

## International

# Fears of hole in EU heart as 'Queen of Europe' departs

## Merkel praised steer Europe through years of turbulence

**BRUSSELS:** Angela Merkel's exit from the stage is sparking fears of a hole at the heart of the European Union during challenging times - but there are also hopes for a wind of change. Tributes have been growing for the German leader - dubbed "Queen of Europe" by some observers after 16 years as chancellor - ahead of elections this weekend to choose a successor. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte praised Merkel's "enormous authority" after helping steer Europe through years of turbulence that included the financial crisis, migrant crisis, Brexit and the coronavirus pandemic.

European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen, who served under Merkel as German defense minister, underscored how important the former physicist's analytical skills had been for unlocking intractable EU negotiations. "She can always put things in the context of the many years in Europe she helped to shape," von der Leyen said. "And often, when we've hit an impasse, she'll throw out an idea and then we're moving again. We'll miss that."

### Pragmatic manager

"Of course, her departure leaves a void," Janis Emmanouilidis of the European Policy Center told AFP. He called the departure of the EU's longest-serving current leader "the end of an era" for the 27-nation bloc. Few will remember Merkel for any visionary speeches on Europe's future. But it has been her much-touted image as a pragmatic manager that has seen her help to maintain unity inside the EU during a period Emmanouilidis dubbed one of

"permanent crisis". He said she had shown "continuity and firmness", qualities that have made her the pre-eminent leader in Europe. "The next chancellor will first have to gain stature before being able to look to replace her in this role." Merkel's steady hand has seen her carve out a positive reputation across much of the continent. In a survey carried out in 12 EU countries by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 41 percent of respondents said they would back Merkel if in a vote for the fictitious role of EU "president".

"Merkel's approach of searching for compromises between competing interests is a major source of Berlin's positive image," the think-tank said. But she has also attracted criticism for her handling of some key challenges. During the eurozone debt crisis of the early 2010s, Merkel was lambasted for the delay in coming to the aid of indebted countries, such as Greece, spurring fears of a collapse of the single currency. She then drew widespread popular ire in Greece for the swingeing conditions imposed on Athens under a bailout.

### Hesitancy

Former European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker hailed Merkel for opening Germany's borders during the 2015 migrant crisis and helping craft a 750 billion-euro rescue plan from the pandemic. But he pushed back at those portraying her as the savior of Europe. "It is the German narrative that would like to present it as if she had been at the origin of all the solutions to these serious crises," Juncker said. "I do not underestimate the role she played,



**BERLIN:** German Chancellor Angela Merkel plays with a handball given to her by the German Handball Federation's president (not in picture) as she received the German national handball team at the Chancellery in Berlin. —AFP

but I am far from overestimating it after having experienced her hesitancy." —AFP

## Germany youths yearn for change

**BERLIN:** For millions of young Germans, Chancellor Angela Merkel is the only leader they have known, a beacon of stability in a world plagued by uncertainties. But as her 16-year tenure comes to end, some say her slowly-slowly approach stymied progress on burning issues such as climate protection and the digital race. Voters under the age of 30 make up 14 percent of the electorate in Germany, which goes to the polls on Sunday. Eager to see change on climate issues, many are shunning her Christian Democrats (CDU) party in favor of the Greens.

Some accuse the old-guard parties - like the CDU or the centre-left Social Democrats - of failing to bring about meaningful change. "She has completely failed on digitalization, the climate crisis has worsened, the gap between rich and poor has widened and she has done nothing about inequality of opportunity in schools," said Christophe Dierckx, a 27-year-old entrepreneur from Frankfurt. He added that Merkel has largely ignored his generation and their future, practicing conservative politics "at its worst".

