

Angela Merkel's bloc achieves victory — but at a price

di Stefan Wagstyl

Angela Merkel predicted this would be the most “difficult” election campaign of her long political career. In the event, her conservative bloc defeated Martin Schulz’s social democrats by a clear margin — but victory has come at a price.

Both Germany’s largest mainstream parties lost support as voters turned in their droves to the populist Alternative for Germany, which becomes the first substantial far-right party in parliament since the Nazis.

While the veteran chancellor’s all-inclusive “mother-of-the-nation” approach has won her a fourth term, the campaign’s lasting image is of angry AfD protesters who jeered at her rallies. Though few in number, their intrusions introduced a harsher tone into German politics and have ushered in a new era in Berlin.

Ms Merkel’s win leaves her with the formidable challenge of responding to the AfD, which capitalised on the resentment of her handling of the 2015-16 refugee crisis and the arrival of more than 1m mainly Muslim refugees.

Meanwhile, she has to marshal her own disappointed conservative forces and form a new administration in tricky circumstances after the SPD pledged it would go into opposition. It leaves her most likely having to put together the country’s first three-way coalition with the Greens and liberal Free Democrats.

She also faces pressing international issues, ranging from North Korea and US president Donald Trump’s nationalist outbursts to French president Emmanuel Macron’s controversial eurozone reform plans.

It could have been even more difficult for the 63-year-old chancellor. As late as early 2017, her Teflon-coated electoral record seemed damaged amid a huge loss of backing over refugees. Mr Schulz, newly appointed SPD leader, was enjoying a surge in support. The CDU was at war over refugee quotas with the Christian Social Union, its Bavaria-based sister party.

Ms Merkel battled back, campaigning on her formidable reputation as an international stateswoman and successful manager of a booming economy. As in previous elections, she focused on the political centre, shamelessly stealing SPD policies such as the minimum wage. She trod carefully around the refugee question, balancing pledges that the inflows would never be repeated with views of a Germany in which immigrants could be integrated like the citizens of the federal country’s different provinces, and avoided even mentioning the AfD.

But this strategy of aiming for the middle ground clearly alienated many more conservatives than she expected. Josef Janning, Berlin office director of the ECFR think-tank, said: “This result will make things more difficult for her with the conservative critics in the CDU.”

Mr Schulz made life easier for her by failing to carve out distinct positions. An attack on social inequality failed amid evidence that most Germans have never had it so good. He was hobbled because the SPD was Ms Merkel’s coalition ally, meaning it was jointly responsible for policies including dealing with refugees.

The single Schulz-Merkel television debate showed the two leaders more as polite discussion partners than political adversaries: “a duet not a duel”, said one commentator.

But after the refugee crisis, the CDU/CSU’s result is well down on 2013’s 41.5 per cent and the AfD’s entry into the Bundestag further sours her victory.

While she does not talk publicly about it, Ms Merkel is presumably thinking of her legacy and comparisons with two other long-serving CDU predecessors — Konrad Adenauer, who rebuilt West Germany from wartime ruin, and Helmut Kohl, who oversaw reunification.

Her overall reputation could now hang on migrant integration. “Refugee issues will dominate the next Bundestag,” says Jürgen Falter, politics professor at Mainz University.

Moreover the AfD’s surge has made coalition building harder: there will be seven parties in the Bundestag, with the support for the CDU/CSU and the SPD down from 90 per cent in the 1970s to around 54 per cent.

The cautious Ms Merkel would have preferred to go back into a coalition with the SPD but the social democrats fear made clear after their own disastrous result that they wanted to be in opposition. The alternative of a three-way coalition with the liberal Free Democrats and the Greens will raise conflicts between the FDP’s business-friendly policies and the Greens’ pro-environment approach.

In Germany’s consensual society, party negotiators try to overcome differences. Nobody wants the blame for failure, let alone for forcing new elections, the last resort. But even in the easier conditions of 2013, the coalition talks took nearly two months.

Meanwhile, the government’s work will not stop. As early as this week, Mr Macron is expected to unveil eurozone reform proposals that Berlin could find discomfiting. Within the EU, Ms Merkel will also have to deal with the challenges of Brexit, African migration, Islamist terror, Russia and Turkey.

At home, the government will have to focus not just on refugees but the diesel emissions scandal, green energy reforms, creaking infrastructure and lagging digitalisation — not to mention the longer term problem of an ageing population.

Ms Merkel's new government may be weeks away, but its policy challenges are already piling up.