
FINLAND'S GOVERNMENT SAVED AFTER POPULIST PARTY THE FINNS SPLITS

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Finland's anti-immigration party has split just days after it elected a hardliner convicted of hate speech as leader. The Finnish government has said the coalition will carry on with the more moderate faction.

Finish Prime Minister Juha Sipilä's coalition government was saved at the last minute on Tuesday

The government of Finland avoided breaking apart on Tuesday after Prime Minister Juha Sipilä announced that his ruling coalition would continue with a newly-formed party after it split from the main populist party, The Finns.

A total of 20 out of The Finns' 37 lawmakers left the party and formed a new faction called the New Alternative group, including Foreign Minister Timo Soini who stepped down this weekend after 20 years as party leader.

The New Alternative committed to working with the government's program, including immigration and European Union issues.

Sipilä has headed a three-party coalition comprised of his Centre Party, the conservative National Coalition and anti-immigration, euroskeptic The Finns since May 2015.

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"This is naturally a very pleasant solution from my point of view," Sipilä told reporters. "We're able now to end this (government) situation in less than one day."

He also told reporters he had been on his way to tender his government's resignation with Finnish President Sauli Niinistö when news broke about the split in The Finns.

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On Monday, Sipilä ousted The Finns after it elected hardliner Jussi Halla-aho as the new leader of Finland's second-largest party.

The election threatened to end the coalition as other party leaders said they would refuse to work with Halla-aho, who has been convicted of hate speech.

Finland's highest court upheld a conviction against Halla-aho for inciting ethnic hatred and

blasphemy in a 2008 blog post where he made offensive remarks about Somalis and Islam.

Halla-aho said he was surprised by the number of lawmakers who left the party after he assumed leadership.

"I had expected that one or a few MPs could make that decision (to leave the party), but I could not have anticipated such a big defection," Halla-aho told reporters. "It doesn't feel good."

The 46-year-old member of the European Parliament had previously said he wanted to steer The Finns further to the right and push for tougher immigration policies.

The new coalition - which does not plan to make ministerial changes - will face a confidence vote in Parliament in the coming days.

rs/rt (AP, AFP)

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