

AUSTRIA: THE RISE OF NATIONAL POPULISM AND THE FAR RIGHT

I used to be quite disinterested in Austrian mainstream politics - boring First World squabbles amongst people who had no intention of changing anything anyhow. I was forced to reconsider when confronted with the disquieting rise of the far right over the last one and a half decades. How to come to terms with that ?

On 4th of February, 2000 a government was sworn in that gives the far right half of Austria's executive power. Austria has, as a consequence of the mislabeled Freedom Party's government participation, been heavily criticized by its EU partners, Israel, the US, and many other states and people abroad. And active political participation of Austrian citizens has increased tremendously. Not a day goes past without one or, usually, several demonstrations against the far right's government participation. The area around Parliament is often sealed off. Does the main institution of people's rule need protection from the people to be ruled ?

Here is an attempt of interpretation as well as some background information.

At the parliamentary elections at the beginning of October 1999, three parties reached more than a quarter each of votes and of parliamentary seats: the Social Democrats (SPÖ), the Freedom Party (FPÖ), and the People's Party (ÖVP). During the run-up to the elections and in the time immediately afterwards, more than 80 cases of violence against Jews were registered.

The Social Democrats had ruled Austria for the last three decades, often in coalition, mostly with the People's Party. The Social Democrats have, over the last ten years or so, discarded most of their socialist ideology (as have the SPD in Germany and the Labour Party in GB). The People's Party is a Christian Democrat party, similar to the CDU in Germany, with an ideology targetted at farmers and small business. The Freedom Party is an anti-immigration party with a national-populist ideology that incorporates tendencies of the ultra-right. It is based largely on the personal appeal of its boss, Jörg Haider.

The differences in basic economic policies between the three main parties are quantitative rather than qualitative. The Freedom Party's version of neo-liberalism is as radical as that of the business-oriented part of the People's Party. It is, however, somewhat more resolute than the social democratic 'new center' politics that more and more equate national with capitalist interests.

Long drawn-out coalition consultations between the social democrats and the christian democrats led nowhere. The social democrats, which had on principle decided not to govern with the Freedom Party, in January decided to go into opposition. The christian democrats and the FPÖ thereafter soon reached a coalition agreement, the first point of which was an immigration ban. The new government was sworn in at the beginning of February, it is headed by chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel of the ÖVP (he was vice chancellor and foreign minister in the preceding SPÖ-ÖVP coalition government), vice-chancellor is Susanne Riess-Passer of the Freedom Party. The ministerial posts are shared equally between ÖVP and FPÖ, with important portfolios like finances, justice, and social affairs going to the Freedom Party. Jörg Haider is not part of the government - he continues as 'chief minister' (Landeshauptmann) of Austria's southernmost county of Carinthia.

So far, so democratic.

But what kind of democracy is or was Austria's ? After the Second World War and on the basis of the political happenings in Austria during the 1920s and 1930s - basically civil war between the right and left - and faced with the threat of a resumption of class war once the Allies-imposed peace had brought the 'national' unity and the stability of the Nazi regime to an end, the political stage was fundamentally reorganised. A consensual model of decision-making was instituted: Social partnership meant that both sides had a part in all political and economic decisions, both sides meaning the SPÖ/unions as

representing the workers and the ÖVP/chambers of commerce as representing business. Independent of who was voted into government in elections, posts in state and parastatal institutions and companies were shared out equally between right and left, decisions on government set prices were taken by a commission on which all sides were equally represented, etc. This consensual model of Austrian politics was widely praised and recommended for imitation for its achieving social peace, reflected, for example, in record low working hours lost through strikes.

All went well throughout the sixties and seventies, the times of Keynesian economic policies. With as good as no unemployment and the long-lasting boom of the economic miracle ('Wirtschaftswunder') of post-war reconstruction, Austrians liked to refer to their country as the 'Insel der Seligen' - the 'island of the blessed'.

Where in all this had the Nazis got to ? Adolf Hitler had come to power in Germany in 1933, and Austria was annexed in 1938 'against its will' (strangely there was as good as no resistance from any official side). On some counts, the percentage of Hitler's and his party's supporters was higher in Austria than in Germany. But Austria fared well on the victim ticket: unlike Germany it was never held responsible, was never ostracised by the international community of states.

After 1945 and after some very superficial de-nazification, the new political masters of Austria decided to hush it all up. With their support, a party, the 'liberal' VdU (Verband der Unabhängigen/Association of Independents; later to transform into the FPÖ) was founded as a 'democratic' harbour for the 'former' national socialists. Meanwhile, many nazis continued uninterruptedly in positions of power and responsibility; property robbed from the Jews under the name of 'aryanisation' was rarely returned - most of the former owners were by then dead, be it through 'work' or cremation. Anything aimed at the resurrection of nazi ideology was made illegal. Only a small hard core of determined fascists kept up the Nazi ideals, stored arms, went about their male war games, paid sometimes for it by having to spend some time in jail.

