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The far right prepares to pounce as Germany's centrists squabble

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Until the end of last week, Germany's three-monthhold grand coalition under Chancellor Friedrich Merz had reason to feel mildly pleased with itself. Following the premature collapse of the previous government from permanent infighting, Merz's centre-right Christian Democrats (CDU) and the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD) swung together noiselessly and buckled down to work. A new purposefulness was in the air, especially in foreign and security policy.

But the toxic bickering is back. And the fact that a full-blown coalition crisis has erupted over a supreme court nominee — a process that used to be one of the most bipartisan, well oiled and silent in German politics — reveals just how volatile the country's mood has become.

On Friday, Merz's coalition had to shelve what looked like a routine parliamentary vote on three prospective justices before the summer holidays. It had become clear that large swaths of the chancellor's own party group would balk at supporting one of the nominees of its SPD coalition partner, law professor Frauke Brosius-Gersdorf.

Conservative critics object to her views on abortion and vaccine mandates. Her defenders point to an academic record that has gained bipartisan accolades. All sides acknowledge that rightwing media outlets whipped up a campaign against her. It featured egregious falsifications and was gleefully picked up by the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). The vote has now been punted to the autumn. Merz has been at pains to gloss over the incident, saying: "It wasn't pretty, but . . . not a crisis for democracy." There is broad consensus about the first half of that statement; the latter is open to debate.

The coalition whips had vetted the nominees and been confident until the eve of the vote that they had the necessary majority. The blame for having misjudged his own flock's mood and undercut his chancellor fell on the conservative whip Jens Spahn, already on the defensive over the botched first round of voting to install Merz as chancellor in May and accusations of having mismanaged mask procurement during the pandemic. On Monday, Spahn wrote a crestfallen letter of apology to the CDU party group.

Still, bitterness remains. Peter Müller, a former constitutional court justice and CDU governor, called it "a flagrant failure of party leadership", reflecting widespread scepticism of the notoriously ambitious Spahn's loyalties in his own party. The SPD, smarting from a historically poor showing

in February, and resentful of its status as a junior partner after having led the previous government, is insisting on its candidate.

The seeming genius of Merz's coalition was that both partners made hard compromises — the CDU on government debt, the SPD on border controls — out of a shared sense of responsibility to keep extremists at bay. Suddenly, those sacrifices look like a weakness, not a strength. As Germany's centrists glumly ponder their future, they should pay more attention to internal AfD strategy debates. The key obstacle to power for the German far right is the “firewall” — the CDU's pledge never to enter into coalition with the AfD. So AfD leaders, concerned about a potential ban on the party, have been unctuously vowing greater moderation.

Meanwhile, they are plotting how to force Merz's government to submit to the far right's agenda. At a retreat in early July, a senior AfD lawmaker presented a six-page strategy paper. Its gist: split and destroy the grand coalition and force the centre-right into co-operation: “Our goal is to create a situation in which the political divide no longer runs between the AfD and the other political currents, but rather one in which a bourgeois-conservative camp and a radicalizing left-wing camp face each other, comparable to the situation in the US.”

In other words, the AfD is pretending to deradicalise while plotting the destruction of the German political centre by instigating culture wars. A justice's record deserves scrutiny; but turning it into a political scandal only aids the AfD.

The American right is watching closely. An article in *The American Conservative* magazine praised the recent invitation of AfD would-be chancellor Alice Weidel to a Conservative Political Action Conference in Budapest, and excoriated chancellor Merz as an “unauthentic conservative”. It then said the quiet part out loud: “At issue is not only the future direction of Germany, but of Europe itself . . . We must co-operate with our friends to help topple the current political stewards of Europe.”

This is the real challenge for Merz's coalition: a revolutionary far right with backing in America. Compromising over a supreme court justice seems like a surmountable difficulty by comparison.