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Covid's political side-effects

The Covid-19 pandemic is posing challenges for the Swiss party system. An emerging movement without a clear political allegiance going by the name Friends of the Constitution suddenly has the power to force popular votes. That is giving the SVP in particular food for thought.

JÜRIG STEINER

The ringing of bells seems to crop up regularly in local politics in Switzerland, for instance when people complain that the sound of church or cow bells is disturbing their rest. For some months now, however, people wearing bells have been causing disruption on an unprecedented scale. “Treichelner” are large, loud bells found mainly in central Switzerland, where they are normally an apolitical accompaniment to customs such as Fasnacht carnival celebrations.



Unmistakeable and divisive bells in a politically charged environment: Freiheitstrychler at a protest against Covid measures.

Photo: Keystone

A group has now emerged from this varied Treichelner culture calling itself by the dialect name “Freiheitstrychler” (“Bellringers for Freedom”). Clad in white T-shirts with traditional designs, these bell ringers from deepest Switzerland can be found marching in formation at the regular demonstrations against government anti-Covid restrictions. The newly politicised Treichelner effectively provide the soundtrack to the growing resistance to the national government’s coronavirus policy, which saw tens of thousands of people protesting at a demonstration in Berne in mid-October.

However, the quaint sound of the stolid Treichelner downplays the political momentum that is gathering here. The Friends of the Constitution (Freunde der Verfassung) group, which opposes the anti-Covid measures, has quickly mushroomed to well over 10,000 members and been labelled a “major new force in direct democracy” by the “Neue Zürcher

Zeitung” newspaper. This is borne out by the fact that it took the organisation – which is not affiliated with any political party – barely three weeks in summer 2021 to secure 190,000 signatures calling for a referendum, and thus to force a fresh popular vote on the further tightening of national Covid legislation.

At the time of printing, three weeks before the vote on the Covid legislation, pollsters were expecting that the majority of the population would back the federal government’s Covid measures, even though Switzerland still has one of the lowest vaccination rates in western Europe, at around 60%.

However, even if the Friends of the Constitution are defeated at the ballot box, the party-political system has been shaken by the group’s recent surge in popularity among right-wingers who believe that the Covid crisis has been used as a pretext for bringing in a freedom-robbing surveillance state. This has been compounded by support from the left, where some people regard Covid measures as an infringement of human rights.

The political geographer Michael Hermann, whose Sotomo research institute has conducted multiple opinion polls on the subject of the coronavirus crisis, stresses that the Friends of the Constitution is attracting a broad spectrum of people from both the right and the left of the SVP. However, the success of this unpredictable movement has also forced the right-wing nationalist SVP to react swiftly: leading figures such as Federal Councillor Ueli Maurer and party pioneer Christoph Blocher have appeared in the media wearing Freiheitstrychler T-shirts, as a nod to protesters against the measures.

This highlights what Michael Hermann has long predicted: the controversy over the Covid measures has suddenly repoliticised critics of the state on the right wing, giving the SVP an unexpected boost, after it had weakened following the 2019 elections. Hermann’s Sotomo institute also carried out a mid-term electoral barometer study in autumn 2021, which showed a trend towards the SVP clawing back its losses. It is well ahead of the SP, with the FDP, Die Mitte (The Centre) and the Greens locked in fierce battle for third place in Switzerland’s political hierarchy. That is unless Covid ramps up the stress on political parties even further.