

International

Scholz: Safe pair of hands who wants Merkel's job

'Scholzomat' has managed not to make embarrassing mistakes on campaign trail

BERLIN: Nicknamed "Scholzomat" for his robotic speeches, Olaf Scholz, the center-left Social Democrat (SPD) candidate to succeed Angela Merkel, has hardly stood out for his charisma in the run-up to September's election. But unlike his two main rivals, Armin Laschet of Merkel's CDU-CSU alliance and Annalena Baerbock of the Greens, the 63-year-old has also managed not to make embarrassing mistakes on the campaign trail.

As a result, Scholz is now within grasping reach of the chancellery just a month before the election.

At the start of the year, the SPD was trailing so badly in the polls that many had written off the chance that the party—currently the junior partner in a coalition with Merkel's conservatives—would be part of the next government. But the latest surveys have the SPD neck-and-neck with the conservatives, and when it comes to which personality Germans would like to see as their next chancellor, Scholz is streets ahead.

One poll on Tuesday even had the SPD ahead of the conservative bloc for the first time since 2006.

Even if the SPD does not come first in the September 26 vote, Scholz could still end up being chancellor if he is able to form a coalition with other parties.

As finance minister and vice-chancellor under Merkel, Scholz is one of Germany's most influential politicians and the only one of the three candidates who has held a ministerial office. During his time in the post, the man often described as meticulous, confident and fiercely ambitious has cemented his reputation for being fiscally conservative. Despite agreeing to suspend Ger-

many's cherished "debt brake" to stave off the crippling effects of the coronavirus pandemic, he has insisted on a return to the policy by 2023.

"All this is expensive, but doing nothing would have been even more expensive," he insisted at the time. Scholz's cautious approach has at times seen him marginalized within his own workers' party, overlooked in a leadership vote in 2019 in favor of two relatively unknown left-wingers.

But he has got behind the SPD's flagship policies in the election campaign, opposing a reduction in wealth tax promised by the conservatives and backing an increase in the minimum wage.

Despite his tight grip on Germany's finances, he has been known to loosen the purse strings, notably as mayor of Hamburg from 2011 to 2018, when he bailed out the wildly over-budget Elbphilharmonie concert hall. For Scholz, whose motto is "I can only distribute

what I have", the spending was justified by the city-state's healthy finances.

'Not particularly emotional'

Born in the northern city of Osnabrueck, Scholz joined the SPD as a teenager. He flirted with its more leftwing ideals but soon came to prefer a more centrist course. After training as a lawyer specialized in labor issues, Scholz was elected to the national parliament in 1998. He married fellow SPD politician Britta Ernst that same year.

It was during his 2002-2004 stint as the SPD's general secre-



Meticulous and confident



AHLEN, Germany: In this file photo taken on August 13, 2020 SPD Chancellor candidate Olaf Scholz listens during his visit with a citizen dialogue at an old coal mine in Ahlen, western Germany. —AFP

tary that he earned the "robot" moniker for his dry yet tireless defense of the unpopular labor reforms of his idol, then-chancellor Gerhard Schroeder. As labor minister in Merkel's first coalition government from 2007 to 2009, Scholz helped avert mass layoffs during the financial crisis by convincing firms to cut workers' hours with the state topping up their salaries—a policy repeated during the pandemic. —AFP

Merkel, Germany's 'eternal' chancellor, prepares to leave

BERLIN: She was called "the leader of the free world" as authoritarian populists were on the march in Europe and the United States but Angela Merkel is wrapping up a historic 16 years in power with an uncertain legacy at home and abroad. In office so long she was dubbed Germany's "eternal chancellor", Merkel, 67, leaves with her popularity so resilient she would likely have won a record fifth term had she wanted to extend her mandate. Instead, Merkel will pass the baton as the first German chancellor to step down entirely by choice, with a whole generation of voters never knowing another person at the top.

Her supporters say she provided steady, pragmatic leadership through countless global crises as a moderate and unifying figure. Yet critics argue a muddle-through style of leadership, pegged to the broadest possible consensus, lacked the bold vision to prepare Europe and its top economy for the coming decades. What is certain is that she leaves behind a fractured political landscape, with the question of who will govern Germany next wide open just weeks before the September 26 election. Assuming she stays on to hand over power, she will tie or exceed Helmut Kohl's longevity record for a post-war leader, depending on how long the upcoming coalition negotiations drag on.



ESSEN, Germany: This file photo taken on December 6, 2016 shows German Chancellor Angela Merkel gesturing after addressing delegates during her conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party's congress in Essen, western Germany. —AFP

The brainy, unflappable Merkel has served for many in recent years as a welcome counter-balance to the big, brash men of global politics, from Donald Trump to Vladimir Putin. A Pew Research Center poll late last year showed large majorities in most Western countries having "confidence in Merkel to do the right thing regarding world affairs".

However the last days of her tenure have also been marred by what Merkel called the "bitter, dramatic and terrible" return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan—a debacle in which she shares the blame as German troops pull out. A trained quantum chemist raised behind the Iron Curtain, Merkel has long been in sync with her change-averse electorate as a guarantor of stability. —AFP

Scotland drops case on extraditing Catalan separatist

EDINBURGH: A Scottish court yesterday dropped the extradition case of a Catalan separatist politician wanted by Spain for "sedition", saying it did not have jurisdiction. Ponsati, 64, is one of three Catalan members of European Parliament wanted by Spain on allegations of sedition over their role in the failed Catalan independence bid of 2017.

The extradition case of the former Catalan education minister was being heard in Scotland where she previously lived and taught at the University of St Andrews in Scotland. She now lives in Belgium.

The extradition hearing at Edinburgh Sheriff Court ended with Sheriff Nigel Ross saying that Ponsati has indicated she will not move back to Scotland from Belgium.

"The court has, in effect, no jurisdiction in this matter," Ross said. Ponsati is one of three Catalan MEPs wanted by Spain on allegations of sedition over their role in the failed Catalan independence bid of 2017 through a referendum that Madrid ruled was unconstitutional. Ponsati's solicitor Aemer Anwar said after the hearing that "the full case still remains to be heard at the European Court of Justice."

He said that "no rational argument has been presented by Spain which justifies the criminalization of its citizens who wish to peacefully argue for a different form of government, or simply the right to self-determination". The three — also including former regional president Carles Puigdemont and Lluís Puig—were elected as MEPs in 2019, giving them immunity from prosecution. —AFP