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Finland: Testing times ahead for the opposition under new party leadership

The past year was turbulent for the Social Democrats (SDP). In the April parliamentary elections, the pendulum swung to the right, and the SDP ended up in opposition after four years in power under the leadership of Prime Minister Sanna Marin. The election campaign was marked by strong polarisation between the political left and the right-wing parties. After the elections, highly popular Marin resigned as the SDP leader, and the new party chair, Antti Lindtman, and more broadly the left may benefit from the potential backlash against the programme of the right-wing government.

The Finnish Social Democrats (SDP) entered 2023 with feelings of trepidation. The SDP and Prime Minister Sanna Marin had led the left-leaning, five-party government – which had brought together the SDP, the Centre Party, the Green League, the Left Alliance and the Swedish People’s Party through the Covid-19 pandemic and the first year of war in Ukraine. Marin’s government had received a lot of positive international media coverage, as all five coalition parties were led by women, with four of the party chairs under 40 years of age. Marin was also praised for her leadership skills during the crises. However, the government had accumulated further debt, and there was increasing criticism of the handling of the economy, with the National Coalition (conservatives) clearly ahead in the polls. In the April parliamentary elections, the pendulum swung to the right, and the SDP returned to opposition. Marin resigned as the leader, but the new party chair, Antti Lindtman, and more broadly the left may benefit from the potential backlash against the programme of the right-wing government.

Polarising campaign

The parliamentary elections in Finland on 2 April 2023 were in many respects unusual. Putin’s war in Ukraine has had a dramatic impact on Finnish security policy, with the country seeking NATO membership by mid-May 2022 and joining the defence alliance two days

after the election. NATO membership was accepted almost unanimously in the *Eduskunta*, the unicameral national legislature, and hence, the dramatic change in the country's security policy status hardly featured at all in the election campaign. However, a few security and defence policy experts with strong media presences were elected to the parliament from the ranks of the National Coalition.

The second deviation from standard patterns concerned pre-election promises. In Finland, it had been customary for parties and their leaders not to commit themselves to any potential coalitions nor to declare that they would not join a government with any particular party.¹ This, however, had already changed in the previous elections in 2019. Following the hardliner 'coup' within the Finns Party and the election of Jussi Halla-Aho, the unofficial leader of the party's anti-immigration wing, as the party chair in 2017, some parties, not least the Green League and the Swedish People's Party, indicated that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, for them to join a government that also included the Halla-aho-led Finns.² In 2021, Halla-aho stepped down as party leader, with the new party chair, Riikka Purra, continuing the anti-immigration line of her predecessor. Referring to differences in world views, this time around, the three left-wing parties – SDP, the Green League and the Left Alliance – each announced that they would not share power with the Finns Party. The Swedish People's Party also made it clear that it would be difficult for them to enter a cabinet together with the Finns. Interestingly, the Finns Party started out as a populist, Eurosceptic party that was quite centrist and even centre-left on the socio-economic dimension, but since the 2010s has moved in a more right-wing direction with opposition to immigration as the central item on its agenda.³

The third unusual pattern was the extremely high popularity and visibility of Prime Minister Marin. Marin, 37 at the time of the elections, has been touted as the 'rock star' of Finnish politics, and she is clearly the most famous Finnish politician of the 21st century. Marin is perhaps also a polarising figure, but her support has remained very strong throughout the early 2020s. Marin's government had steered the country through the Covid-19 pandemic and the first year of the war in Ukraine, but Finland had to incur further debt in the process. The centre-right parties, particularly the National Coalition and its leader, Petteri Orpo, therefore focused their campaigns very much on the need to get the economy back on track.

In the 2019 elections, climate change and socio-cultural issues had featured prominently in the campaigns,⁴ but now it was pretty much all about the economy.⁵ Orpo declared

1 Raunio, T. (2021) "Finland: Forming and managing ideologically heterogeneous oversized coalitions", in T. Bergman, H. Bäck and J. Hellström (eds), *Coalition Governance in Western Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 165-205.

2 Raunio, T. (2019) "The campaign". *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 3-4(42): 175-181. DOI: 10.1111/1467-9477.12149.

3 Poyet, C. and T. Raunio (2021) "Confrontational but respecting the rules: The minor impact of the Finns Party on legislative-executive relations". *Parliamentary Affairs*, 4(74): 819-834. DOI: 10.1093/pa/gsab010.

