

Towards victory for the Social Democrats in Finland?

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ANALYSIS

On 14th April next the Finns are being called to ballot to appoint the 200 members of the Eduskunta/Riksdag, the single house of parliament. For the first time the Finns living abroad who to date could not fulfil their civic duty in their country's embassies and consulates will now be able to vote by post.

2,468 people, of whom 42% are women are officially running for election. For around seven candidates out of ten (69%) it is their first election.

The government led by Juha Sipilä (Centre Party, KESK) which was formed in May 2015 includes three parties: The Prime Minister's Centre Party, the Conservative Assembly (KOK), led by Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Petteri Orpo and Blue Reform (SIN) led by Sampo Terho.

This government's economic results are positive: Finland recovered growth in 2015 after three years of recession (growth lay at 2.7% in 2017) and unemployment totals 6.7% (January 2019). The number of unemployed has dropped by 140,000 during this term in office. The government achieved its goal in terms of the employment rate which lies at 72.4% (2019 figure) and even 81.5% in the 20-64 age bracket, i.e. a European Union record. In 2015 the employment rate was 68%. It has also reined in public debt (which represents 59% of the GDP) and it succeeded in stabilising income tax.

Juha Sipilä's government has failed however to approve the reform of the healthcare services (SOTE), which planned for the management of the social and sanitary services, which today is run by the country's 313 town councils to be transferred to 18 autonomous regions (social and healthcare zones, SOTE). It was also supposed to make way for private operators in social and sanitary service provision. This reform was a priority for Prime Minister whose aim it was to reduce healthcare spending on an ageing population. Today one fifth of the Finns (21.4%) are over 65, and their figure is due to rise to a quarter by 2030. Healthcare spending represented 6.9% of the Finnish GNP in 2000, fifteen years later, 9.6%.

The fact that several scandals have come to light in some retirement homes managed by private companies (short staffed, ill-adapted treatment given to residents, and even the abuse of the elderly) did not help in the adoption of the healthcare service reform.

Today medical protection (55%), employment (45%), environmental issues (40%) and immigration (35%) are the most important electoral themes for the Finns. As in most European countries the audience of the government parties is declining. According to a study by the institute Taloustutkimus, published by the daily Suomen Kuvalehti, around one million voters, i.e. one third, will not vote for a party for whom they voted in the last general elections on 19th April 2015.

According to the most recent poll by Kantar TNS for the daily Helsingin Sanomat, published mid-March, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) is due to come out ahead in the general elections on 14th April with 21% of the vote. The Conservative Assembly is due to win 18.1% of the vote; the Centre Party is due to win 14.3% of the vote and is said to be threatened by the ecologists of the Green League (VIHR) which is due to win 14% of the vote. The populists, True Finns (PS) are forecast to win 11.1% of the vote and the Left Alliance (VAS), 8,9% of the vote.

It remains that the debates organised by the TV channels between the lead candidates are still to come and they might influence the support given to the various parties. Marko Junkkari, editor of the daily Helsingin Sanomat, recalls that during the

general elections on 19th April 2015, the Social Democratic Party saw its voting intentions decrease after the appearance in the TV debates of its leader Antti Rinne.

ON THE RIGHT

On 8th March last outgoing Prime Minister Juha Sipilä announced the resignation of his government. He said that he had taken this decision after seeing that the SOTE reform, one of his government's main goals, would not be approved before the end of the legislature. "It is really disappointing. As a man of principle, I believe that a politician must be accountable. I have listened carefully to my inner voice and I have concluded that the government should resign," declared Juha Sipilä.

"It is a skilful manoeuvre in view of the general elections. In a way the Centre Party has made an intelligent choice because after the election it will be able to make new alliances to get other parties to approve its reform, notably with the social democrats," stressed Jan Sundberg, a political expert at the university of the capital Helsinki. Indeed, although the Centre Party has lost all hope of retaining the post of Prime Minister, it hopes that it will be able to take part in the next government by joining forces with the social democrats.

