

Finland: the president becomes involved as the government nearly collapses

This blog post was co-authored with Maarika Kujanen, a doctoral student at Tampere University working in a project on presidential activism (<https://www.researchgate.net/project/Taming-the-presidents-Exploring-the-links-between-presidential-activism-policy-making-capacity-and-regime-legitimacy>).

Finnish governments are broad coalitions, in most cases bringing together parties from both the left and the right. The fragmented party system, with no party winning more than around 20–25 % of the votes in the elections, contributes to the formation of ideologically heterogeneous coalitions that contain at least three and, in most cases, more parties. This internal heterogeneity also in large part explains the importance attached to the government programme, which have become considerably longer and more detailed since the late 1990s. Furthermore, once the cabinet has entered into office, there are institutionalized procedures for solving disputes among coalition partners. The most salient issues are discussed informally between the leaders of coalition parties. Such informal talks are held when needed and they are essential for cabinet decision-making.

The heterogeneity of governments means that Finnish prime ministers are first and foremost ‘managers’ of coalitions for whom building and maintaining trust is a prerequisite for policy success and cabinet survival. Prime ministers are expected to provide leadership, but they must respect the established rules while paying close attention to the preferences of the coalition partners. Trust is essential: trust between the coalition parties and trust between the prime minister and individual cabinet parties. The cohesion of the cabinet is usually tested when there are difficult and unexpected issues on the agenda and/or when one or more of the coalition parties are doing badly in the polls.

The five-party government led by Prime Minister Sanna Marin of Social Democrats has mainly displayed unity during the COVID-19 crisis. Particularly Marin has enjoyed strong popularity ratings, while the support of the second biggest party in the coalition, the Centre, has remained alarmingly low. The Centre has enjoyed a good run of election results since the early 1990s, holding the position of the prime minister in 1991–1995, 2003–2011, and 2015–2019. However, in the 2019 elections the Centre suffered a humiliating defeat with only 13,8 % of the votes, losing 18 seats in the 200-member parliament. Since then its support has stayed around 10–12 %, despite the party forcing the replacement of Prime Minister Antti Rinne with Marin in late 2019 and the Centre also electing a new leader, Annika Saarikko, in September 2020.

The uncomfortable position of the Centre in the left-leaning cabinet

Apart from low support, the actual decision of joining the government has caused turmoil inside the Centre. Many felt the party should stay in the opposition after the ugly electoral defeat, while some supporters were concerned about the party entering a five-party, left-leaning cabinet which also includes the Green League, the Left Alliance, and the Swedish People’s Party. Despite commentators pointing out that the Centre has managed to defend its interests quite well in the cabinet, critical voices in the party feel uncomfortable about the image of the party in a Social Democratic-led cabinet. In the public the main confrontations have occurred between the Centre and the Green League, not least about the continuing use of peat as an energy source. Here the question is not so much about economy, as about pitting rural interests against more liberal, pro-environmental urban interests. Moreover, with the municipal elections approaching in June, the party is afraid of another bad election result. The stakes are high since the Centre has traditionally performed well in municipal elections.

These tensions inside the cabinet surfaced in the so-called 'mid-term review' session (*puoliväliriihi* in Finnish) of the Marin cabinet. In the mid-term review session the entire cabinet comes together halfway through the four-year electoral period to talk more freely about what the government has achieved, where it has failed, and whether its targets should be re-adjusted for the remaining two years. Previously these sessions have lasted around two days, and that was also the plan on 21 April when the talks started. However, the session ended up lasting nine days, and involved a lot of turning points and theatrical drama better suited for TV reality shows, with the Centre and its leader Saarikko in the leading role. But the drama was not just about the Centre needing to prove that its voice counts in the cabinet. COVID pandemic had forced the government to adopt several additional budgets and to provide extensive financial help to both businesses and the public sector. Now the question was about how soon the government should return to 'normal' and start gradually enforcing budgetary discipline. Here the main dividing line was between the three left-wing parties (Social Democrats, Greens, Left Alliance) and the two centre-right parties (Centre, Swedish People's Party). Matti Vanhanen, the Minister of Finance from the Centre party, even said that the session had become almost like bargaining about government formation. Interestingly, while the finance minister is considered the second most important portfolio in the cabinet, Vanhanen was even not always present in the mid-term review talks, with Saarikko, the Minister of Science and Culture, leading the Centre's team. And on 22 May it was announced that Saarikko will become the new finance minister.

