

World

E.U. is nervous at prospect of Merkel's exit

BRUSSELS

Anxiety over who can fill role of a reliable protector of Europe's core values

BY STEVEN ERLANGER

The European stage Angela Merkel commanded for so long and so effectively may be cracking, if not collapsing. She has been the poster woman for Europe's democratic center, but the center is imploding. She and Germany have been a symbol of stability, but now even Germany is seen as politically unstable.

Nonetheless, the prospect of her departure — she announced this week that she will not run for another term as the German chancellor — has created a degree of panic at the core of the European Union.

Ms. Merkel may be becoming more unpopular at home, and her influence over others may be waning. But to those who believed — and worked for — the dream of an ever-closer union, Ms. Merkel was considered fundamentally reliable, decent and committed to Europe and its values. She stood as a bulwark against the strutting populists who now run countries as varied as Italy, Hungary and Poland.

What Europe will do without Ms. Merkel is no small question, especially when nationalism is rising and Europe's politics seem to be reorganized not along the usual left-right spectrum, but rather around who is for Europe, and who is against it.

"She provided the sense that someone was in control and could be counted on," said Jan Techau, the Berlin-based director of the Europe program for the German Marshall Fund of the United States. "She gave the assurance that Germany was the reserve power in Europe on which you could depend. While she made mistakes, you could rely on Merkel even if you didn't like her."

Who can act as a counterbalance to the forces tearing at the bloc's unity in her eventual absence — Ms. Merkel said she would finish her term that ends in 2021, though that seems doubtful — is suddenly an urgent discussion.

Tomas Valasek, the director of Carnegie Europe, a foreign policy research organization, said that Ms. Merkel "created European consensus out of nothing," and everyone wonders, "My God, who will do the job for her?"

Emmanuel Macron, the president of France, is "now the default leader of Europe, the big hope," Mr. Techau said. "He's the last one with a strong mandate and an instinct for the right thing."

But for now at least, before elections in May, Mr. Macron, unpopular at home,



Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany has a consensus-minded pragmatism that has been crucial to keeping Europe together through a series of crises.

has no representatives in the European Parliament. And his ideas for reform of the bloc and the eurozone — the group of countries that share the euro currency — laid out in September 2017, have gotten little traction.

The problem for Mr. Macron was, and remains, that he is not strong enough on

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his own to push through his ambitious vision of "more Europe." He needs German support.

On paper, Ms. Merkel has committed to support some of Mr. Macron's ideas for eurozone reform and his call for a new start in Europe. If she was luke-

warm to some of his other proposals — like the idea of empowering a European finance minister — Ms. Merkel did at least provide a reasonably like-minded partner at the core of Europe.

Any Merkel successor is unlikely to be any more supportive of Mr. Macron's ideas and will have a lot less stature in Brussels than the chancellor has earned after 102 European summit meetings since she took office in 2005.

The rest of this year will see little progress, said Josef Janning of the European Council on Foreign Relations in Berlin, because "she's a very lame duck until a new party leader is elected, without carte blanche to move in Europe."

All of that portends badly for buttressing European Union machinery that could help the bloc head off another financial crisis, or at least weather one. "2018 was supposed to be the year of reform," Mr. Janning said. "But nothing

much has happened except trying to solve one crisis after another."

Ms. Merkel's consensus-minded pragmatism was crucial to the passing of the Lisbon Treaty that governs bloc relations, to the decision to keep Greece inside the eurozone against strong opposition, and to the Western response to the Russian annexation of Crimea and the sanctions that followed.

While a reluctant leader, Ms. Merkel has provided a dignified but firm response to both President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia and to President Trump, who have both tried to provoke her.

Some European leaders, of course, will be glad to see her go. Ms. Merkel's critics note that her hard line on enforcing austerity during the financial crisis and her decision to let a million migrants into Germany may have helped fuel the populist backlash that is now Europe's biggest challenge.

The Polish politician Jaroslaw Kaczynski has demonized the German chancellor over the migration issue and her support for the Nordstream II pipeline from Russia, and the Greeks blamed her for all but strangling their country financially.

Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orban, has set himself up as the anti-Merkel for European elections in May, and along with the new Italian populist leaders, has been critical of the sanctions on Russia but has so far not blocked their renewal.

The countries of Central Europe were opposed to Ms. Merkel's initial welcome of refugees and migrants and her efforts to spread them around. But as Mr. Valasek, the Carnegie Europe director, pointed out, the Czechs and Slovaks appreciated her financial rigor, and German investment in Central Europe has been crucial to the region's economy.

'Fear is coming back' as Sri Lanka enters crisis

NEWS ANALYSIS

BY MARIA ABI-HABIB AND DHARISHA BASTIANS

When Sri Lanka's president was elected in 2015, he was given a sweeping mandate from voters to investigate accusations of war crimes and graft against his predecessor's government and to cancel deals with China that had plunged the country into debt.

