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The Reform of the Electoral System and Its Political Consequences :  
From German Experience to Its Implication for South Korea

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## Germany's Democracy in crisis – the example of the election for prime minister of the state of Thuringia in 2020

[English ver.]

In February 2020 Thomas Kemmerich, local chairman of the small German liberal party FDP, was elected as prime minister of the State of Thuringia with the votes of conservative and liberal parties (CDU and FDP) as well as the right-wing party (AfD) in the Thuringian parliament. By many left-wing as well as centrist observers this was seen as breaking taboos (“Tabubruch”) of the centrist parties in Germany because of a first cooperation with the right-wing party AfD. The result was a political earthquake in Germany as a whole. For the first time after decades, German democracy was in an obvious crisis.

### Development of the political system in Germany

In the last 50 years the political spectrum has widened in Germany. While in 1975 only three parties were represented in the federal parliament (“Bundestag”), conservative CDU/CSU, social-democrat SPD and liberal FDP, the 1980s brought a first new party, the Greens. Then, after reunification of Germany in 1990, the former leading party of communist GDR, PDS (nowadays “Die Linke”) was added as new left-wing party to the political spectrum. After the financial and debt crisis of 2008 also a new right-wing party was founded in 2013, the “Alternative for Germany” (AfD). The political floor was opened for the party's success after an additional move from conservative to centrist positions of the CDU/CSU<sup>1)</sup> led by chancellor Angela Merkel in the refugee crisis in 2015. As a result, the votes for the old centrist parties eroded massively. In the 2018 elections for the German Bundestag – currently consisting of 709 parliamentary seats – the conservative-centrist parties CDU/CSU and FDP only reached 246 respective 80 seats, the moderate left-wing parties SPD and Greens 153 respective 67 seats. In contrast, the left-wing party “Die Linke” could attain 69 seats and the right-wing party AfD 94 seats. In general, extremist parties hold about one quarter of all seats in the parliament.

Because of German history, dealing with the new right-wing party AfD is crucial for the centrist parties. In 1933 the national socialist party NSDAP came to power with support of the moderate right-wing spectrum. Conservative president von Hindenburg designated

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1) CSU = Sister party of CDU in the Federal State of Bavaria.

Adolf Hitler as chancellor of the German Reich. The results, Second World War, Holocaust, and German division, are well known. Therefore, in current Germany left-wing governments are widely accepted while right-wing governments are out of discussion for the political mainstream. Social democrats decided already years ago to cooperate with “Die Linke” to come to power. In this manner, they are cooperating with the direct descendant of the Marxist-Leninist ruling party of former East Germany (GDR) including a Communist Platform (“Kommunistische Plattform”) which wants to “build [...] a new socialist society, using the positive experiences of real socialism and to learn from mistakes”. Not surprisingly, the result of the rise of an extreme left-wing party is a massive decline of voters supporting the left-centrist SPD which became unimportant between a rising level? centrist CDU/CSU and the left-wing “Die Linke”.

In contrast, conservative-centrist and liberal parties are in a dilemma. From an ideological point of view, they do not want to cooperate with the left-wing “Die Linke” and they cannot cooperate with the right-wing AfD. By an overwhelming majority of German voters the German-nationalist, right-wing-populist and Eurosceptic AfD is seen as a return of the Nazis in Germany. The relation of its far-right wing “Der Flügel”, led by Thuringian chairman Björn Höcke, to neo-national socialist movements in Germany is obvious. Therefore, cooperation with the AfD is a “no-go” for Germany’s centrists, at least in the West of the country. Overall, one must know that parts of both parties, “Die Linke” and AfD, are under observation by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz). But the AfD became the third largest party in Germany within a few years. Therefore, to come to power becomes in fact more and more impossible for the conservative-centrists without cooperation with moderate left-wing parties like SPD and/or Greens at least, or one party of the extreme wings. In Eastern Germany, support for the “old” democratic parties of the West is eroding. East Germans sometimes feel misunderstood. Therefore, support for extreme parties, mainly populist parties like the right-wing AfD, gain ground. As a result, it is much more difficult to form governments with parties out of the center of the political spectrum. A very good example is the Federal State of Thuringia.

## **Example: election for prime minister of the state of Thuringia in 2020**

### **Results of 2019 elections in Thuringia**

Thuringia, a small federal state in the centre of Germany, actually belongs to “Eastern Germany”, the former GDR. Therefore, here political structures are different from Western Germany. Left-wing “Die Linke” as well as right-wing AfD are stronger than in the West.

In Thuringia both parties even have the majority of seats in the parliament. That leads to a blockade of the centrists between far-left and far-right. While the country was governed by CDU in the 1990s, since the new millennium this party lost more than half of their votes (51% in 1999 to 21.8% in 2019). In contrast, “Die Linke” could rise in the voter’s favor (9.7% in 1999 to 31% in 2019). Also votes for the social democrats declined to 8.2% in 2019. Therefore, from 2014 to 2019 the country was governed by a so-called “red-red-green” government, led by prime minister Bodo Ramelow (“Die Linke”) and supported by SPD and Greens. Unfortunately for these parties, the right-wing AfD could more than double its seats in the parliament between 2014 and 2019 (10.6% to 23.4%). As a result, the “red-red-green” government lost majority in the 2019 elections, while centrist opposition parties CDU and FDP only achieved 21.8% respective 5%. The result was a blockade of the political system. While the left-wing government had no more majority, the centrist parties CDU and FDP could not form a government without support of right-wing AfD or left-wing “Die Linke”. Also, the votes for all centrist parties CDU, SPD, FDP and Greens only accounted for 40.2%. While 46 seats in the Thuringian parliament are necessary for a majority, “red-red-green” only achieved 42 seats. And a so-called “Simbabwe”-coalition (so called because of the color of Simbabwe’s flag: black, red, yellow, green) of the latter centrist parties achieved 39 seats, only.

