

Exit polls say German far-right party to win eastern state in regional vote



Berlin, September 2 (RHC)-- Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD) party is on track to become the first far-right party to win a regional election in the country since World War Two, two exit polls show, but was almost certain to be excluded from power by rival parties.

The AfD was projected to win 33.1 percent of the vote in the state of Thuringia, comfortably ahead of the conservatives' 24.3 percent, exit polls by broadcasters ZDF and ARD showed on Sunday.

In the neighbouring state of Saxony, the conservatives led on 31.9 percent, just half a percentage point ahead of the AfD. The left populist Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW), which like the AfD demands sharper controls on immigration and wants to stop arming Ukraine, came third in both states, though significantly underperformed earlier polls.

With a year to go until Germany's national election, the results look punishing for Chancellor Olaf Scholz's coalition, though his Social Democrats looked to have cleared the 5 percent threshold for staying in the parliaments of both states.

However his coalition partners, the Greens and the business-friendly Free Democrats looked less secure in both parliaments, in a development that could herald yet more conflict in Scholz's already fractious coalition government.

All parties including the BSW have pledged not to allow into coalition an AfD they regard as anti-democratic and extremist.

"This is a historic success for us," Alice Weidel, a national co-leader of AfD, told ARD. She described the result as a "requiem" for Scholz's coalition.

Reporting from Berlin, Al Jazeera's Dominic Kane said AfD's lead in Thuringia, is a personal mandate for the party's leader in the region, Björn Höcke. He said Höcke has been found guilty of using Nazi slogans in the past and is now going to be leading the largest party in the parliament in Thuringia.

"The irony here is that in winning this election...if he was from any other party, then he would be in a position to be making deals, trying to get into the [national] government. Yet he is as far from government now...then he was before voting actually took place," Kane said.

Kane said that in Saxony it appears that the Christian Democrats have just held on to first place but added that the results could still fluctuate.

"The thing to take from this[eastern region elections] is that the turnout in both states, was much higher than the last time.... and the shift is rightward," Kane said.

The two east German states of Thuringia and Saxony cast their ballots in an election just over a week after three people were killed in a knife attack that has fuelled a bitter debate over immigration in Germany.

Saxony is the most populous of the former East German states and has been a conservative stronghold since reunification. Thuringia is more rural and the only state currently led by the far-left Die Linke, a successor of East Germany's ruling communist party.

Al Jazeera's Kane said that some of the people voting in these two states had lived under communism 35 years ago.

Casting her vote early in Erfurt, the capital of Thuringia, Sandra Pagel told AFP news agency earlier on Sunday that she was "really afraid" of a victory of the AfD. "I'm very nervous to see what happens today ... because I think there's a very high risk that the AfD will win and that scares me. For my grandchildren and also for me," said the 46-year-old sterilisation processing facility manager.

"I just hope that we get a coalition that is democratic and not right-wing at the end," Naila Kiesel told Reuters after casting her ballot in the city of Jena in Thuringia.

Created in 2013 as an anti-euro group before morphing into an anti-immigration party, the AfD has capitalised on the fractious three-way coalition in Berlin to rise in opinion polls.

In June's European Parliament elections, the party scored a record 15.9 percent overall and did especially well in eastern Germany, where it emerged as the biggest force.

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