Journalist Marko Junkkari qualified the Prime Minister's resignation as a "good political coup" but he also believes that there are risks come with this. By resigning he believes that the head of government is trying to place the blame for the failure of the SOTE reform on the Conservative Assembly. "What the Centre Party is trying to do is catch up on the Conservative Assembly in the polls," said his party, political journalists Unto Hämäläinen.

The Centre Party is of course trying to win back points before the general elections. Juha Sipilä repeats that the Finns must make sure they do take the risk of having a blue-red government, i.e. a government led by the Conservative Assembly and the Social Democratic Party. "All governments formed based on a coalition like this have been catastrophic, except for the one led by Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen (SDP) from 1995 to 1999," declared the outgoing head of government who

also said that he would not be standing to take the lead of the Centre Party if it did not achieve the result forecast for it in the polls (i.e. around 14%).

The Centre Party says it is prepared to invest 600 million euro in social insurance and 400 million euro on R&D and training. It hopes to bring the employment rate up to 75%, which means the creation of 100,000 new jobs, and to increase the minimum retirement pension by 100€ per month, i.e. up to 900€. The party also wants to reduce the legal voting age to 16.

For its party the Conservative Party is promising a reduction in taxes of around one billion euro that would benefit workers and pensioners.

The Conservative Assembly (KOK) is promising to reduce taxes by around 1 billion €, which would especially benefit workers and pensioners. It would like to continue governing with the Centre Party: 70% of the conservative candidates want this. The Prime Minister Juha Sipilä's party privileges its alliance with the social democrats: 70% of the Centre Party's candidates say they want this although 54% say they support a coalition with the Conservative Assembly.

ON THE LEFT

The Social Democratic Party has had a strange electoral campaign with its leader Antti Rinne contracting pneumonia whilst on holiday at the end of the year in Spain, followed by a nosocomial infection whilst he was in hospital. Finally, on his return to Finland, doctors detected a coronary embolism. Antti Rinne was therefore on sick leave until the end of February and recently made his return to public life.

The Social Democratic Party, which is against the SOTE reform, wants to strengthen the Welfare State and reduce inequality. It hopes to invest in professional training, education and research. The party also wants to increase the tax base without increasing taxes.

The Left Alliance (VAS) led by the popular Li Andersson, has made the fight to counter inequality the central

theme of its electoral campaign. The party wants to adopt a wealth tax and increase the number of income tax brackets.

THE OTHER PARTIES

Like the Social Democratic Party, but different reasons, the Green League (VIHR) has also experienced leadership problems. Touko Aalto, appointed as the party's head in 2017, has had some difficult times (in his private and public life), and at present he is sick leave following a burn out. Pekka Haavisto has therefore been the Green League's interim leader since November.

He hopes to see his party to be one of the first three at national level on 14th April and to win the capital, Helsinki. The ecologists want to reform the social security system and they support universal revenue. They are also suggesting an increase in labour immigration and the creation of 100,000 jobs by 2023.

The True Finns (PS) are due to lose half of their voters in the election notably due to the party's division in June 2017. Twenty of the party's MPs, including three ministers split off from the main movement after the election of Jussi Halla-aho as the chairman of the party and they founded the association 'Blue Reform' (SIN). This then became a political party on 15th November 2017. Jussi Halla-aho, who hopes to recover his seat in parliament has already said he would resign from the chair of the True Finns if the party did not win more than 7 seats in the general election.

The True Finns want to act on the budgetary deficit (1% of the GDP) implementing a strict austerity programme and reduce public spending. They also want to invest in care of the elderly. Finally, with its sights firmly set on security issues, the populist party wants to increase the police force and put a stop to "humanitarian immigration".

For its part Blue Reform (SIN) has suffered a blow with the recent decision by the outgoing Foreign Minister Timo Soini not to stand in the general election on 14th April. The party is only credited with 2% of the vote in the polls.

Finally, the Swedish People's Party (SFP) hopes to win two additional seats in the election, one in the constituency of Vaasa and the other in the capital Helsinki. The party is against the SOTE reform and hopes to increase the annual quota of refugees hosted by Finland to 2,500 people.

