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Autor: Lenzin, René
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The political landscape in transition

The continued electoral success of the Swiss People's Party (SVP) and the ousting of its Federal Councillor Christoph Blocher are resulting in changes to the political landscape: expelled and rebel SVP members are forming a new party, and the Free Democrats (FDP) and Liberals are moving towards an alliance. By René Lenzin

On 12 December 2007, Parliament elected the then Grisons cantonal councillor Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf to the Federal Council in place of Christoph Blocher. The Swiss People's Party (SVP) felt deceived and betrayed by party member Widmer-Schlumpf. She was accused of contravening a party and parliamentary group resolution by accepting the position and of making a deal with the political opposition. Three months after her election, the party executive demanded that Widmer-Schlumpf stand down from the Federal Council and resign from the party. When the newly-elected Federal Councillor refused to go, the party executive gave the Grisons cantonal section an ultimatum: expel Widmer-Schlumpf from the party or your cantonal party will cease to be a member of the national SVP.

However, the Grisons party was not willing to abandon its Federal Councillor and was consequently expelled from the national SVP. This led to a split in the Grisons SVP. Some of the party members formed the new SVP, which followed the Blocher line politically and became part of the national SVP. The others founded the Civic Democratic Party (Bürgerlich-Demokratische Partei, BDP). There are numerous office-holders from the former SVP in its ranks. In addition to Federal Councillor Widmer-Schlumpf, it has both cantonal councillors, both National Councillors and the 32 cantonal MPs.

There was little opposition from the other cantonal sections to the action taken by the SVP against the Grisons section. Only in Berne and Glarus was there open rebellion from individual party members leading to some breaking away. In Glarus, the sole SVP cantonal councillor and 8 of 26 MPs joined the new BDP. In Berne, one of the two cantonal councillors, 2 of 10 National Councillors, the sole member of the Council of States and 17 of the 47 cantonal MPs switched allegiance to the BDP. The Bernese Federal Councillor Samuel Schmid, who was expelled from the parliamentary group by the SVP after his election in December 2007, also joined the BDP.

At the time of going to press, the new party therefore had two Federal Councillors as well as five federal and 57 cantonal members of Parliament. However, it cannot form a parliamentary group in the Federal House as this requires at least five seats on the National Council. Whether the BDP can establish itself in the long term and how much damage it will do to the SVP remain to be seen. One thing is clear – the presence of both parties in national government does not sit well with the Swiss system of consociationalism. There are likely to be major changes in the Federal Council by the 2011 elections at the latest.

Alliance of the federal state founders

The recent development in the SVP has not just led to the forming of a new party, but has also triggered further shifts in the political landscape. The SVP increased its share of the vote from 11% to 28.9% between 1987 and 2007. This unprecedented growth by Swiss standards is partly explained by the fact that the party has absorbed almost everything to its political right. It has also lured voters away from the traditionally middle-class parties. The SVP has seen its strongest growth in the rural Catholic areas of central and eastern Switzerland and in the reformed rural areas of French-speaking Switzerland. Its success has primarily been at the expense of the Christian Democrats (CVP) and, to a lesser extent, the Free Democrats (FDP) and Liberals (LPS).

Nationally, the vote for both founder parties (FDP and LPS) "only" fell by 7.9% between 1987 and 2007. The loss of support, however, was disproportionately great in the former Liberal strongholds of French-speaking Switzerland: down 24.5% in Neuchâtel, 22.3% in Vaud and 13.6% in Geneva. At the same time, the SVP made gains in these cantons of 23.2%, 16.2% and 21.1%, respectively. Now the FDP and LPS have taken stock of the losses and put their long rivalry to one side to form an alliance. On 21 June, the Neuchâtel cantonal sections united to form the Neuchâtel Radical Liberal Party (Parti libéral-radical neuchâtelois), and the alliance is set to be extended to national level in October.

Free Democrat-Liberal parties already exist in the cantons of Fribourg, Jura, Ticino and Valais. Only the Liberals in Basel-Stadt have so far categorically opposed the alliance.

The FDP and LPS have made up a joint parliamentary group in the National Council since 1999 when, for the first time, the Liberals won fewer than the five seats required to form a parliamentary group.

A split amongst the Greens

The third significant change in the Swiss political landscape has nothing to do with the SVP. It concerns the Greens who, along with the SVP, made the greatest gains at last year's parliamentary elections.

The Green Liberals in Zurich broke away during the course of the last legislative period on account of political and, above all, personal differences. This new party won three seats on the National Council and one on the Council of States in October 2007 at the first attempt. Now Green Liberal sections have been formed in nine other cantons. This new party combines ecological issues with a rather middle-class outlook in terms of finance and social policy. Whether its success will last remains to be seen. The Green Liberals occupy the political middle ground and are part of a parliamentary group in the Federal House with the Christian Democrats (CVP) and the Evangelical People's Party (EVP).