

Germany mulls possibility of life after Angela Merkel

Germany is beginning to think about life after Angela Merkel, despite a deal this week which paved the way for her to form a new coalition government.

A visibly exhausted Mrs Merkel appeared before the cameras on Friday to announce that she had reached agreement with her old coalition partners, the Social Democrats (SPD), after marathon 24-hour talks.

“We will work earnestly, today and through the next term of office, to create the conditions so that we can live well in Germany for the next 10 years, the next 15 years,” she said.

But a recent survey found that more than half of Germans do not expect Mrs Merkel to see out a full fourth term as chancellor. Leading voices have started to say that it is time for her to start planning to hand over power to a successor.

“Angela Merkel is past her zenith,” Oskar Niedermayer of Berlin’s Free University told Handelsblatt newspaper.

“In the interest of her party’s electoral strength, she should not stay in office for the entire legislative term.”

“After the long night in Berlin, Merkel said ‘We have work before us’. For how long will that still apply to her?” Berholt Kohler, editor of the influential Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung newspaper wrote.

“How long will the German desire for peace, stability and reliability, which brought Merkel such high levels of approval for twelve years, keep at bay the need to see new faces and constellations?”

Friday’s deal with the SPD comes more than three months after September’s elections, in which Mrs Merkel suffered damaging losses, and follows the collapse of coalition talks with smaller parties. It is already the longest it has taken to form a new government in postwar German history.

But Mrs Merkel is still not out of the woods. Friday’s deal is only an agreement to

begin formal coalition negotiations, and it still has to be approved by delegates at a special SPD party convention next weekend.

If they vote in favour, the two parties will open talks on a detailed coalition agreement, which could take months. That too will have to be put to an SPD vote — this time of the full membership. Experts agree it could be months before Germany has a new government.

There is opposition to a new coalition within the SPD's ranks, particularly in the party youth wing, the Jusos, who have led a vociferous No campaign.

Martin Schulz, the SPD leader, has staked his future on the deal, and most commentators believe his opponents will struggle to muster enough votes to block it — they only managed to get 20 per cent of delegates to vote against opening initial talks last month.

If the SPD does vote No, it will spell disaster not only for Mrs Merkel, but for the SPD leadership.

For Mrs Merkel, it will mean the only remaining option is to try to form a minority government and try to muster a majority on a vote-by-vote basis.

Mr Schulz would almost certainly be forced to resign, and the SPD would be thrown into chaos. The entire party leadership has put its weight behind a new coalition, including every likely candidate to succeed Mr Schulz.

Most observers believe it won't come to that, and Mrs Merkel will get her new coalition. But so far it has received only a lukewarm reception from Germans. Spiegel magazine described it as "paleo-coalition" of political dinosaurs.

The parties have agreed to use Germany's influence to reform the European Union — though the deal stops far short of Mr Schulz's recent call for a "United States of Europe".

But beyond agreement to limit the number of asylum-seekers arriving in Germany to 220,000 a year, there is little new in the way of domestic policy.

"It should be clear to all involved that this is the last hurrah of the era of Merkel," Mr Kohler wrote in Frankfurter Allgemeine.

Commentators have noted that Mrs Merkel's Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), is already seeing a changing of the guard, after its leader Horst Seehofer agreed to step down as Bavarian prime minister and make way for the younger Markus Soder. Some have even suggested it may be time for Mrs Merkel to contemplate something similar.

Potential successors are already jockeying for position, prominent among them Jens Spahn, the junior finance minister, and Ursula von der Leyen, the defence minister.

Veteran Merkel watchers are keeping an eye on is Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, the regional prime minister of Saarland state — long known as “mini-Merkel” and increasingly seen of late as the chancellor's preferred successor.

If she is brought to Berlin and given a cabinet job, they say, it means Mrs Merkel is getting ready to go at some time in the next few years.

Profile | Angela Merkel



CREDIT: AFP

Chancellor of Germany

Born: 17 July 1954

Nickname: Mutti ("Mommy")

Education: Physics at the University of Leipzig, Doctorate in Quantum Chemistry at German Academy of Sciences, Berlin

Early career: Research scientist, before entering politics after the German reunification

Party politics: The Christian Democratic Union, Germany's centre-right party

Time in office: Leader since 2005

Did you know? Ms Merkel's trademark hand gesture, forming a quadrilateral shape from the fingers and thumbs of both hands, has become known as the "Merkel-Raute" and adopted by both supporters and critics as a symbol of her leadership.

Source: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/01/13/germany-mulls-possibility-lif-e-angela-merkel/>

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