THE FINNISH POLITICAL SYSTEM

The Eduskunta/Riksdag has 200 MPs elected every four years in 13 constituencies appointing between 7 and 36 representatives depending on their population (except for the Aland Islands which only elect one representative). In the next election the number of citizens in each constituency is being divided by the country's total population with the result then being multiplied by 199 to achieve the number of seats to be allocated per constituency.

The general elections take place according to the proportional vote and the d'Hondt method (single list vote in one round in the Aland Islands). The electorate votes once for a party and once for a candidate. A Finnish specificity means that there is no electoral threshold to achieve to be able to enter parliament. A threshold would make it difficult for the Swedish speaking minority in Finland to achieve representation, going as far even as totally depriving the Swedish People's Party of a seat.

The candidates in the general election are appointed by the political parties and by electorates' associations. To take part in the election a party has to collate a minimum of 5000 citizens' signatures to be registered with the Interior Ministry. Voters' associations hoping to run must have a minimum of 100 members. In the event of the number of candidates appointed by the local branches of a political party rising over the number of candidates that the latter is allowed to present, the electoral law obliges it to organise primaries.

Between 1981 and 2011, three parties of almost equal importance shared two thirds of the vote at constant levels in the general elections. This situation came to an end on 17th April 2011 when the True Finns won

a similar number of votes to that won by the Social Democratic Party.

Finally, the Eduskunta/Riksdag has 83 women members, i.e. 41.5% of all MPs. In terms of the number of women in Parliament, Finland comes second in Europe after Sweden (47.3%).

Eight political parties entered the Eduskunta/Riksdag after the general election on 19th April 2015. These are as follows:

- the Centre Party (KESK), successor to the Agrarian Party founded in 1906, lying to the right of the political scale. Led by outgoing Prime Minister Juha Sipilä, it has taken part in nearly half of the Finnish governments (36 out of 70). It has 49 seats;
- the Conservative Assembly (KOK), a party founded in 1918, positioned to the right, it has taken part in all of the government coalitions since 1990. Led by Petteri Orpo, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister with 37 seats;
- the True Finns (PS), a populist, nationalist, eurosceptic party, created in 1995, emerging from the Rural Party (SMP) itself created 1959. Led by Jussi Halla-aho, with 38 seats;
- the Social Democratic Party (SDP) created in 1899 under the name of the Workers' Party of Finland, led by Antti Rinne, with 34 MPs;

- the Green League (VIHR), created in 1987 and the first European ecologist party to be given a ministry (in 1995). Led by Pekka Haavisto (interim leader since November 2018), it has 15 seats;
- the Left Alliance (VAS), a far-left party founded in 1990, emerging from the People's Democratic League (SKDL), the Democratic League of Women (SNDL) and the Communist Party (SKP). Led by Li Andersson it has 12 seats;
- The Swedish People's Party (SFP), a liberal party created in 1906, representing the interests of the Swedish minority and led by Anna-Maja Henriksson, with 9 seats;
- Christian Democratic Party (SKL), a party founded in 1958, led by Sari Essayah, with 5 seats.

In Finland the President of the Republic is appointed by direct universal suffrage every six years. Sauli Niinistö (KOK) was re-elected on 28th January 2018 for a second term in office in the first round winning 62.7% of the vote.

Reminder of the general election results of 19th April 2015 in Finland

Turnout: 66.85%

Political parties	Number of votes won	% of votes won	Number of seats
Centre Party (KESK)	626 218	21,10	21,10
National Coalition Party (KOK)	540 212	18,20	18,20
True Finns (PS)	524 054	17,60	17,60
Social Democratic Party of Finland (SDP)	490 102	16,50	16,50
Green League (VIHR)	253 102	8,50	8,50
Left Alliance (VAS)	211 702	7,10	7,10
Swedish People's Party of Finland (SFP)	144 802	4,90	4,90
Christian Democrats (KD)	105 134	3,50	3,50
Others	25 086	0,85	0,85
Independence Party	13 638	0,46	0,46
Coalition Aland	10 910	0,37	0,37

Source : https://tulospalvelu.vaalit.fi/E-2015/en/tulos_kokomaa.html

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