An everyday kind of nazism was much more wide-spread. 'Under Hitler this couldn't have happened' and 'Another Hitler is what's needed' are two phrases you were bound to hear quite often in Austrian popular political discussions. But in the boom years, these were minor notes of discord in the overall harmonious social symphony.

Then, sometimes in the 1980s, talk of the 'island of the blessed' stopped. Bruno Kreisky, long-time chancellor, social democrat, a father figure for the nation, a left-over from times when ideology could get you into trouble (he had had to spend the second world war in exile in Sweden), a Jew who made pro-Arab politics, Bruno Kreisky stepped down after the social democrats lost their absolute majority. None of the several leaders of the SPÖ since have come close to his stature.

The winds they were a-changing. Imperceptibly, things got rougher, first attempts at chipping away at the social welfare state were undertaken. And the FPÖ was taken over by Jörg Haider, young, good-looking, cheeky, a rebel from the far right. The liberals inside the Freedom Party were side-lined (the liberals later founded their own party). And the vote share of the FPÖ grew. And it has not stopped increasing up till now, despite a number of 'accidents' like major corruption scandals implicating high-level FPÖ functionaries. 27.22% of valid votes in the parliamentary elections of October 1999 went to the Freedom Party.

What is Haider's success based on ? He has presented himself as the one and only anti-establishment voice in Austrian politics. He is 'clean' and honest. He is the champion of the 'little man', of all the common people 'of the street'. Of course there are the communists and there are the greens (environmentalists), but they are extremists, intellectuals. 'Our' Jörg speaks for the masses, he speaks for 'the' Austrian. The main line is no longer drawn between different kinds of Austrians (workers vs. employers), the main line of demarcation is now drawn between the masses and the - thoroughly corrupt - political elite. The latter is often seen as acting in unison or on behalf of foreign powers. Opening up to globalising capitalism has created its own set of fears. A return to traditional values of propriety, decency, to the virtues of hard work and honesty can provide an anchor in the dangerous seas of post-modernity. It was left to national populism to point out that anchor.

The anti-immigration stance was and still is the Freedom Party's single biggest issue. Le Pen has exploited xenophobia in France. Blocher has done it in Switzerland - with big electoral success of late. Austria does not have a particularly high percentage of foreigners: less than 10%. Foreign workers especially from then-Yugoslavia and from Turkey were brought into the country during the boom years to do the jobs Austrians were not prepared to take on for the low wages offered. After the fall of the iron curtain there was some influx of people from the East. And there were some refugees from the wars in former Yugoslavia who made it onto Austrian soil. But the foreign workers' overall share in the population is still comparatively low. There are some districts of Vienna where they dominate street life, there are some school classes where their low command of German makes teaching difficult. These seem minor problems.

But people have got worried. The colder winds of Reaganomics and Thatcherism finally also reached Austria. Poverty is becoming more wide-spread: 250,000 Austrians are estimated by the protestant deaconry to live below the poverty line - a poverty rate of 3% is an unnecessarily high figure for one of the richest countries in the world. Full employment also is a thing of the past. Unemployment at 4.1% is still the second lowest within the European Union (only Luxembourg's is lower). But unemployment is a possibility - so beware of the foreigner who may steal your job. And such fears have been systematically stirred. And the social welfare system is becoming thinner. The dismantling of society-wide solidarity has progressed quite far. The unemployed and other receivers of transfer payments bear the stigma of social parasites nowadays. Like most western highly-industrialised countries, Austria has become icier in the course of the 1990s.

After the social democrats' austerity measures of the past - that already most of all cut into social spending - redistribution in favour of the rich will quicken now. The new government's programme brings relief in the magnitude of 1.35 bn USD for business and an additional burden of 0.98 bn USD for employees.

I forgot to mention: Austria in 1995 joined the European Union and is one of the countries to have adopted the Euro as its currency. The campaign leading up to the referendum that was to seal the Austrian entry into the EU was a perfect example for ruthlessly dishonest and manipulative practices by the established parties (SPÖ and ÖVP), supported by quite a few economists quite blatantly lying, I suppose in some ulterior national interest, to persuade the general public of the advantages of membership. There is one definite advantage, one that no one had thought of at the time: the EU partners can now more weightily make their disagreement felt with the Freedom Party's joining the Austrian government.

