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THE BEGINNING OF THE END FOR ANGELA MERKEL: The coming instability in Germany

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“The pre-post-Merkel period” has begun. Thus, were the words of the *Financial Times* commenting on German Chancellor’s Merkel’s decision not to stand for re-election as party leader of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU). She has held the job since 2002. Merkel also announced that she intends to complete her current fourth term as Chancellor but would not seek re-election for a fifth term in 2021. She will not be available for re-election as a member of parliament either and would not seek any other political jobs. It was clear that this statement of October 29, 2018, indicated the beginning of the end of the Merkel era. It inaugurated the slow and drawn-out departure of the 64-year old Angela Merkel from political power.

Commentators in both Germany and abroad were sharply divided on how to respond. Some gleefully believed that this decision was long overdue and that she should retire as Chancellor as soon as possible instead of hanging on for another three years. Those who strongly objected to allowing almost one million migrants, many from Syria, into the country in 2015 can’t wait to see her go. Others expressed sadness about the coming departure of one of the world’s most experienced politicians. Merkel has been in office as German Chancellor since 2005 and has always been a strong defender of both the European integration process and the rules-based global order. Her poor view of Donald Trump’s statements and behavior is well known.

Three days after the election of Donald Trump in early November 2016, Merkel told the President-elect in a congratulatory public statement: “Germany and America are bound together by values - democracy, freedom, respecting the rule of law, people’s dignity regardless of their origin, the color of their skin, religion, gender, sexual orientation or political views.” Merkel continued by saying that “on the basis of these values, I am offering to work closely with the future President of the United States, Donald Trump.”¹ Not surprisingly perhaps, Merkel and Trump never hit it off and their personal relations have been poor while German-American relations as such have also been fraught with tension and conflict since Trump’s inauguration in January 2017.²

Merkel may have to retire soon

Merkel clearly wishes to remain as Chancellor for the next three years until her current term in office has ended. Whether there really will be a long-drawn-out transition period until her successor has been decided upon is questionable, however. Two factors may lead to her early retirement within the next year or so.

1. Only if Merkel is succeeded as party chairman by someone who is loyal to her and prepared to cooperate and accept her pre-dominance in German politics can she expect to continue as Chancellor until her fourth term ends in 2021. At that time, like every four years, new general elections are scheduled to be held. This means only if Merkel is succeeded by CDU Secretary General Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (often referred to as AKK) or another close political friend can she expect not to be challenged as Chancellor.

¹ Press statement by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel on 9 November 2016 on the outcome of the US presidential election: <https://archiv.bundesregierung.de/archiv-de/meta/startseite/press-statement-by-federal-chancellor-angela-merkel-on-9-november-2016-on-the-outcome-of-the-us-presidential-election-844280>

² For a recent account, see the special issue of the journal *German Politics* (Vol.27, No.2, June 2018), *A Fragile Friendship: German-American Relations in the 21st Century* (edited by Klaus Larres & Ruth Wittlinger): <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09644008.2018.1429412>. It will shortly be published as a book by Routledge.

If the new party chairman turns out to be either the ambitious 38-year old Health Minister Jens Spahn or her old rival, former parliamentary party leader 62-year old Friedrich Merz, it is highly unlikely that she could remain as Chancellor for another three years. There might also be other candidates who may yet throw their hats into the ring. Spahn and Merz have already announced their intention to stand for election to succeed Merkel as party leader. Both are highly critical of the Chancellor. Neither of them would tolerate her continued effective overlordship in German politics. They certainly would try to get rid of her and become Chancellor themselves. As the saying goes, 'with party friends like this, who needs enemies?'

2. The Social-Democrats (the SPD), Merkel's junior coalition partner in the Grand Coalition in Berlin, are in a precarious electoral position. They have lost even more votes than the CDU/CSU in the recent regional elections in Bavaria and Hesse. Opinion polls also indicate that together the two Grand Coalition partners only enjoy the support of a mere 39 per cent of the national electorate rather than the 50 per cent plus needed to form a government in Berlin, if a general election were held tomorrow. This is a dire situation. The left-wing of the SPD is urging the party leadership to rejuvenate the party by leaving the Grand Coalition and joining the opposition benches. This did not work between 2009 and 2013 when the SPD was in opposition; at the next general election they could only increase their share of the national vote by a mere 2.5 per cent. Facts, however, have seldom stood in the way of crusaders and the pressure on the SPD to withdraw from the Grand Coalition is increasing by the day.

If for internal political reasons Merkel were to be replaced as Chancellor by a more conservative CDU politician in the near future, the SPD can certainly be expected to walk away from the Grand Coalition. In all likelihood this would bring about a change of government rather than new elections. In principle the arithmetic's of available parliamentary seats are good enough for the CDU to form an ideologically uneasy coalition government with the left-wing Greens and the neo-liberal FDP (the so-

called Jamaica coalition). However, the attempt to do so failed already in the aftermath of the last general election in 2017. In view of disastrously poor poll ratings, neither the CDU/CSU nor the SPD are keen on holding new elections at present. And in any case, under German electoral law dissolving parliament and bringing about new elections in the middle of a normal parliamentary term is a complex and controversial undertaking that may well not succeed.

Instability in Germany is looming just around the corner

One thing is certain: with the coming end of the Merkel era – may this happen in a matter of months or, most unlikely, only in 2021 – the much-applauded stability in the middle of Europe will dissipate. Germany as the stable anchor of the European Union may soon be a thing of the past in view of the challenges to the existing European order posed by populist and anti-democratic forces and indeed governments in countries such as Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Italy and partially Austria. Some of Europe's neighbors and old allies, such as Turkey and indeed the U.S., are also displaying increasingly autocratic and populist tendencies.

The German economic boom of the last 8 years or so will also soon come to an end. A number of economic indicators are pointing toward such a development. Incidentally, many in Germany have hardly profited from this boom and similar to the situation in the U.S. have to be content with poorly paid jobs or need to work several jobs to make ends meet. A real economic crisis would increase the frustration and dissatisfaction in the country even further. So far public discontent has largely focused on the issue of migration though it may soon be complemented by increasing economic dissatisfaction.

The right-wing and anti-democratic AfD (*Alternative for Germany*) is waiting in the wings. Based on a vote of 12.6 per cent, the party that was only founded in 2013, already has 94 members of parliament in Berlin and is now also represented in the regional parliaments of all of Germany's 16 states. The AfD is bound to benefit from the

looming instability in Germany and the continued further weakening of Germany's two traditional center parties, the CDU and the SPD.

Despite Angela Merkel's many flaws and much justified criticism, perhaps in only a few years' time we will all long for the 'good old days' of the Merkel era. As a student of mine said recently, "I wish someone would let me know about the good times before they are in the past."

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