

Presidential Election in Germany

30th June 2010

few days
before
the vote

Presidential Election in Germany, a round up just a few days before the vote.

The surprise resignation by German President Horst Köhler on 31st May last, a first in the country's history, occurred at a difficult time for the government coalition led by Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) that rallies the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) and the Liberal Democratic Party (FDP). It forced the Chancellor to organise an early – high risk – presidential election. Indeed the Social Democratic and Greens Party candidate, Pastor Joachim Gauck, is – just days before the election on 30th June – now running favourite in a presidential election that has never before been the focus of interest in Germany.

The Head of State, whose role is mainly honorary, is elected by the German Federal Assembly (Bundesversammlung) that brings together 612 members in the Bundestag, the Lower Chamber of Parliament and an equal number of representatives from the 16 Länder, MPs of the regional parliaments or personalities from civil society.

Joachim Gauck describes himself as a «*leftwing conservative*». He says he sympathises with liberal values and also thinks that he will be elected President of the Republic thanks to the votes of certain people close to the CDU/CSU and the FDP. The leftwing candidate is a friend of the present Chancellor. He declared in the daily Bild Zeitung that he could have been Angela Merkel's candidate. «*It is not my intention to take the limelight from the Chancellor with my candidature, I watched her political rise with great attention and joy,*» he says.

Joachim Gauck does not want to be qualified as the man who might bring Angela Merkel down and said that he had been on the verge of giving up the presidential race which he had been offered so as not to impede the Chancellor. «*I was surprised and flattered that someone thought of me for this post. But I didn't look for it and it really was not my intention to get in Angela Merkel's way. I am sure that she does not see my candidature as an attack against her government,*» declared Joachim Gauck. Mr Gauck, a pastor from the former German Democratic Republic, like the Chancellor, is civil rights militant. After the fall of the Berlin

Wall in 1989 he led research into the Stasi archives – the former political police of the GDR.

In spite of Joachim Gauck's declarations, the candidature by the man the weekly Der Spiegel, qualifies as «the best President» is spreading disquiet amongst the government coalition forces. Several rightwing personalities have already declared their support for him: Holger Zastrow, FDP leader of Saxony; Kurt Biedenkopf (CDU) who has asked Chancellor Angela Merkel to let the grand electors have a free choice in their vote on 30th June next and Jürg Schönbohm former CDU leader in Brandenburg said, «*I wonder why it isn't possible for the conservative camp to agree with the Social Democratic Party on the candidature of Joachim Gauck?*»

The social-democrats insist on the moral authority their candidate embodies. «*Joachim Gauck stands presenting his entire life as a man and not simply a full political life,*» declared SPD leader, Sigmar Gabriel.

Although the SPD/Green candidate has convened the rightwing he does not seem to be to the taste of the

Left Party (Die Linke). Hence MP Gesine Löttsch said that Die Linke members really could not vote for Joachim Gauck, because of his militant anti-communist past. The far left party is putting forward its own presidential candidate for 30th June: Lukrezia Jochimsen, former sociologist and MP at present.

The ruling government coalition's candidate is Christian Wulff (CDU). The former Minister President of Lower Saxony (2003-2010), a post he just relinquished in order to stand in the presidential election (he was replaced by David McAllister), was not Angela Merkel's first choice for this post. She first wanted to see present Labour and Social Minister Ursula von der Leyen (CDU) succeed Horst Köhler before giving in to the pressure of her party and to her government partner, the FDP. After the resignations of Roland Koch (CDU), Minister-President of Hessen and Jürgen Rüttgers (CDU), Minister-President of Nordrhein Westfalen, beaten in the regional elections on 9th May last, the Chancellor can now hope, in the event of Christian Wulff's victory, of ridding herself of yet another of her adversaries within the CDU, «*placing one of her last potential rivals in a golden cage in Bellevue castle (the residence of German Presidents),*» according to political scientist Gerd Langguth. «*Short term, 2010 is the year when all candidates to the Chancellorship could be eliminated and this might be beneficial to Chancellor Angela Merkel who no longer has to think of her rivals. But long term it is bad for her because increasingly she will have to convince the party to follow her. And sooner or later the party might say 'we need someone else',*» analyses political scientist Gero Neugebauer, of the Free University of Berlin.

«*I think that a President of the Republic must be able to rally, build bridges between people, reconcile, provide dialogue and debate including between those of different origins, religions and languages,*» declared Christian Wulff who appointed a minister whose family background was Turkish in his Land of Lower Saxony. In April last the latter «*made the front pages*» of the media when she called for a ban on the crucifix in German schools, a measure that was unacceptable to the Catholics of the CDU/CSU.

The polls reveal that if the Germans were called to vote they would elect Joachim Gauck as head of State: 39% of them would vote for him according to the political barometer on TV channel ZDF and 31% would opt for Christian Wulff. According to a poll by Forsa for the weekly Stern, Joachim Gauck would win 42% of the vote and Christian Wulff 32%. Finally the poll published by ARD credits Joachim Gauck with 40% and 31% for Christian Wulff.

The CDU/CSU and the FDP have 21 more seats than their rivals in the Federal Assembly. In theory this is enough to see the election of Christian Wulff. But is a surprise possible? For the time being Angela Merkel has withdrawn from the presidential electoral campaign.

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