

Germany: Political earthquake

The vote on the new premier minister in the state of Thuringia marks a new milestone in German politics and bears the potential of more shockwaves in national politics



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This afternoon, German politics were surprised by moves, normally only seen in “House of Cards”. The simple facts are that the small state Thuringia now has the first premier, voted with support of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). A first timer and a surprise as up to today all other political parties had always ruled out governing together with the AfD.

The unfolding of today’s events, however, was exciting and unprecedented. The state elections last October had left the outgoing premier, Bodo Ramelow, of Die Linke, as the candidate of the largest party but the outgoing government of Die Linke, SPD and Greens fell short of an absolute majority. In today’s vote, the Ramelow wanted to be signed in as premier of a minority government with, again, SPD and Greens. It was expected to be a done deal as the other three parties in the state parliament, CDU, FDP and AfD, would not work together. Both CDU and FDP had always ruled out forming any kind of political alliance with the AfD. The AfD had nominated a candidate for the premier post only recently - Christoph Kindervater, an independent mayor of a small village in Thuringia.

As expected, neither Ramelow nor Kindervater managed to get an absolute majority in the first two rounds. In the third round, a simple majority is sufficient. However, the leader of the smallest party in parliament, Thomas Kemmerich of the FDP, also announced his candidacy for the third round. While under normal circumstances, this would still have left Ramelow as the front-runner,

all AfD votes went to the FDP candidate as did all votes from the CDU. Thomas Kemmerich and not Bodo Ramelow was then sworn in as premier minister and Germany had a small political coup and definitely an unexpected unfolding of events.

The political outcry which followed mainly related to the fact that up to now CDU and FDP had always ruled out cooperating with the AfD, both at the federal and regional level. Many commentators remembered that during the last negotiations on the federal government in 2017, the FDP walked out of talks with the CDU and the Greens, citing red lines and compromised principles.

The shockwaves of today's events have already reached Berlin and are unlikely to ebb away quickly. Even if Thuringia is a small state with roughly more than 2 million inhabitants, the symbolic meaning of today's events could leave some marks on national politics. In our view, today's events do not represent a shift to the right but illustrate that German politics have become more fluid. At the national level, the relative strengths of the political parties are different than in Thuringia. It remains to be seen whether and how national voters will react to today's events in the next opinion polls. In the short run, given the first comments from national politicians, today's events could definitely revive the tensions within the grand coalition.

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