Unlike Jörg Haider and his Freedom Party, the social democrats and the christian democrats of Austria are spent forces. They embody the establishment. No change for the better can be expected from them. And the social partnership, for many years also enacted on the government plane in the form of the 'great' coalition, makes that alliance of the powerful and mighty all the more unmovable and impenetrable. This is probably the secret of Jörg Haider's success: to present himself as the only alternative to the entrenched system, to that corrupt, bureaucratic, despicable, inflexible establishment. Consensuality, once the strength of the Austrian political model, has become its downfall.

Jörg Haider is not a fascist, not a nazi. He is a populist of the far right. He will say anything that goes well with the audience. And that may be - and has been - that Hitler's labour market policies were a good thing. Or it may be - and it has been - that people of the ultra-right are decent people.

Jörg Haider constructs a unitary Austrian (who is certainly an Aryan) far beyond that awkward category of class, and far beyond all concepts of differing class interests. And this uniform Austrian is who he represents and whose fears and worries he voices. Loudly and cheekily. He has fared well on that strategy.

Even before the Freedom Party at the beginning of this year came to share government responsibility, Haider's anti-immigration policies had been put into practice. Afraid of the immense appeal of that pied piper from the right, the social democrat home minister became tougher and tougher in his anti-immigration stance. To no avail - it was obvious whose politics the SPÖ was enacting. Some unfortunates fell victim to this kind of politics. Omofuma, a black Nigerian, died on 1st of May, 1999

on a plane while being deported from Austria: The accompanying policemen had had to restrain the offender from resistance against state authority by putting more and more adhesive tape over the deportee's mouth and nose. They proved to be stronger.

Tips of icebergs. Racism is wide-spread amongst Austrian police. What is it going to be like with a more 'honest', a more open anti-foreigner stance from the government downward ?

As an aside: There are some interesting structural parallels to developments in India. The Congress, after dominating Indian politics for so long, had become moribund, it had become one with the establishment. And the BJP could present itself as the rebel force against vested interests, burgeoning bureaucracy, corrupt politicians. The situation in India is more complex than the Austrian one, the country is 40 times as big in area, more than 100 times as big in population. But substitute Jörg Haider's immigrants by the BJP's, the RSS's, and all the Hindutva's Muslims (by now also add Christians) and you'll find the parties' successful ascents to power based on very similar single issues. And look at the attempts at unitarisation. A lot of simplification goes into Jörg Haider's construction of 'the' Austrian. And the Hindutva is busy imposing its standardised upper caste male Hindu as a model to emulate for a society that is non-upper caste in its vast majority and is rich in its ethnic and religious (even within Hinduism) diversity. And in India like in Austria, in economic policy terms, the differences between the political rivals are negligible.

I am very much in favour of external interference in cases such as Austria's. 'We' need all the help that 'we' can get. But two qualifications are needed. First, I most certainly do not advocate an intervention like the NATO war in Kosovo. And secondly, there are also problems with foreign interference. If new elections were to be held now, Jörg Haider would be bound to win. His anti-establishment rebellion of the representative of the 'small Austrian man' could be applied all over again, but this time on a bigger, an international scale. And much of Austria, 'like one man', would rally behind him. It has happened now: some Austrians have rallied behind 'their' new government in the face of international criticism. And it has happened before: When former UN general secretary Kurt Waldheim was the christian democrat candidate for Austrian presidency in 1986 it was discovered that he had, during the Second World War, been part of a German army unit that had engaged in brutal reprisals against Yugoslav partisans and civilians and that had deported most of the Jews of Thessaloníki to Nazi death camps. Not that he was accused of any crime, he had only been a small interpreter and intelligence officer, but he had afterwards and repeatedly lied about it. An international outcry followed, Waldheim was for example placed on the US government's watch list of undesirable aliens. In the face of international criticism and attacks, Austrians rallied behind 'their' own: Waldheim was voted in with a more than comfortable margin.

The new justice minister of the Freedom Party has once belittled concentration camps by calling them 'penal camps'. Let us hope that the unemployed, other 'anti-social elements', gypsies, jews, and all sorts of unwanted foreigners will not soon (again) be punished for their being unwanted foreigners, jews, gypsies, unemployed.

Günther Lanier

P.S. A few days ago, talking amongst friends about neo-nazis, I noticed how I had in my mind set neo-nazis (and they most certainly do exist in Austria, I have had the questionable pleasure of doing research into one of their groups) and the Freedom Party totally apart, as if they belonged to different worlds (and I have argued above that there are important differences).

I have since come to doubt my own former certainty. When Hitler was voted in in 1933, the people who voted him into power are unlikely to have voted for Auschwitz.

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