

## Northern Flank by Göran Haglund

### A Finnish grand coalition

*The mid-March elections are altering Finland's political map, but will policy change?*

Over 20 years of Finnish rule based upon some form of center-left coalition are coming to an end. A grand coalition composed of Finland's two largest parties, the Social-Democratic Party (SDP) and the conservatives, is being negotiated at this moment of writing.

A month of maneuvering by President Mauno Koivisto after the March 15-16 elections defied all predictions, as Finnish politics—notoriously inscrutable—were discreetly turning away from two decades of center-left rule. Rather unlike the drama of Italian government crises, the Finns after World War II have perfected a Nordic, cool-and-silent type of political upheaval.

In Finland, parties come and go, but the President stays. Social Democrat Koivisto, only the third postwar President after Juho Paasikivi (1946-56) and Urho Kekkonen (1956-82), looks forward to his comfortable reelection in early 1988, as polls give him a two-thirds majority. The grand coalition is aimed at excluding Koivisto's chief challenger, Center Party leader Paavo Väyrynen—not because Koivisto's 1988 victory would be in jeopardy, but to secure a Social Democratic order of succession.

Although foreign minister in Social Democratic Premier Kalevi Sorsa's center-left government, Väyrynen was largely kept out of real foreign policy making by the SDP, particularly the management of the overshadowing relations with Moscow. This was coherent with the 1982 transfer of Finland's powerful presidency

from the Center Party's aging Kekkonen to the SDP's Koivisto.

But the SDP lost over 100,000 votes in the elections, and the Center Party grew slightly. While the center-left coalition would still hold a majority of the 200 seats in the parliament, its continuation would imply a revival of the power of the Center Party, and an enhanced position of Väyrynen, maybe even as premier.

Growing from 44 to 53 seats, the conservative Coalition Party failed by only three seats to overtake the SDP as the biggest party. Emerging from 21 years of opposition, the conservatives signaled their desire to enter the government at all costs. Their "natural" partners would be the Center Party and some smaller parties. By conventional parliamentary arithmetic, this would imply a non-socialist majority, again with Väyrynen as the likely premier, "cohabiting" with an SDP President, much as in today's France.

While all parties concerned have assured their faithful adherence to Finland's state doctrine, the postwar "Paasikivi-Kekkonen-line" of appeasement of Moscow, such an arrangement might be viewed as too unorthodox by the Kremlin. After Kekkonen, and the shift from the Center Party to the SDP as the vehicle of state power, the emergence of a non-socialist cabinet would oblige the President to bypass all of his ministers in managing sensitive affairs with the East—or shift power back to the Center Party, and thus Väyrynen.

Both the conservatives and the

Center Party advocated a national unity government among themselves and the SDP, creating an overwhelming majority of well over two-thirds. The President called into question whether such an overkill majority was needed, or even desirable, as the parliament could be reduced to passing laws negotiated over its head by the three big parties. More decisively, the SDP, in such a national unity coalition, would be in a minority vis-à-vis the two non-socialist parties, again with the unwanted Väyrynen as the likely premier.

Conservative leader Ilkka Suominen had recently won the post of speaker of the parliament, in view of traditional rules for forming governments in Finland, which call for the President's assigning the speaker to sound out various political coalitions. Throwing out such rules, Koivisto instead named his associate Esko Rekola to assess "the need and possibilities" of a national unity coalition. Rekola's task was to find that there were no such "need and possibilities," which he did.

Koivisto's next surprise was to assign former conservative leader Harri Holkeri, the Coalition Party's presidential nominee, to sound out a conservative-SDP coalition, and if that were to prove impossible, to opt for a non-socialist coalition.

The leaders of the Coalition Party and the Center Party, Suominen and Väyrynen, thought they had a deal to form a new government, with or without the SDP. Bypassing both, Koivisto moved to have Holkeri, known to favor a coalition with the Social Democrats, negotiate with Sorsa for a conservative-SDP grand coalition. Whether continuing as premier, or moving to the foreign ministry, Sorsa under this formula can keep mediating the President's policy vis-à-vis the Soviets.