



Race row ignites Swiss election

By Rob Broomby

BBC correspondent in Switzerland

Swiss general elections rarely inflame passions but a row over racism within the right-wing Swiss People's Party (SVP) may set the campaign alight.

The party narrowly took the largest number of votes at the last election in 1999, after a surge in support. It is expecting to increase its share again in this year's poll, due on 19 October.

We need foreigners to work in Switzerland and they are well paid but we don't need scroungers who cost money, and the criminals should be kicked out or interned

Will Eckler, SVP member

Under Switzerland's constitution, cabinet posts are split between the four main political parties in a consensus system known as the "magic formula".

But that system now under massive pressure.

Polls suggest the SVP, led by Christoph Blocher, could pull further ahead of its rivals.

Despite its strong showing in 1999, the party remains under-represented in the cabinet itself, with only one seat.

Controversial posters

Now the populist SVP is on the march. It is ultra-conservative, fiercely patriotic and on a roll.

Rooted in Alpine tradition, it is a passionate defender of Swiss independence, but it now stands accused of racism.

"We need foreigners to work in Switzerland and they are well paid," says Will Eckler, a member from Zurich, "but we don't need scroungers who cost money. The criminals should be kicked out or interned".

The party recently provoked a race row with a poster showing a caricatured black face and the slogan, "the Swiss are increasingly the negroes".

The poster was withdrawn but a signal had been sent.

Even the party's beleaguered liberal wing condemned the poster, saying it was likely to increase tensions and was in "bad taste".

No apology

Mr Blocher is a multi-millionaire businessman who runs the EMS-Chemie chemical company. He has pushed the party to the right.

He says the slogan was based on an old-fashioned saying, but he offers no apology.

"The immigrants have a lot of rights and we in Switzerland are the stupid ones," he says. "That is not anti-foreigner - it is anti-illegal immigration."

The richer the people in Switzerland get, the more the people fear to lose

Andreas Gross, Social Party MP

About a fifth of Swiss residents are foreigners, partly because naturalisation is so hard. But change is coming. And the ethnic minorities are slowly gaining confidence despite the SVP.

Andrew Katumba, the product manager for a video-on-demand service is Swiss and black. He is one of 33 candidates standing for a new second generation immigrants' party called the "Secondos Plus".

He gives the SVP slogan the most offensive translation possible but he has turned it back on his opponents. The right translation he claims it not "negro". For him it means "nigger".

"Its a stupid provocation," he says. But his response was even more surprising. His poster carried his smiling face and suggested that if Swiss people felt increasingly like "negroes" it was time to elect a real one.

Chocolate box conservatism

From the village water fountains to the chocolate-box landscape, Switzerland is as conservative as its is beautiful. It is one of the richest countries in the world, yet it feels threatened.

It is not in the European Union, but it fears Brussels. Law and order prevail, yet it fears crime.

"The richer the people in Switzerland get, the more the people fear they have to lose," says Andreas Gross, a centre-left Social Party MP. He claims Mr Blocher's party is simply exploiting those fears.

Mr Blocher always denies being a populist. But he has successfully tapped into discontent on a range of emotive issues.

The Swiss High Court recently overruled voters in the industrial town of Emmen, who had conducted secret ballots to decide which Swiss passport applications to accept.

The ruling has pitted the courts against the people and another sacred cow, the system of direct democracy itself, by which the people decide on all major issues in regular referendums.

Confident of success

Marinko Vukajlovec, who has lived in Switzerland for 18 years, was one of those whose citizenship was rejected.

"We felt discriminated against," he says, "all those from the former Yugoslavia were rejected, it was very hurtful".

But the decision has given Mr Blocher's party yet another issue to campaign on and he is confident of success.

"I think we will be the biggest party after the election," he says. With further gains his party is certain to demand a second seat in the cabinet and that may not be accepted.

The radical wing of his party - the largest and strongest - is already disenfranchised. It is the SVP's more moderate faction which sits in the cabinet.

That is already putting massive strain on the Alpine consensus government. If Mr Blocher's party won a major increase in support the system itself could fall apart altogether.

But don't hold your breath - tectonic shifts in Swiss politics are rare. Another compromise is more likely.

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