He's not the only young person to feel sidelined. Merkel's CDU policies are "mostly aimed at older people", Kaan Ogurlu, a 19-year-old Berlin law student, said. A youth-led movement has in recent years made a vocal push for Merkel's government to step up climate protection, protesting on Fridays in school strikes inspired by Swedish activist Greta Thunberg. Young activists have also taken the government to court to force it to improve environmental targets. After a TV debate between the three main candidates to replace Merkel last weekend, just 11 percent of voters aged 18 to 34 picked the CDU's Armin Laschet as the winner, with 52 percent opting for the Greens' Annalena Baerbock. —AFP

## Austerity, far-right, Uyghurs: Merkel's ambivalent legacy

**BERLIN:** Crises have a knack for felling leaders. Not Chancellor Angela Merkel. During 16 years in power, the veteran navigated Germany through the 2008 financial turmoil and ensuing eurozone debt crisis, the 2015 refugee influx and now the coronavirus pandemic. "Merkel has experienced more global crises than Macron, Johnson and Trump added together," noted Zeit weekly, referring to contemporaries in France, Britain and the United States. While largely admired at home and abroad even in the final weeks of her reign, the legacy she leaves behind is marked both by light and shadows.

### Party in crisis

Merkel scraped to a narrow win in 2005 against then-incumbent chancellor Gerhard Schroeder of the Social Democrats, putting her conservative CDU-CSU alliance on the path of power for over a decade. At the zenith of her popularity, Merkel led the conservatives to a thumping win with 41.5 percent of votes in 2013. With her track record, she was able to end a crucial TV election debate that year with the simple closing words "you know me".

But her exit from politics has been marred by a succession crisis in her party. Merkel's initial choices to take over from her, first Ursula von der Leyen and later Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, had to bury their ambitions over various missteps well before the election year began. Her party's current chancellor candidate, Armin Laschet, is lagging behind his Social Democrat rival Olaf Scholz, with the conservative CDU-CSU on course to come in below its worst-ever score of well under 30 percent in Sunday's election.

### Budget dogma

Once dismissed as the sick man of Europe, Germany has cemented its reputation as the bloc's economic engine on Merkel's watch. Unemployment is at record lows - 5.7 percent in July even as the economy rebounds from

the impact of the pandemic. Budget surpluses chalked up from 2012 also allowed the ageing nation to pay down a huge debt mountain, giving it a buffer against the impact of the health emergency. But Germany's fixation with balanced budgets has left a sour taste, particularly among southern Europeans battered by the financial and eurozone debt crises. Merkel appeared to ignore pleas for debt relief when Greece was on the brink of economic collapse, triggering huge demonstrations in the country. While credited with securing huge European bailouts that saved Greece from crashing out of the euro, it was achieved at a heavy social cost including massive job losses. But it was COVID-19 that forced her to make a drastic U-turn on her resistance to mutualising European debt. Instead, Merkel spearheaded the 800-billion-euro (\$950-billion) EU recovery fund, which sees the European Commission raising money by issuing bonds on behalf of all 27 members.

### Climate chancellor?

Merkel made the startling decision to shut Germany's nuclear power plants in the aftermath of the 2011 Fukushima disaster, triggering the 'Energiewende' - the shift to sustainable energy. But the sudden policy shift forced greater reliance on coal energy in the transition period as the country battles to ramp up wind or biomass energy output. Merkel's government has been accused of protecting Germany's vital automobile industry by watering down emissions regulation reforms, and its refusal to advance a 2038 deadline to quit coal energy has also irked green activists. In a humiliating ruling against the government's flagship environmental protection plan, Germany's highest court in April ordered Merkel's coalition to draw up an improved plan. The government subsequently pulled forward targets to slash CO2 emissions by 65 percent by 2030 compared to 1990 levels, from an earlier goal of 55 percent. "When I look at the situation, no one can say that we have done enough" for the environment, admitted Merkel in June.

"Time is pressing. I can understand the impatience of young people." She was lauded by human rights activists in 2015 for keeping Germany's borders open to hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing war in Syria and Iraq. But on China's mass incarceration of Uyghurs in the far western province of Xinjiang, Merkel has been accused of lacking bite. Critics say she is hamstrung by huge economic interests in China. —AFP