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Angela's ashes: 5 takeaways from the German election

The next few years won't be pretty.

By **MATTHEW KARNITSCHNIG** | 9/25/17, 4:25 AM CET | Updated 9/26/17, 5:41 AM CET



Angela Merkel secured her fourth term as chancellor in Sunday's elections | Alexander Koerner/Getty Images

Angela Merkel will remain German chancellor. That widely anticipated outcome was about the only unsurprising element of Sunday's German election.

The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) finished much stronger than most observers dared predict, becoming the first unabashedly racist, anti-foreigner party to sit in Germany's parliament since the days of Hitler.

The Social Democrats (SPD) all but imploded, opting to go into opposition to lick their wounds rather than risk another “grand coalition” with Merkel. The Free Democrats, back in parliament after four years in the wilderness, along with the Greens, finished slightly better than projected, opening the door to a three-way tie-up with Merkel’s conservatives. Previously considered a long shot, the combination Germans call “Jamaica” now looks like the only option left to form a government.

Here are five takeaways from Sunday’s election.

1. Merkel’s twilight has begun

SPD leader Martin Schulz told Merkel on live television she was the election’s “biggest loser.” A bit harsh perhaps (especially coming from a candidate who just recorded his party’s worst-ever result), but there’s some truth to it. Instead of addressing tough questions such as migration head-on, Merkel ran a vague, feel-good campaign, promising a “Germany in which we live well and happily,” while offering few specifics about how she wanted to get there.

Merkel’s will be a long *aufwiedersehen*, but there’s no denying her grip on power began to loosen the moment the first returns rolled in. Yes, she won, but support for her party fell by more than 20 percent compared to 2013, despite low unemployment, a strong economy and a host of other positives that by all rights should have guaranteed the Christian Democrats an easy win. Not even Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble’s balanced budget was enough for voters to forgive Merkel for her handling of the refugee crisis.

Conservatives in Merkel’s bloc — especially the Bavarians — are already whispering “I told you so.” Look for that to continue and for the chancellor to inch to the right on migration and questions related to “German identity.”



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2. Germany's consensus-driven political model is shattered

The next parliament will include six parties (seven, if you count the CSU, the Bavarian sister party to Merkel's CDU), representing a much more diverse cross-section of the country's body politic than its predecessor. Sparks will fly.

The inclusion of the far right in parliament will make German politics louder and nastier. AfD leader Jörg Meuthen made it clear Sunday that confrontation and "provocation" were central to the party's strategy. If other European countries where populists have a strong foothold are any indication, that no-holds-barred spirit will infect the political mainstream, creating a decidedly more raucous political climate.

3. Forget about meaningful eurozone reforms

Merkel's conservatives were skeptical of French President Emmanuel Macron's reform proposals even before Sunday. A grand coalition represented the French president's best chance for realizing his vision. With that option now off the table, a weakened Merkel is unlikely to be able win over the Free Democrats and skeptics in her own party, even if she wants to. France and Germany may agree to establish some form of budget and an oversight position for the eurozone with the title of finance minister, but neither will have the scope the French, not to mention many economists, had been hoping for.

4. Berlin will play hardball with Europe on refugees

German patience over Europe's lack of solidarity on the refugee front was already wearing thin. After Sunday's result, look for outright confrontation with countries like Poland and Hungary. In the view of many Christian Democrats, the AfD would have never gotten this far if other European countries had taken in their fair share of refugees instead of letting Germany bear the burden. It's payback time.

5. This isn't Weimar

For all the breathless historical comparisons, it's worth taking a deep breath and remembering Germany is a stable democracy. The vast majority of Germans didn't vote for the AfD and most of those who did, did so in protest. The coming years won't be pretty, but Germany's democratic foundations are robust enough to withstand the populist onslaught.