Now the president, Maithripala Sirisena, has become an agent of the comeback effort of the man he replaced, Mahinda Rajapaksa.

Mr. Sirisena has unilaterally suspended Parliament and the cabinet and declared that Mr. Rajapaksa would immediately become the new prime minister.

The Parliament and public that once rallied around Mr. Sirisena are now bitterly divided over what his critics call an unconstitutional attempt to consolidate power.

The country is split down the middle, with members of Parliament slightly tilted toward Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who is standing his ground despite attempts to replace him with Mr. Rajapaksa.

Sri Lanka, one of Asia's oldest democracies, has now been left with two prime ministers claiming legitimacy, and concerns that violence might be used to break the stalemate.

Though the current crisis appeared to have been at least partly caused by bitter personal differences between the leaders, it has geopolitical importance. India and China have been locked in an expensive competition for influence in Sri Lanka, and Mr. Rajapaksa's allies blame his 2015 election defeat on meddling from New Delhi. India denies the allegations.

Mr. Wickremesinghe said that any legitimate confidence vote in Parliament would confirm that he still had the votes to remain in office. "I am confident that I am the only one who can get a majority. If someone else can show a majority, I will give way," Mr. Wickremesinghe said in a news conference on Monday.

The president's move to consolidate power and invite Mr. Rajapaksa back into government starkly counters the promises he made to investigate the for-

mer government's actions during the country's long civil war. During his 10 years in power, Mr. Rajapaksa and his government were accused of rights violations in the endgame of the war against Tamil Tiger separatists. Opposition politicians, aid workers and journalists routinely disappeared; many were found dead.

During his campaign in 2015, President Sirisena used the image of the journalist and cartoonist Prageeth Eknaligoda, who had been critical of Mr. Rajapaksa and disappeared in 2010, as a symbol of Mr. Rajapaksa's tenure.

On Monday, Mr. Eknaligoda's wife, Sandhya Eknaligoda, who campaigned for Mr. Sirisena in 2015, called Mr. Rajapaksa's appointment last week "a great betrayal."

"When we walked the streets for Mr. Sirisena, we walked against the politics of fear and repression. Today, the same Mr. Sirisena is bringing the man who terrorized us back to power," she said. "The fear is coming back."

The crisis appears to be the first unconstitutional transfer of power in Sri Lanka's independent history.

Mr. Rajapaksa and his supporters say Mr. Wickremesinghe's government has behaved unconstitutionally by delaying provincial elections.

"We are working as a caretaker government to prepare for elections next year," said Namal Rajapaksa, Mr. Rajapaksa's son and a parliamentarian. Mr. Wickremesinghe's government, he said, had "delayed elections for three years and that was unconstitutional and no one said anything."

Mr. Wickremesinghe is hunkered down in his residence with hundreds of supporters and Buddhist monks surrounding the building, complicating Mr. Sirisena's ability to oust him without a bloody showdown. The president is in charge of the armed forces, and it remains unclear where they stand in the crisis.

Violence broke out on Sunday evening when the petroleum minister approached his office and was confronted by Mr. Rajapaksa's loyalists, who prevented him from entering. As a crowd formed, the minister's bodyguard opened fire, killing one person. The minister, Arjuna Ranatunga, formerly a world-famous cricket player, was arrested on Monday.



President Maithripala Sirisena of Sri Lanka was elected in 2015 partly on promises to investigate his predecessor, but he has moved to replace the prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, top right, with the previous president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, lower right.

Over the weekend, a mob loyal to Mr. Rajapaksa stormed the state television broadcaster and took it off the air. Some journalists say they have gotten threatening calls to support Mr. Sirisena's government.

From the beginning, it seems Mr. Sirisena miscalculated how much support he could rally to oust Mr. Wickremesinghe.

On Friday evening, Mr. Sirisena summoned members of his parliamentary bloc and representatives of the military for a meeting, which many assumed would be on policy matters, according to two officials familiar with the matter.

Instead they entered Mr. Sirisena's residence to find Mr. Rajapaksa and a hastily arranged swearing-in ceremony to appoint the former leader as the new prime minister. By Saturday afternoon, parliamentarians loyal to Mr. Wickremesinghe refused to defect to Mr. Sirisena's new coalition, and even some members of the president's own party declined to cross over.

rightful prime minister. Moments later, Mr. Sirisena suspended Parliament.

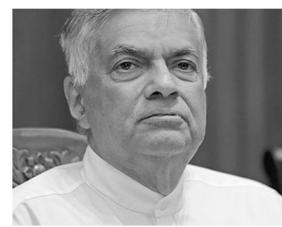
In a national speech on Sunday evening, Mr. Sirisena claimed that a cabinet minister he did not identify had been plotting to assassinate him. The claim came weeks after The Hindu, a

One of Asia's oldest democracies now has two prime ministers claiming legitimacy, and the prospect of violence looms.

major Indian daily, reported that Mr. Sirisena had told allies that India's intelligence agency was also planning to assassinate him. Mr. Sirisena later denied that report.