4 Borg, S., E. Kestilä-Kekkonen and H. Wass (eds) (2020) "Politiikan ilmastonmuutos: eduskuntavaalitutkimus 2019". Oikeusministeriön selvityksiä ja ohjeita, 2020:5; Raunio, T. (2019) "The campaign".

5 Arter, D. (2023) "The making of an 'unhappy marriage'? The 2023 Finnish general election". *West European Politics*, 2(47): 426-438. DOI: 10.1080/01402382.2023.2233072.

a “6+3” policy, meaning that the next government should reduce debt by €6 billion and the government after that by €3 billion. The Finns Party and the Centre Party broadly agreed with Orpo, while the leftist parties argued against radical cuts and favoured investments that would generate growth and employment. The National Coalition is internally split on socio-cultural questions, hence the focus on the economy worked in the party’s favour. During the campaign, Marin engaged in aggressive rhetoric against the National Coalition and the other parties of the right. Specifically, she argued that voting for the SDP was the only way to prevent a victory for the right. This did not go down well among the Green League and the Left Alliance, as the final campaign weeks focused very much on who would finish first and, therefore, take the lead in forming the new government – the National Coalition, the Finns Party or the SDP. Other parties received much less media attention, especially the Greens found it challenging to get their message across.

The Marin government had finally agreed on a reform of the social and health services, a topic that had been on the agenda of several previous governments. As part of that package, Finland established directly elected regional councils (officially titled “councils of wellbeing services counties”), with the first regional elections held in January 2022.⁶ The funding and quality of social and health services continue to raise serious concerns. Still, it was harder to detect significant policy differences between the parties regarding social and health services, although the left-wing parties underlined the state’s role in providing such services more.

Segregation among schools and students and internal security also featured in the campaigns, with the Finns Party connecting these issues to immigration, as in the months leading to the elections there were reports about problems in the education system and worsening street violence. Overall, the election debates focused, to a large extent, on state finances and the future of social and health services. Unfortunately for the SDP, concerns about state finances predominated over social and health services. Overall, the campaign was almost like a throwback to the 1980s – the EU or international politics were hardly mentioned, and socio-cultural issues, including climate change, remained firmly in the background.

From government to opposition

The verdict of the voters was clear: Finland turned right.⁷ Orpo guided the National Coalition to pole position, with 20.8% of the vote (+3.8) and 48 seats (+10). The Finns Party finished second, with 20.1% of the vote (+2.6) and 46 seats (+7). The populists achieved a breakthrough in the 2011 elections and have finished in the top three in the elections held since. Most notably, the Finns Party again won votes throughout the country,

6 Sipinen, J. (2022) “Regional elections in Finland, 23 January 2022”. Electoral Bulletins of the European Union, Elections in Europe: 2022, Issue 3.

7 Grönlund, K. and K. Strandberg (eds) (2023) *Finland Turned Right: Voting and Public Opinion in the Parliamentary Election of 2023* (Åbo: Samforsk, The Social Science Research Institute, Åbo Akademi University).

in urban centres as well as in rural areas. Since the 2011 elections, the Finns Party has been the largest party among working-class voters, yet the party remains critical of trade unions, which continue to see the SDP as their natural ally.⁸

The SDP came third, with 19.9% of the vote (+2.2) and 43 seats (+3), an impressive result considering the party of the incumbent prime minister normally loses votes. The SDP gained votes at the expense of the other left-wing parties. In the Helsinki district, the vote share of the SDP increased by 7.3% to 20.9%, while the Greens experienced a drop that was even larger in the capital. Party leaders Maria Ohisalo (Greens) and Li Andersson (Left Alliance) looked absolutely devastated as the election results became clear. The Greens won 7% of the vote (−4.5) and 13 seats (−7), while the Left Alliance received 7.1% (−1.1) and 11 seats (−5). Roughly a quarter of those who voted for the Greens and almost one fifth of the Left Alliance voters in the 2019 elections had now switched to the SDP.⁹ Tactical voting, therefore, benefited the SDP, but it is nonetheless safe to predict that support for the Greens will increase again over the next few years – and this may happen at the expense of the SDP. In June, the Green League elected a new leader, Sofia Virta, who has indicated that her party needs to focus more on economic policy instead of traditional ‘green’ issues.

