ANGELA MERKEL'S CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS WARY OF HESSE STATE ELECTION RECOUNT

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The day after her CDU party's dismal showing in the elections, Merkel announced her gradual retreat from politics. Now a recount could leave the party with a weak mandate. How could this have happened, and what's next?

The Hesse election results published on the day of the vote suggested a wafer-thin majority of one seat in parliament to the ruling coalition of CDU and Greens.

Chancellor Angela Merkels Christian Democratic Union (CDU) was still the strongest party in Hesse at 27 percent ⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜ a considerable drop of 10 percent compared to 2014. The Greens surged dramatically and managed to beat the Social Democrats (SPD) into second place, but only with a margin of 94 votes.

Merkel confirms this is her final term as chancellor

The election had repercussions on a national level, with Merkel announcing the morning after that she would not run for CDU party leadership again and that this current term as chancellor would be her last.

Meanwhile, it has emerged that the computer system used to count the ballots in Frankfurt was down for two hours on election night, leading to severe calculation errors.

It was reported that some 900 votes, across a dozen constituencies in Frankfurt, were incorrectly counted.

Jan Schneider, the city councilor for Frankfurt's election office said despite the errors in Hesse, there's "no reason to put the whole election in doubt." But two weeks later, its clear that the glitch could have huge implications on the official final result, and consequently on the coalition in Hesse.

For the past five years, Hesse has been governed by the previously unlikely coalition of the conservative CDU and Greens ⬜⬜ partnership that both parties are keen to continue. Merkels CDU, however, has suspended coalition talks with the Greens until the votes have been recounted and announced at 12 pm on Friday.

'Traffic light' coalition

Waiting in the wings are the Social Democrats (SPD), who are hoping to surpass the Greens and take second place in the recount. Such a result would open a path for a potential so-called traffic light coalition ⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜ for the symbolic red, yellow and green of the SPD, liberal Free Democrats (FDP) and the Green party, respectively.

The FDP had so far ruled out such a coalition as the current results would mean that the Greens would also claim the office of state premier ⬜ something the liberals oppose. Should the SPD jump to second place after the recount, they would likely take the job in traffic light coalition.

Such a coalition would be the biggest blow to Angela Merkel's conservatives yet: Despite being the strongest party in Hesse, the CDU would then be left out of the picture after almost two decades of governing the southwestern state.

Leaders of the business-friendly FDP have said they are open to the idea. "We will reach out to the Greens with an invitation to discussions in the coming week," said Hesse SPD leader Thorsten Schäfer-Gümbel after meeting with the FDP in Wiesbaden last week. And Green party front man Tarek Al-Wazir, Hesse's economy minister, has also announced his willingness to talk.

'Technical glitch'

Due to the recount of only 900 votes, a change in the distribution of seats in Hesse state parliament, however, is highly unlikely. But in a country that prides itself on a stereotype of efficiency and clean electoral procedures, how could such a blunder occur?

The first signs of failings came as election helpers began to count the votes, Ralf Jack-Hoang, an election official in Frankfurt, told DW. Voters had been given two ballots: One for the Hesse state parliament election, the other for a referendum on the death penalty.

But there was one major drawback: The ballot papers for both votes were the same color.

"This made counting ballots by hand even more difficult than usual," said Jack-Hoang.

After the ballots had finally been counted, the Frankfurt vote was hit with a technical glitch. The computerized system "WahlWeb," which had been rolled out statewide for the first time, was quickly overwhelmed and election officials were unable to input results.

"In the end, everything was written down by hand," said Jack-Hoang.

The mistakes made in Hesse were far from an anomaly ⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜ in Germanys state elections. In 2017, in the western state of North Rhine-Westphalia, several thousand votes cast for the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party were mistakenly assigned to the Alliance of German Democrats (ADD). After a recount, the AfD won an additional 2,000 votes, but no additional seat in the state parliament.

Meanwhile, in last Septembers federal election, ballot papers in the state of Brandenburg, close to

Berlin, were printed incorrectly.

"Where people are involved, human error can never be completely ruled out," said political scientist Oskar Niedermayer in the aftermath of the Hesse election.

The CDU has traditionally been the main center-right party across Germany, but it has shifted toward the center under Chancellor Angela Merkel. The party remains more fiscally and socially conservative compared to parties on the left. It supports membership of the EU and NATO, budgetary discipline at home and abroad and generally likes the status quo. It is the largest party in the Bundestag.