Mr. Sirisena also harshly criticized Mr. Wickremesinghe, his coalition partner of the past three years, calling him "arrogant, stubborn and inflexible" and saying the prime minister had stalled economic reforms while allowing corruption to flourish. He had no choice but to appoint Mr. Rajapaksa, he said, "for the sake of the motherland."

On Monday evening, Mr. Rajapaksa



ERANGA JAYAWARDENA/ASSOCIATED PRESS



M.A. PUSHPA KUMARA/EPA-EFE

port this year, China gave Mr. Sirisena a grant worth nearly \$300 million, which the president boasted was for "any project of my wish."

Western governments have rallied around Mr. Wickremesinghe in the crisis, and the loans and grants they have given this government in recent years may be at risk unless the prime minister is restored. But that money pales in comparison to the loans China has provided.

"The political turmoil, more than Rajapaksa's return to power, works to China's advantage. In country after country, China has exploited internal disarray to advance its objectives," said Brahma Chellaney, an analyst and critic of China who often advises the Indian government and is affiliated with the Center for Policy Research in New Delhi.

China's ambassador to Sri Lanka quickly sought to show he was not taking sides, posing for photo opportunities with Mr. Rajapaksa and Mr. Wickremesinghe on Saturday.

Parliament is set to reconvene on Nov. 16, but there is concern that the delay may be used to coerce lawmakers to support Mr. Sirisena and Mr. Rajapaksa. Namal Rajapaksa, the parliamentarian, says his party and Mr. Sirisena's already have the support they need.

Mr. Sirisena broke from Mr. Rajapaksa's party to ally with Mr. Wickremesinghe in the prelude to the 2015 elections. But the alliance he formed with Mr. Wickremesinghe was a coalition of contrasts, with Mr. Sirisena's party notably more socially conservative.

The leaders quarreled at every step, and the government was paralyzed, unable to fulfill its economic or social promises. And they never held the accountability crusade they had promised, to investigate claims of war crimes by Mr. Rajapaksa's government.

"This government came in and made commitments to deliver on transitional justice, to deliver truth, justice and reparations for Sri Lanka's conflict," said Omar Waraich, deputy South Asia director for Amnesty International. "While there were some very important gains made, that process stalled, disappointing the families of victims. There is a danger now that even those limited gains will be reversed."

Mr. Trump and Mr. Putin may be glad when she goes, as well.

Mr. Trump has always had issues with Germany, especially over trade and the German devotion to multilateralism. "But with Merkel it seems to be worse, almost personal, the way she avoids open confrontation and sticks to her principles," Mr. Valasek said.

Mr. Trump, he said, "will be relieved, but the fundamentals of the relationship won't change. And I think Putin will be delighted. The staying power of the sanctions against Russia were her personal triumph."

There will be continuing uncertainty as to how long Ms. Merkel will be able to continue as chancellor, despite her strong wish, as Mr. Janning said, "to hand over the job to someone who has won it in an election." Ms. Merkel, who ran only reluctantly for a fourth term after the election of Mr. Trump, "will hand it over in dignity to an elected successor and not be pushed out by her party," he said.

But new elections could come faster than she now expects.

Writing in the Süddeutsche Zeitung, Matthias Kolb said that given all the challenges facing the European Union, "one can only hope that Chancellor Merkel and her new partner who heads the conservative party are able to work together and make clear what is at stake for Germany" in next year's European election.

"With her departure," he wrote, "a politician is leaving who had the ability to speak at eye level with Presidents Xi, Trump and Putin, and always represented the position of the E.U. It will take time before her successor reaches such standing."

There are worries about Ms. Merkel's position, somewhat thrust upon her, as the defender of Western values and the international order, especially in the face of the challenges from Mr. Trump, Mr. Putin and the Chinese leader, Xi Jinping. Those were expressed in a Twitter message by Richard N. Haass, head of the American Council on Foreign Relations.

"The Merkel era is close to ending, leaving the West and the post-WW2 int'l order w/o a leader," he wrote. "The US of @realDonaldTrump has abdicated. The UK is distracted. Canada lacks means. Macron is too weak. Bodes poorly for stability, prosperity, freedom."

But Ms. Merkel has been badly weakened, too. And as Mr. Valasek suggests, her leaving office "may in fact take some steam out of the populist wave."

"The zeitgeist is getting someone else in place," he said. "So it's possible when the leader leaves who looms largest, since 2005, and represents the largest E.U. country, this might have salutary effect on the restlessness of the masses in getting out the elite no matter what."