The elections were a crushing blow for the Centre Party, which had led governments from 2003 to 2011 and from 2015 to 2019. The party had suffered a humiliating defeat in the 2019 elections, and fared even worse this time, with 11.3% (−2.5) and 23 seats (−8). The Centre Party had been the largest party in several rural electoral districts, but the Finns Party is now the biggest in those constituencies. It is likely that many Centre Party voters did not appreciate their party’s participation in the Marin cabinet from 2019 to 2023, but nor did they seem to appreciate the ‘economy-first’ approach of the Centre Party led cabinet in 2015–2019. Clearly, a lot of soul-searching will take place in this party. Of the smaller parties, the Swedish People’s Party won 4.3% (−0.2) and retained its 10 seats (including the representative of the Åland Islands). The Christian Democrats won 4.2% of the vote (+0.3) and held on to its five seats. The centre-right Movement Now, registered as a party in late 2019, won 2.4% of the vote and maintained its sole member of parliament (MP). Turnout was 72%, and it appears that it has stabilised at roughly that level in the elections held in the 21st century.

Divisive politics may benefit the left

Marin and her government received wide international media coverage, and so has the new Finnish government, but for entirely different reasons. After the elections, Orpo essentially had two options – either forming a right-wing cabinet that included the Finns Party or going for the more traditional model of a blue-red coalition built around the National Coalition

8 Tiihonen, A. (2022) “The mechanisms of class-party ties among the Finnish working-class voters in the 21st century”. Doctoral thesis. Tampere University.

9 Kestilä-Kekkonen, E. and J. Sipinen (2023) “Taktinen äänestäminen”. Vaalitutkimuskonsortio (FNES), 10 September.

and SDP. Orpo went for the former, presumably because it enabled the National Coalition to push through its economic reforms, including significant cuts to public sector funding and weakening the influence of trade unions. The Christian Democrats and the Swedish People's Party joined the coalition talks, which lasted six and a half weeks; involved over a thousand expert hearings and resulted in a massive, 216-page (+ annexes) government programme.¹⁰ The coalition negotiations were full of drama, not least because of the obvious discomfort inside the Swedish People's Party. After all, the Finns Party and the Swedish People's Party disagree strongly about socio-cultural issues, and the Finns Party has even been critical of the status of the Swedish language in Finland.

The four-party coalition – bringing together the National Coalition, the Finns Party, the Swedish People's Party and the Christian Democrats – led by Prime Minister Orpo was sworn into office on 20 June. However, a summer of crisis followed, as several ministers of the Finns Party became embroiled in scandals about their racist language. The minister for Economic Affairs, Vilhelm Junnila, from the Finns Party, announced his resignation on 30 June after a scandal over his links with the far right that saw the Swedish People's Party vote for a no-confidence motion in the parliament. A couple of weeks after that, attention turned to Purra, the new minister of Finance, who in 2008 repeatedly used racist terms in texts on the Scripta blog hosted by Halla-Aho and had in 2019 referred to Muslim women as “unidentifiable black sacks”. In late July, the scandal deepened, as *Helsingin Sanomat*, the leading national daily, published messages containing racist slurs and language sent by Minister of Economic Affairs Wille Rydman from the Finns Party to his previous partner. The messages were from 2016 when Rydman was in the National Coalition. Purra regretted her blog texts, but doubts lingered about how genuine her apologies were. Halla-Aho, elected as the speaker of the Eduskunta, decided not to reconvene parliament during the summer break to debate the fate of Purra and the government, and much of the public outcry about racism had dissipated by early September when the whole government, Purra and Rydman survived separate votes of confidence in the Eduskunta.

David Arter has called the coalition an “unhappy marriage”,¹¹ and even Orpo has referred to it as a “marriage of convenience”. It may well be that the coalition will not last until the next parliamentary elections scheduled for spring 2027. And even if it does, it will be a tumultuous ride: in addition to the scandals about racism continuing to bubble under the surface, the implementation of the ambitious government programme is guaranteed to raise concerns both inside the coalition and in society as a whole. In September and October, there were already a range of anti-government activities from various work stoppages to public demonstrations and sit-in protests at university campuses. The leadership of the Finns Party in recent years has become fiscally very conservative, and it is possible that the ring-wing economic policy is the glue keeping the government together.

