamism is not an integral part of German society. His stance is in opposition to that of Federal President Christian Wulff, who described Islamism as an integral part of German society in his speech on the Day of German Unity in 2010. Friederich's denial of the role of Islamism is a concession to all those right-wingers who want to exploit anti-Islamic prejudice as a political weapon.

Like anti-Semitism in the past, anti-Islamism is now used by right-wing circles to divide the working class and divert attention from pressing social problems. New parties have emerged on this basis in Denmark and Holland, and conservative governments in Britain, Italy and France are stirring up hatred towards Muslims.

On Friedrich's first day in office, a youth—apparently sympathetic to Islam—shot two American soldiers at Frankfurt Airport. It can only be expected that the new German interior minister will exploit this tragedy to intensify the campaign against people of the Islamic faith.

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