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Ueli Maurer succeeds Samuel Schmid

The Federal Assembly has elected Ueli Maurer as the successor to Defence Minister Samuel Schmid. With the election of its former president, the Swiss People's Party (SVP) has returned to the Federal Council declaring an end to its one-year period in opposition. By René Lenzin.



The swearing-in of Ueli Maurer, new Federal Councillor and Minister of the DDPS

Ueli Maurer, the official SVP candidate, was elected by the tightest of margins when the National Council and Council of States voted him into national government on 10 December 2008. He was initially one of two official SVP candidates, the other being Christoph Blocher, who had been ousted as a Federal Councillor by Parliament a year earlier. However, Blocher withdrew his candidacy after the first round of voting favoured Maurer. Maurer gained an absolute majority in the third round of voting. With 122 votes, he obtained one vote more than his party and National Council colleague Hansjörg Walter. The president of the Swiss Farmers' Union had been built up as an opposing candidate by the Social Democrats, the Greens and some Civic Democrats despite declaring that he would not accept the position if elected. The SVP, most of the Free Democrat-Liberals and around half the Christian Democrats voted for Maurer.

With Maurer joining the Federal Council, the SVP has renounced its opposition strategy. After Blocher's deselection, it had declared itself an opposition party and expelled Blocher's successor Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf from the party. Samuel Schmid,

the second former SVP Federal Councillor, later left the party of his own accord. Schmid's resignation from office opened the door for the SVP to return to the Federal Council. However, the close-run election shows that almost half the Members of Parliament were not willing to accept a candidate whom they considered to be a political clone of Blocher. Many also saw the SVP's tactics – elect one of our candidates or we will remain in opposition – as blackmail.

From critic to boss

Maurer, who reached the rank of major in the Swiss army, has taken over from Schmid at the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport (DDPS). This is contentious as the SVP and its former president have been among the harshest critics of the Federal Council's security policy. As defence minister, Maurer will have to represent positions that contradict not only his previous statements but also his party's agenda. It is highly unlikely that the Federal Council or the majority of Members of Parliament will accept fundamental changes in line with SVP policy, especially since the key elements of current army policy have been approved with a large majority by the people.

In addition to the ongoing development of the army, Maurer will have to deal with two important decisions right at the start of his term of office – the appointment of a new army commander-in-chief and the choice of a new fighter jet. The Members of Parliament who elected Maurer hope that the political debate on military issues will abate somewhat. They appear confident that the new Federal Councillor will make the transition from political agitator to member of a collegial government who is willing to compromise. Many of his opponents do not share this conviction.

58-year-old Maurer is married with six children. From 1978 to 1986, he sat on the municipal council (executive) of Hinwil, the commune in which he lives. Between 1983 and 1991, he represented his party in the Zurich cantonal parliament and subsequently in the National Council. As President of the SVP from 1996 until the beginning of 2008, he made a significant contribution to the party's rapid rise. In August last year, he took over the presidency of the Zurich section of the SVP, a position he had to give up after his election to the Federal Council. Ueli Maurer is the first non-academic in national government since Adolf Ogi, Samuel Schmid's predecessor.

As during Christoph Blocher's term of office, the Canton of Zurich now has two representatives in the Federal Council in Ueli Maurer and Moritz Leuenberger, while the Canton of Berne has no representatives in national government for only the second time in the history of the federal state. Since the SVP entered the Federal Council in 1929 through Rudolf Minger, its representation has traditionally come from Berne. Before Samuel Schmid left the party, this tradition had only been broken during the term of office of Leon Schlumpf (1979 to 1987), who was from the Canton of Grisons.

Hans-Rudolf Merz is President of the Swiss Confederation

The Federal Assembly has elected Hans-Rudolf Merz as President of the Swiss Confederation for the coming year. The 66-year-old Free Democrat from Appenzell Auser rhoden took up office just weeks after suffering a heart attack that he only just survived. Parliament has elected 45-year-old Christian Democrat Doris Leuthard from Aargau as Vice-President.