

Köhler quits

Germany's president resigns after ill-chosen remarks about the war in Afghanistan.

THE powers of the German president are more symbolic than real, but Horst Köhler's sudden resignation from the job on Monday May 31st was nonetheless a bombshell. He quit days after critics accused him of violating the spirit of the constitution in remarks he made about German military operations abroad. His accusers "flouted the necessary respect for my office," said a tearful Mr Köhler. His premature departure, the first by a post-war president before the end of his term, piles additional pressure on the coalition government led by Angela Merkel, which is already beleaguered by sagging popular support and the crisis in the euro area. How she proceeds in the search for a successor will say much about how she means to manage Germany during the coalition's three remaining years in office.

Mr Köhler, a former director of the International Monetary Fund, had been floundering for some time. As a non-politician he lacked influence in Berlin's backrooms. Earlier presidents had made their mark by rising to historical occasions with ringing oratory. Despite his financial expertise Mr Köhler struggled to find his voice during the economic crisis. The markets had become a "monster," he told a magazine in May. Hurling sporadically his thunderbolts fizzled. Recently, the press has been giving more coverage to infighting and resignations among his aides than to anything Mr Köhler has had to say. He remained popular but his prestige was ebbing.

Then came his comments on military deployment, during a visit to Afghanistan. A "country of our size with an export orientation" must sometimes send its armed forces "to defend our interests, for example open trade routes," he said in an interview. To most Germans the war is tolerable, if at all, only on the grounds of national defence. Mr Köhler seemed to be offering an economic justification, an affront to their instinctive pacifism. "The constitution permits no economic wars," thundered one opposition politician. Mr Köhler claimed he had been misinterpreted but such accusations stung. His allies, themselves trying to keep their distance from an unpopular war, offered a tepid defence. Mr Köhler's sudden resignation—with immediate effect—seemed petulant.

Mrs Merkel now has a problem. She engineered his first election in 2004 along with Guido Westerwelle, head of the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) and now foreign minister as well. That helped to form a partnership between the FDP and Mrs Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which became Germany's governing coalition after last September's federal elections. But the coalition has had a rocky start. On May 9th its two constituent parties lost power in elections in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), the most populous state. That cost the duo a majority in the Bundesrat, the upper house of parliament. Mr Köhler's departure is another blow to the "Christian-liberal" project.

A federal assembly now has 30 days to elect a new president. Even after the NRW election the CDU and FDP may still command a majority of the body, which consists of all members of the Bundestag, the legislature's lower house, plus an equal number of representatives from the states. But Mrs Merkel may not think it politic to push through a candidate against resistance from the opposition. After losing in NRW and dragooning unwilling taxpayers into a rescue of the euro, she may prefer to court consensus rather than conflict. If that is the case, she will start by backing a president that Germans of all political persuasions can rally round.

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