The conflict finally ended when Marin lost patience with the Centre's tactics, and after bilateral talks between Marin and Saarikko the Centre agreed to continue in the government. Commenting the decision, Saarikko primarily emphasized that her party is a responsible actor and expressed that she values the mutual trust in the government. In the press conferences held after the mid-term review session ended, Saarikko stood next to Marin, with the other party leaders more in the background. The final outcome was a compromise between the various positions, both concerning finances and peat as an energy source. Regardless of who won, the episode surely left bitter feelings amongst the coalition partners.

President Niinistö rules out automatic early elections

Interestingly, when the conflict was at its worst, President Sauli Niinistö got involved. It seems that Niinistö made a phone call to Saarikko to express his concerns about the stalled negotiations. What exactly was said between Saarikko and Niinistö is not clear, but according to press reports Niinistö was not happy with Saarikko referring to their conversation when briefing the Centre's parliamentary group about the mid-term review session. Again, Niinistö denied exceeding his powers and said that he was actually surprised by the agreement between the parties. In interviews Niinistö nonetheless suggested, in his usual rather vague fashion, that he might not have agreed to call new parliamentary elections had Marin's cabinet collapsed. Niinistö also mentioned that he had spoken privately with several persons about the situation but refused to reveal the names of his contacts.

This was not the first time Niinistö has addressed the issue. When the possibility of government resignation surfaced in June 2018, Niinistö commented that dissolution of the centre-right cabinet led by Juha Sipilä would not automatically result in early elections. Niinistö said that he would first hear the views of the Eduskunta parties to find out whether it would be possible to form a new government.

Constitutionally the rules leave room for presidential interpretation. The understanding is that the president should not interfere in any way in government formation, but the constitution nonetheless states that the president appoints the prime minister and the other ministers after the prime minister has been approved by the Eduskunta. Since the late 1980s the presidents have not intervened in government formation processes. Both the dissolution of the Eduskunta and the resignation of the

prime minister and the individual ministers are dependent on an initiative from the prime minister. According to Section 64 of the constitution 'The President of the Republic grants, upon request, the resignation of the Government or a Minister'. Until the 1990s the president alone had the right to dissolve the Eduskunta and order new elections. The president exercised this right four times during the post-Second World war era (1953, 1962, 1971, and 1975). A constitutional amendment in 1991 altered the situation in favour of the cabinet by requiring the explicit consent of the prime minister for parliamentary dissolution. Section 26 of the constitution consolidated this practice: 'The President of the Republic, in response to a reasoned proposal by the Prime Minister, and after having heard the parliamentary groups, and while the Parliament is in session, may order that extraordinary parliamentary elections shall be held. Thereafter, the Parliament shall decide the time when it concludes its work before the elections.' Since the last time the president has dissolved the Eduskunta and ordered new elections was 46 years ago, the threshold for calling early elections must be high for both the president and the prime minister.

Although the Marin government finally managed to reach a compromise regarding the main issues in the mid-term review session and did not collapse, the work of the ideologically divided coalition will not get any easier. Government's annual 'budget session' (*budjettiriihi* in Finnish), for example, will take place in the fall, and the government must find consensus on important financial questions once again. Should the government collapse before the next elections scheduled for spring 2023, it is not sure how Niinistö would react. At least Niinistö has publicly made it clear that he would not automatically call early elections.