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Swiss politician – and convicted criminal – Pierre Maudet wins re-election

Pierre Maudet has lied on multiple occasions, accepted luxury travel from foreign royals and has a criminal conviction. But that didn't stop him being re-elected to the Geneva cantonal government and causing ripples throughout the country, especially in the German-speaking part. Political analysts put his comeback down to charisma.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

"This is a triumph for him," declares Nenad Stojanović, a political scientist at the University of Geneva. Maudet's re-election follows a lengthy period in the wilderness: thrown out of his party, stripped of his department at the Geneva Council of State, found guilty of accepting illegal favours and roundly condemned by the Swiss media.

The scandal can be traced back to a 2015 trip to Abu Dhabi paid for by the Emirati crown prince. The Geneva criminal appeal and review court (Chambre pénale d'appel et de révision) ruled on 26 May 2023 that Maudet must repay the cost of this trip, put at more than 50,000 Swiss francs, to the canton of Geneva. The newly re-elected state councillor was also given a suspended 120,000 Swiss franc fine. The court declared that Maudet had accepted an undue favour, knowingly exposing himself to the risk of influence over the performance of his duties as a state councillor. The Maudet affair was first revealed by the "Tribune de Genève" newspaper in May 2018 and turned into a national scandal – particularly coming shortly after the 2017 Federal Council elections, in which he came close to winning a seat. "It is a serious political matter, and in his shoes 99 percent of elected representatives would have stepped down," says Stojanovic.

Shock, outrage and admiration

Maudet's re-election – along with the election to the Grand Council of 11 deputies from the Liberty and Social Justice movement that he established – provoked a mixture of shock, outrage and admiration. "It's staggering that he has been voted back in," says Lukas Golder, a political analyst and media expert who jointly heads up the gfs.bern research institute. There has been no major outcry about Maudet's return from national elected representatives in Berne; their line has very much been that voters have the right to elect the candidate of their choice. The "NZZ" newspaper has not shied away from comparing Maudet to Donald Trump, however, labelling the affair a classic example of "Genferei" – a term denoting the political contortions perceived as typical of this canton.

For their part, Swiss political commentators attribute Maudet's re-election to his exceptional personal qualities: intelligence, resilience and powers of communication. "Voters in other cantons would be just as ready to forgive

a personality like this, if one existed," argues Golder. He stresses that first-past-the-post elections amplify the reach and appeal of characters like Maudet. "French-speaking Switzerland does have a certain reputation, but in fact the whole 'Genferei' line is a myth," says Stojanovic, pointing to other scandals that originated in German-speaking Switzerland and Ticino.

His University of Geneva colleague Pascal Sciarini notes that voters on the other side of the Röstigraben



From zero to hero –
Pierre Maudet with
jubilant supporters
after winning
re-election to the
Geneva cantonal
government on
2 April.
Photo: Keystone

were themselves seduced by Maudet in the 2017 Federal Council elections. "He ran an excellent campaign and wasn't far off being elected. So don't be so sure that a similar situation could not arise in another urban canton."

The biggest political scandal since Kopp

"The Maudet affair is the biggest scandal in Swiss politics since the resignation of Elisabeth Kopp in 1989," wrote Philippe Reichen, French-speaking Switzerland correspondent at the "Tages Anzeiger" newspaper. Meanwhile, Golder of gfs.bern points out that "Kopp lied when under pressure and was not convicted, whereas Maudet persisted with a long-term lie". Is Swiss politics sexist? Golder also observes that "following her resignation, Kopp never attempted a comeback. That contrasts with several cases where erring male politicians in this country have seized their second chances, in circumstances where women tend to give up". He cites in particular the case of Geri

Ylfete Fanaj, a Lucerne trailblazer

Müller, former mayor of Baden in the canton of Aargau and National Council member for the Green party. Müller became embroiled in controversy in 2014 when it emerged that he had sent naked selfies. He did not stand for re-election to the National Council and three years later was voted out as mayor of Baden. His was a case of moral – but not criminal – wrongdoing. In another case, Roberto Zanetti, member of the Solothurn government, was involved in a 2004 scandal over electoral campaign donations, which he repaid. He was not re-elected in 2005, took some time away from politics and was voted onto the Council of States in 2010. Once again, there was no condemnation.

For his part, Pierre Maudet did step down from the Geneva government, but only as a step towards rehabilitating himself. Between the two rounds of voting in the Geneva elections, Green party State Councillor Antonio Hodgers expressed indignation, asking: "When the people decide to vote into office someone who has been convicted of corruption, who has lied to the authorities... what value does that place on ethics in politics?" But in a democracy, it is the people who decide. "Voters wanted to focus on the good and forget about the bad," concludes Sciarini.

Above all, people vote for human beings

Golder points out that "the media are very quick to make a moral judgment, whereas voters are more likely to look at someone as a human being, with a hope for redemption". During his most recent campaign, Maudet adopted language and attitudes that underscore people's fascination with him. "I met him once," says Stojanovic, who found him to be empathetic and humble. He also points out that Maudet has genuine fans: "a rarity in Swiss politics". It should be remembered, however, that Maudet showed a much harsher side in his dealings with civil servants. Another fly in the ointment is that, in the words of the appeal court, Maudet "has never accepted, not even in part, the criminal nature of his actions, pleading legal uncertainty in order to escape sanction".

Going forward, Pierre Maudet "has no choice but to work effectively with his colleagues on the Council of State. It could be that five years from now he will have regained all his legitimacy," argues Golder.



Photo: Keystone

Ylfete Fanaj's election to the Lucerne cantonal government in mid-May was remarkable in more ways than one. Fanaj, 41, from the city of Lucerne is the Swiss Social Democratic Party's first representative for years in what was previously a purely centre-right and right-wing – and exclusively male-run – executive. Ylfete Fanaj has also become Switzerland's first-ever cantonal cabinet member of Kosovar origin. Kosovans, particularly Albanian speakers, make up one of the country's biggest immigrant groups. Born in Prizren, Fanaj arrived in Switzerland aged nine at the beginning of the 1990s. Her father was a seasonal worker. Her family settled in Sursee. This small town in the canton of Lucerne was their home for a long time. Sursee shaped her as a person, says Fanaj, who became a Swiss citizen there at the age of 20. Fanaj was good at school but only obtained a commercial apprenticeship after receiving 200 rejections – an experience that she shared with other teenagers from the Balkans. But young Ylfete was willing to work hard. She completed a vocational university entrance diploma and studied social work before becoming the cantonal integration officer of Nidwalden. Fanaj's political career in Lucerne took the classic Swiss route from bottom to top – from city council to cantonal parliament, from faction leader to speaker. She is now a member of government in the predominantly conservative canton of Lucerne. Her story has attracted considerable attention in both Switzerland and Kosovo. "Change is possible," was her response. Fanaj, who has a young son, has blazed a trail but refuses to make a fuss. Lucerne's cantonal government "now reflects our diverse society", she says instead.

SUSANNE WENGER