10 Finnish Government (2023) “A strong and committed Finland. Programme of Prime Minister Petteri Orpo’s Government, 20 June 2023”. Publications of the Finnish Government, 2023:60.

11 Arter, D. (2023) “The making of an ‘unhappy marriage’? The 2023 Finnish general election”. *West European Politics*, 47:2, pp. 426-438, DOI: 10.1080/01402382.2023.2233072.

An interesting development concerns the prospect of bloc politics and increasing polarisation between the opposing camps.¹² The pre-electoral promises made by the left-wing parties of not sharing power with the Finns Party – and the willingness of the centre-right parties to do so – resulted during the campaigns in debates about polarisation and the growing distance between the right and the left. These debates will no doubt continue, as the policies of the Orpo government clearly divide opinions among citizens. As Finland is known for its tradition of broad, mainly cross-bloc coalitions, moves towards bloc politics would constitute a significant departure from established practices. One thing is nonetheless guaranteed: Finnish politics is no longer boring.

From Marin to Lindtman

Marin's exceptional popularity and high profile presents a major challenge for the SDP, as Marin was probably a key factor in attracting younger and female voters to support the party. SDP party members have primarily belonged to older age groups, while the two other leftist parties, the Greens and the Left Alliance, have been more popular among younger voters. Three days after the elections, Marin announced that she would step down as the party chair in the party congress in early September. That congress elected Antti Lindtman as her successor. In an internal party ballot, Lindtman received 12,546 votes from party members, while Krista Kiuru, who held the key position of the minister of Family Affairs and Social Services during the Covid-19 pandemic, received 3,587 votes. Back in December 2019, Lindtman had narrowly lost the party council vote to Marin in the race for the party's leadership seat. Marin meanwhile joined the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change as a strategic counsellor, thereby resigning as an MP from the Eduskunta.

Despite his relatively young age, Lindtman (41) is an experienced politician and a loyal party servant, who has been waiting in the wings for his turn. He comes from Vantaa, an SDP stronghold in the capital region, where he chaired the municipal council from 2009 until he was elected the SDP leader. Lindtman was elected to the Eduskunta on his third attempt in 2011. He was the SDP vice-chair before being chosen as the chair of the SDP parliamentary group in 2016, a position he held until election as the party chair.

Lindtman faces a tough job, but the unpopularity of the right-wing government probably improves his chances of guiding the SDP to success in future elections. According to polls conducted in late 2023, the SDP are again the largest party, but the SDP needs to strike a balance between defending traditional leftist goals and appearing as capable of sound budgetary and fiscal policies. Lindtman probably recognises that most citizens are concerned about the level of public debt, and hence, the SDP must take those concerns into account when attacking government policies. To make matters more challenging, the funding of social and health services is bound to stay high on the political agenda, as the wellbeing services counties responsible for them being seriously under-resourced. The

¹² Kekkonen, A. (2023) "Affective polarization in a multiparty democracy: Learning from the case of Finland". Doctoral dissertation. University of Helsinki.

SDP will probably be more vocal in defending labour rights. Trade unions are guaranteed to oppose the measures of the Orpo government, and the links between the SDP and particularly the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK), the main confederation of 'blue-collar' unions, remain very close.¹³

The right-wing government has also begun to impose various restrictions on immigration and citizenship laws, and this poses another challenge for the SDP. Many of the sister parties of the SDP across Europe and in the Nordic countries have adopted more conservative positions on immigration, and Lindtman needs to decide where his party stands on the issue. Until now, the SDP, and more broadly the political left, have advocated for liberal policies, embraced diversity and multiculturalism, and businesses as well as social and health services which increasingly depend on a foreign workforce. Continued immigration is thus very much an economic necessity, but simultaneously there is debate about immigrants' role in worsening gang violence and street crime. One issue that used to cause divisions inside the SDP was Finland's traditional line of military non-alignment and the prospect of NATO membership, but that question is now settled, as Marin and the SDP were crucial in guiding Finland into the defence alliance.

13 Raunio, T. and N. Laine (2017) "Finland: Strong party-union links under challenge", in E. H. Allern and T. Bale (eds), *Left-of-Centre Parties and Trade Unions in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 93-111.