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Norway

The 2021 elections in Norway: A turn to the Left

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General elections were held in Norway on 13 September 2021, and a fairly Blairite social-democratic party (Labour Party, AP) in alliance with a centrist-farmer party and three parties on the left appear to be form the basis of a new social democratic government under a prime minister Jonas Gahr Støre that will replace the current Liberal-Conservative government of prime minister Erna Solberg. Solberg of the Conservative Party has been governing since 2013 in shifting coalitions of parties on the political right, including the populist Progress Party (2013-20) known mostly for its anti-immigrant and anti-taxation views.

While the coalition that is to take over looks similar to the Red-Green coalition that governed Norway under prime minister Jens Stoltenberg (2005-13, later NATO General Secretary), there are some notable differences.

Towards the center, the most conservative of the parties that will likely form part of the Red-Green coalition, the rural centrist-farmer Centre Party (SP), has grown to twice its previous size (6.5 in 2005/9 to 13.5 per cent in 2021) in response to policies very unfavourable to the non-urban parts of the country, like closing down local hospitals. The party is needed to form a majority, but many of its policies are not classically left-wing. The social democrats (AP) have gone from 35 per cent to 26 per cent in the same period.

The third party that probably will again be part of a red-green government is the Socialist Left Party (SV). Before entering the government in 2005 it had strong support, almost 15 per cent in the polls. The years in government were a disaster for the party. In 2011, it was down to just over 4 per cent. Much has been written about how a lack of strategy toward government participation caused this sharp decline (see for example, Braathen and Ekeland, "Die Linke und die Regierungsfrage - Kritischer Vergleich der Erfahrungen in Norwegen und Europa", *Inprekorr* 598).

Yet by 2017, after a change of leadership and style, SV has started to grow again. At the same time, two other parties have entered parliament to the Left of it: the Red Party and the environmentalist Green Party (MDG).

The Red Party

The Red Party (Rødt, previously: Red Voting Alliance, RV) was originally formed as an election vehicle for the Maoist Workers Communist Party (AKP) in 1973, but became a more independent party allowing for other political views in the late 1980s with the Maoist party forming a party within the party and leaving some level of control of RV to individuals who were not party members. In 2007, AKP and RV joined to become Red, and leading party members have distanced themselves from Maoism and Stalinism.

RV had one member of parliament in the period 1993-1997 and under the new label, Red had another single member of parliament in 2017-21. In the 2021 elections, the party obtained 8 seats in parliament. The party had obtained 1-2 per cent in all elections 1993-2013, 2.7 per cent in 2017 and 4.7 per cent in the 2021 elections.

In comparison, in Denmark the Red-Green Alliance has obtained multiple seats in parliament at every election since 1994 with election results in the range 2.2-7.8 per cent. In Denmark per cent are required to enter parliament as a full group, while in Norway 4 per cent are required.

While Red has targeted the same kind of voters as the Socialist Left Party (SV) for most of its existence, in recent years Red has tried to move away from targeting intellectuals and the well-educated. Red has instead tried to become a new working-class party. Red has been somewhat successful in changing the profile of its voters, in part by rhetorics and policies that some would say are catering to anti-immigrant sentiments and cutting down on environmentalist demands such as putting an end-date to the drilling for oil in Norway (yet no more searching for new oil reserves). The party rejects most alternatives to oil as well and instead focuses on creating a self-sufficient Norway rather than being part of an international energy production/consumption scheme (“Why should Norwegian nature be destroyed just because Germany needs electricity?”, Mimir Kristjansson, newly elected MP for Red).

Another area in which Red has sharpened its rhetoric has been in the area of anti-poverty policies.

Norway has had no tax on inheritance since 2014 (Sweden abolished inheritance taxes in 2005, Denmark still collects them) and combined with a state that has seen little development in social programs over the past eight years, there is a slowly increasing divide between the rich and the poor albeit starting from a relatively low level. Queues in front of soup kitchens have been the most visible sign thereof.

Additionally, in 2019-21 it was discovered that the Norwegian National employment agency (NAV) had been much stricter in its rules toward the unemployed than what the EU/EEA rules permit. This made some question the general assumption that Norway has the most developed welfare state in the world.

Red has focused on demands to lower inequalities, such as including dentistry in the public health insurance system, more help for those in need, a return to a tax on inheritances and generally less pressure by the state on the poor and unemployed. Other demands have been to roll back privatisation, and forbidding private employment offices.

The Environmentalist Green Party

The Environmentalist Green Party (MDG) was founded in 1988, the same year the similarly named Environmentalist Green Party (MP) entered the Swedish parliament. The party had no major election gains in Norway staying under 1% of the vote until 2013 (2.8 per cent). Its share has increased in the two elections since then (2017: 3.2 per cent, 2021: 3.8 per cent), but it still fell short of the 4 per cent required to enter as a full group, so they will only increase the number of seats in parliament from 1 to 3 in 2021. While it did not yet enter into parliament as a full group in 2021, its rise has arguably been faster than that of Red.

The party did not start out with an understanding that it is located on the political left. When there was a Red-Green majority in the Oslo City Council for the first time in 18 years, the party announced that they would first have to talk with conservative/liberal as well as Left of center parties to determine which side they would form a coalition with. However, after it did form a coalition with SV and the Social Democrats (AP), it did establish itself as part of this constellation, even though its rhetoric is generally more internationalist, more EU-friendly and also less critical of capitalism than that of either Red or SV.

MDG's profile is mostly that of an urban party with goals such as liveable cities, an end to fossil fuels, better public services and freedom for wildlife to roam freely in more rural areas. However, some have read MDG's policies as being ignorant of the consequences for poor people for many of their proposed environmental taxes - a possible cause for the party falling in the polls during the elections period.

Despite its very different profile, Red also has its base in urban areas and the urbanization of Norway and new

technologies that allow even more remote Norwegians to live relatively urban lifestyles are likely in part to explain the recent success of these two parties.

Toward a new government

While having grown slower in the long-term, Red has doubled its share of the vote 2017-21 and obtained 70 000 more voters in the 2021 election. MDG obtained 22 500 more votes, and SV 51 000. In Oslo, Red obtained 8.3%, and they did especially well in areas with many foreigners. Together - SV (13.27 per cent), Red (8.26 per cent) and MDG (8.48 per cent) - accumulated over 30 per cent of the votes in Oslo.

The exact shape of the new government is still uncertain. For a majority, SP, AP and SV are needed, while the two new entrants, the votes of Red and MDG are not needed. Following Scandinavian parliamentary traditions, it is likely that these parties will try to become constructive opposition voices - collaborating with the government when it makes sense for them and otherwise voting against them. The government will likely in part be able to use attacks from the Left to counter similar attacks from what is now to be the right-wing opposition.

What is more difficult to see is how the dynamics of SP, AP and SV are to play out. On the one hand one the centrist SP is likely to request that its increase in size will translate into increased influence. On the other hand, SV and AP are likely not too happy about having a permanently established left-wing opposition in parliament either, so they will need to make some moves to convince the voters of Red and MDG to return.

28 September 2021

Author's addition: On 29 September SV announced that they had retracted from negotiations to participate in the government for the time being. A government will therefore likely be formed of SP and AP, but they will still have to rely on SV to maintain a majority in parliament, so while this may lead to more open discussions in parliament, the effects on what policies the new government is able to implement, will be limited. Being part of a common opposition to the Left may lead to more possibilities for cooperation between SV, Red and MDG. SV has announced though that they may join the government at a later stage during the current parliamentary term - a maneuver quite common in Norway that lacks the provisions Denmark and Sweden have for holding new elections in case of a government lacking a majority in parliament.

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