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Is Germany's Government Headed for a Breakdown?

By Tristana Moore / Berlin

It was only eight months ago that Angela Merkel was re-elected German Chancellor amid buoyant approval ratings and the giddy promise offered by a new center-right government. But these days, the constant sniping in her coalition has the German public fuming and the media begging her to put an end to the fighting. Every time she tries to paper over the cracks and implore her government partners to get back in line, another crisis bubbles up. Merkel is under siege, with most Germans now believing — maybe even hoping — that her government won't serve out its full term until 2013 and opposition parties calling for fresh elections.

Since September's general election, Merkel's coalition — made up of her conservative alliance, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Christian Social Union (CSU) and the pro-business Free Democratic Party (FDP) — has found itself hopelessly divided. The CSU and FDP have bickered over virtually every major policy initiative, from tax cuts to healthcare reform, nuclear power to the parental allowance. The new coalition was meant to be the dream team, but it's turned into a nightmare as the parties' mutual distrust has degenerated into unprecedented public slanging matches. Just two weeks ago, a member of the FDP's Health Ministry described the Bavarian conservative CSU as a "wild sow" during a row over health reform. The General Secretary of the CSU, Alexander Dobrindt, hit back, calling the FDP "Gurkentruppe" ("Cucumber Troops") or "Bunch of Losers." ([See a profile of Angela Merkel.](#))

"Chancellor Merkel is in deep trouble. She's surrounded by big, clashing egos in her coalition who represent the narrow interests of their parties," says Richard Hilmer, head of Germany's Infratest Dimap polling institute. "She has found it more difficult keeping a grip on her center-right government than she did managing the grand coalition between her conservative party and the Social Democrats in the past." The relationship between Merkel's conservative party and her ideological opponents, the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD), was so tense that most predicted the early demise of the grand coalition — but it survived its full four-year term, until the election in September.

The debt crisis in Greece forced Merkel to first push an unpopular rescue package through parliament at the beginning of May and then sign Germany up for another massive bailout for the eurozone two weeks later, on May 21. That same month, a regional election in Germany's most populous state, North Rhine-Westphalia, gave Merkel's conservative party a battering, leaving the coalition poised to lose its majority in Germany's upper house of parliament. Already struggling to keep her coalition together, Merkel then suffered a double setback when she lost two of her conservative allies: Both Roland Koch, the governor of the central state of Hesse and German President Horst Köhler resigned later in May. ([See more on how](#)

low the euro can go.)

And the hits just kept on coming. On June 7, Merkel announced a controversial austerity plan, billed as the biggest in Germany's postwar history. The package of public spending cuts worth more than \$95 billion by 2014 was slammed by economists, opposition parties, trade unions and conservative lawmakers as "socially unjust." The Chancellor stood accused of punishing the poor by cutting social welfare benefits while shielding the rich by refusing to raise taxes. Thousands took to the streets in protest. "This government has failed and if they would realize that, then an early general election would be the best option," Frank-Walter Steinmeier, chairman of the SPD's parliamentary group told *Bild* newspaper.

Many German commentators are heralding the end of the coalition and point to the austerity plan as the straw that broke the camel's back. "Chancellor Merkel was under pressure from the pro-business FDP to announce cuts for low-income families and protect high-income earners," says Joachim Behnke, professor of political science at the Zeppelin University in Friedrichshafen, in southwest Germany. "By shifting to the right, Merkel has lost voters in the center of the political spectrum and she won't be able to reverse this trend." Behnke adds that he thinks the austerity package will inflict "disastrous long-term damage" on Merkel's government. (See the dangers of printing money in Germany.)

Polls indicate he may be right. According to a June 16 survey published by Infratest Dimap for the German broadcaster ARD, Merkel's CSU-CDU-FDP coalition polled 37%, well behind the Social Democrats and Greens, who together took 46%. The same survey found that only 40% of Germans are satisfied with Merkel's performance — her lowest approval ratings since she first took office in 2005. "Voters are extremely disappointed," says Infratest Dimap's Hilmer. "Merkel has to take control of her coalition and show she can govern."

The presidential election on June 30 will be Merkel's next big leadership test. She has chosen another conservative politician, Christian Wulff, governor of Lower Saxony, as her candidate to replace Köhler. Wulff's main opposition is SPD-Green candidate Joachim Gauck, a 70-year-old Protestant pastor and former civil rights activist in communist East Germany. Merkel's center-right coalition enjoys a majority in the special federal assembly, made up of representatives from the Bundestag (the lower house of parliament) and Germany's federal states, which will elect the new president. But the ballot is secret, giving critics even within Merkel's government the chance to vent their anger by voting against her candidate. (See pictures of the global financial crisis.)

After that, German lawmakers go on their summer break, and Merkel can only hope that a couple of months in the sun will be enough to get her coalition partners to relax, put aside their differences, and help her stop her government from falling apart.