News



Co-leaders Alice Weidel and Tino Chrupalla of the Alternative for Germany party hold a press conference in Berlin Sept. 2, 2024, after state elections in the Saxony and Thuringia regions of eastern Germany. (OSV News/Reuters/Lisi Niesner)

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The results of local elections in eastern Germany's regions of Thuringia and Saxony prompted German bishops to call for "responsible" formation of a government, even under "difficult" circumstances as the far-right party Alternative for Germany, or AfD, won over 30% of the vote.

"The Thuringian election result is a challenge for all of us," the regional bishops wrote in a Sept. 2 statement. "The formation of a new state government will be very difficult under the current circumstances. We appeal to all democratic parties to quickly agree on a workable coalition for the good of our country, even beyond previously used constellations. We need a stable and reliable government that tackles the problems of our country with heart and confidence."

In Thuringia, AfD was way ahead of the center-right Christian Democratic Union, or CDU, the main national opposition party, which won 23.6% of the votes in a stark defeat for Chancellor Olaf Scholz's governing coalition. In Saxony, both the AfD and CDU won over 30% of the votes.

"We bishops encourage all those in positions of responsibility to always place the desire to solve problems together above their own party political goals. We are convinced that this is the only way to overcome the many challenges of our time and to win back those people who no longer trust democracy in general," the regional bishops urged Sept. 2.

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Signing the statement were Bishop Ulrich Neymeyr of Erfurt, Bishop Heinrich Timmerevers of Dresden-Meissen and Bishop Michael Gerber of Fulda, whose dioceses extend into the election regions.

In Thuringia, a government majority of the CDU would be possible if the Christian party agreed to align with the left. All parties had clearly rejected a coalition with the AfD, which has been classified by the Thuringian Office for the Protection of the Constitution as "right-wing extremist."

AfD won the election on a pro-family and anti-immigration ballot that commentators harshly criticized in German media. Björn Höcke, one of the party’s leaders, was twice found guilty by a German court of purposely employing Nazi rhetoric. According to Politico, on election night, a public television journalist, in an interview with Höcke, described the AfD in Thuringia as extremist.

"Please stop stigmatizing me," Höcke replied. "We are the number one people’s party in Thuringia. You don’t want to classify one-third of Thuringian voters as right-wing extremists, do you?"

Thuringia's Catholic bishops warned of the impact of the elections on the social climate.

"It is unacceptable that people with a migration background are now worried about their safety, that quite a few people are seriously considering leaving Thuringia or that companies are questioning their future in our country. We hope that the democratic forces in the Thuringian state parliament will succeed in strongly asserting their positions and working for a future worth living for all people in Thuringia," the bishops wrote in their Sept. 2 statement.

For their part, the bishops said, they want to "ensure that Thuringia remains a friendly and cosmopolitan state. Our primary task is and remains to stand up for the protection of human dignity, especially on the side of the weak."

The bishops gave their assurance that they "remain open and ready to seek dialogue with AfD voters."

The AfD's electoral success in Thuringia and Saxony is not just the result of a protest vote, Rolf Frankenberger, who researches extremism, told KNA, Germany's Catholic news agency. The "anti-democratic convictions" of this party are too obvious, he said.

"The fact that an extreme right-wing party that incites hatred against foreigners, Jews, Europe and everything that does not fit into its nationalist world view has risen

to become a 'people's party' cannot be explained by protest votes alone," the expert said.

The AfD's "anti-democratic convictions" and substantive positions are "too obvious" for that.

"Nationalism seems to be back in vogue," warned Frankenberger, a political scientist and scientific director of the Institute for Research on Right-Wing Extremism at the University of Tübingen. It is the only university-based institute in Germany that specializes in research on right-wing extremism.

Antisemitism is on the rise in Germany, with another incident taking place Sept. 5 when an extensive police operation was under way in Munich after a man reportedly approached the Israeli general consulate bearing a “long” weapon and shot at police, before officers shot him.

The bishops emphasized in their Sept. 2 statement that an "ethnic-nationalist program such as that represented by the AfD is not compatible with the Christian faith."