

Swedish elections: Support declines for establishment parties

By Jordan Shilton
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The main feature of elections held on Sunday in Sweden, which resulted in the removal of the right-wing government of former Prime Minister Frederick Reinfeldt, was the growing rejection by the electorate of all the established political parties.

While the nominal victors were the Social Democrats, whose leader Stefan Löfven will take over as prime minister, the party secured just 31 percent of the vote. This was barely a 1 percent increase on the party's result in 2010, when Sweden's traditional party of government suffered its worst result in almost a century, polling just over 30 percent of the vote.

The Social Democrats' poor performance meant that even with the backing of the Green Party, which won 6.8 percent, and the Left Party, 5.7 percent, it could muster only 43.7 percent of the vote. According to the latest result, this coalition would be 15 seats short of the 175 needed for a parliamentary majority.

The right-wing Alliance, led by Reinfeldt's Moderate Party, suffered a disastrous result. The Moderates lost around 10 percentage points from 2010, dropping to just 23 percent of the vote. The three smaller parties in the coalition, the Liberals, Centre Party and Christian democrats, saw little change.

After conceding defeat, Reinfeldt and finance minister Anders Borg both announced their resignation, with Borg declaring that he would retire from politics.

The only party to gain significant support from the vote was the far-right Sweden Democrats, which more than doubled its vote to 13 percent. It is likely to send 47 MPs to parliament, up from 20 in the last legislative period, making it the third largest party in the Riksdag. It has sought to capitalise on growing social discontent by blaming immigrants for overrunning Sweden's welfare state and producing the social problems that the country now confronts.

The vote reflects broad disillusionment with the entire structure of official politics. Reinfeldt's government was viewed with hostility for its policies of slashing social welfare, deregulation, privatisation and tax cuts since coming to power in 2006. Its sell-off of state assets, in what was the biggest privatisation drive in Swedish history, and further opening up of the public sector to private companies has helped deepen social inequality.

Sweden, long praised as a role model for social harmony, is now cited as the country with the fastest growing levels of social inequality in the OECD. There are regular reports of patients waiting for extended periods for access to the health care system, and standards in the education system have fallen.

Overall unemployment stands at around 8 percent, but among young people under 25 and immigrants it is over 20 percent in some areas. The social tensions this is producing were demonstrated in the outbreak of riots in the suburbs of Stockholm last summer.

The election results show that there is no confidence among the population that the Social Democrats and their allies will do anything to change this. In fact, the Social Democrats have been instrumental in the past decades for undermining Sweden's Nordic social model.

In his capacity as leader of the IF Metall trade union it was Löfven who following the global financial crisis of 2008 struck a deal with Swedish employers to implement pay cuts and shorter working hours.

Löfven's intervention at that time won the warm approval of the chief negotiator for the Swedish industrial employer organisation Teknikforetagen Anders Weihe, who commented: "He doesn't look for battles and conflict, but for solutions."

As Social Democrat leader since 2012, Löfven enjoys

firm support from the capital city's upper middle class. As one paper notes, Löfven "has not scared away better-off Swedes who have enjoyed years of income tax cuts. They do not view him as a threat to a consumer boom that has transformed Stockholm from a rather staid capital to a vibrant IT startup centre packed with new restaurants and bars."

It was the Social Democrats, led by Prime Minister Göran Persson until 2006, which laid the basis for many of the regressive reforms implemented by Reinfeldt, including the opening up of important areas of the public sector, such as education, to private profit.

While in opposition, the Social Democrats offered tacit support to many of the government's right-wing policies. It adapted to the anti-immigrant sentiment stirred up by the Alliance, campaigning in 2010 for a more regulated immigration system. The targeting of immigrants as scapegoats for the deepening social crisis has played directly into the hands of the extreme right, as shown by the Sweden Democrats' success.

Nor have the Social Democrats offered any opposition to the outgoing government's plans to vastly expand defence spending, as part of a strategy to integrate Sweden more fully with the military operations of the major imperialist powers. May's announcement that a 10 percent increase in defence spending would be implemented over the coming decade hardly featured in the run-up to Sunday's vote. The close collaboration of Swedish intelligence services with the US through its provision of data on Russia, together with the expansion of the state's surveillance powers, were also not discussed.

The prospect of a minority government following the election is not welcomed by business circles, which fear the establishment of an unstable administration incapable of implementing its demands. In a post-election analysis, Swedish bank SEB spoke of a "fog of uncertainty" over the Swedish economy, and the krona fell on Monday.

Maria Rankka, head of the Stockholm chamber of commerce, raised the prospect of a grand coalition between the Social Democrats and Moderates, declaring that while such a formation previously would have seemed unlikely, "business would like it."

Concerns within the ruling elite are being fuelled by declining exports as a result of the slowdown in the euro zone. Sweden's central bank stated recently that

interest rates would remain unchanged until at least the end of 2015, as any increase would threaten to undermine the minimal economic growth currently being experienced. This is largely thanks to an extremely overinflated housing market.

The further turn to the right by the incoming government is being justified by claims of the need to unite against the growth of the Sweden Democrats. Löfven noted that he was only prepared to speak with all "democratic parties," while Green Party leader Gustav Fridolin added, "I really hope that all anti-racist parties in Sweden are ready to lift their prestige to make it both possible both to form a government and to do the political reforms that we need in broad areas."

Casting the entire political establishment as a bastion of democracy against the far-right Sweden Democrats is a thoroughly dishonest attempt to whitewash the records of the very parties that have contributed so significantly to the rise of the extreme right. Support for the far-right Sweden Democrats, which has its roots in Sweden's neo-Nazi movement, has grown as the country's leading parties have intensified their attacks on the country's social fabric and democratic rights.

Although officially refusing to make a deal with the Sweden Democrats to save political face, Reinfeldt's government depended on the party's votes in parliament over the past four years as it ruled in a minority government. The Sweden Democrats backed over 80 percent of Alliance initiatives. On Sunday, the party that lost the most votes to the Sweden Democrats was the Moderates.

The attempt to build a political consensus of all of the major parties against the Sweden Democrats also extends to the Left Party. Though it criticised growing inequality, the privatisation of welfare and the jobs crisis in its election manifesto, it campaigned on the basis of securing participation in a coalition with the Social Democrats and Greens. It failed to achieve 6 percent of the vote under conditions in which all of the major parties are thoroughly discredited.

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