## Goals of Political Parties

While all left-wing parties, “Die Linke”, SPD and Greens, wanted to continue the left-wing government, centrists and right-wing AfD had different goals. Especially the situation within CDU were problematic. While chancellor Angela Merkel and the federal party leaders supported a “No cooperation with the far-left or the far right!” approach, local CDU members in Thuringia saw the necessity to cooperate either with AfD or “Die Linke” to form a government. Therefore, local CDU leader Mike Mohring led first talks with “Die Linke” about at least tolerating a left-wing government. But he did not receive support from the federal level of his party. The liberal FDP was back to parliament after 5 years out because of the 5% hurdle. They saw themselves as a “bürgerliche Alternative” (centrist alternative) neither willing to cooperate with far-left nor with far-right. Because AfD is the “Dirty Boy” in the German political spectrum, this party could not expect cooperation with any other party. Therefore, their only goal was political defection to show its voters the inability of the democratic system to find solutions for the blockade.

## Elections for prime minister in 2020

According to the Constitution of the State of Thuringia, the prime minister is elected in

a maximum of three rounds of voting. While in both first rounds an absolute majority (46 votes) is necessary, in the third round a relative majority is enough. That shall ensure the forming of a new government, at least as minority government. In both first rounds of voting on 5 February 2020, Bodo Ramelow (“Die Linke”) and Christoph Kindervater (independent but supported by AfD) ran for prime minister. Ramelow received 43 respective 44 votes and thus not enough. In contrast, Kindervater received 25 respective 22 votes only. Obviously, a majority of CDU and FDP members of parliament abstained, following the rule “No cooperation with far-left or far-right!”. For the third round, another politician, Thomas Kemmerich, leader of the local FDP, decided to run for prime minister as “bürgerliche Alternative” (centrist alternative). Obviously, he did not expect to be elected by right-wing or left-wing parliamentarians. But exactly that happened. In the third round of voting, he achieved all votes from FDP (5), majority of CDU and additionally all votes from the AfD. The latter party voted tactically in favor of Kemmerich, not to support his policy.

The result of this election was an earthquake in German politics. The left-wing of the political spectrum was shocked immediately. From their point of view, it was an incredible break of taboos of the centrist parties in Thuringia. First, several centrist politicians like Christian Lindner, leader of federal FDP, or several CDU politicians sent congratulations to Kemmerich. But urgently, the federal party leaders decided not to accept this local political decision because of its impacts on politics on the federal level. Thomas Kemmerich had to resign after three days as prime minister. Also, local CDU leader Mike Mohring decided to retire from CDU leadership soon. At all, both parties – CDU and FDP – lost a huge amount of confidence of the centrist voters in Germany in general and in Thuringia in particular.

Therefore, it was extremely difficult to find a solution in the blocked political situation for the left-wing and the centrist parties. Urgent new elections would have made Bodo Ramelow’s “Die Linke” even stronger. The liberal FDP had to fear not to leap over the 5% hurdle. Also, Bodo Ramelow’s proposal to build an expert government led by well known CDU politician Christine Lieberknecht until urgent new elections was not acceptable for the centrists. In the end they agreed to tolerate a minority government by “Die Linke”, SPD and Greens and accepted new elections on 25 April 2021.

In additional three voting rounds on 4 March 2020, Bodo Ramelow was re-elected as prime minister of Thuringia. In all three electoral rounds he received exact 42 votes of the left-wing parties. His competitor Björn Höcke, leader of the far-right-wing “Der Flügel” of AfD, got only the votes of his party in the first two rounds. CDU abstained and FDP boycotted these electoral rounds. In the third round of voting, 23 members of parliament voted against Ramelow, 20 abstained. In this way, indirectly CDU and FDP supported the election of a left-wing prime minister of “Die Linke” for the first time in Germany. Interestingly, this was

not a break of taboos but only a practical solution of a political problem.

## Conclusion

The actual winner of the chaos and political blockade in Thuringia is the right-wing AfD, perhaps especially its far-right wing “Der Flügel”. They could show how discordant and irresolute the centrist parties can be. So far, their political defection strategy was very successful. On the other hand, the left-wing parties could form a new government in Thuringia, at least until April 2021. On the other hand, the centrist parties CDU and FDP lost confidence of voters. Whether they can win more reputation until the new elections in 2021 is not obvious at the moment. Therefore the political system of the Federal Republic of Germany is damaged. We have to expect that the two parties, forming the “Große Koalition” (Grand Coalition) in Berlin will lose its majority in the elections in fall 2021. If AfD and “Die Linke” are successful in these elections, a blockade of forming a government in Berlin is possible, too. Of course, the Federal Republic of Germany is not Thuringia. At the moment both parties hold only a quarter of the seats in the “Bundestag” (Federal Parliament). But the strengthening of far-right and far-left parties in Germany is obvious during the last years. We do not have to fear “Weimar Republic” conditions at the moment. But to overcome the crisis of the democratic system and to strengthen the centrist parties, must be on the top of agenda for all of them.