

ANALYSIS-Germany's Merkel sows problems with vague promises By Madeline Chambers

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HANOVER, Germany, Dec 4 (Reuters) - Chancellor Angela Merkel may be storing up problems by shelving tough policy choices to woo the political middle ground ahead of an election in 2009.

For now, Merkel is riding high in the opinion polls as Germany's most popular post-war chancellor.

But the prospect of an economic slowdown coupled with a more combative approach from her Social Democrat (SPD) coalition partners could contribute to a more difficult year in 2008 when there are elections in four German states.

These will be a test of the popularity of Merkel and her Christian Democrats (CDU) before the national vote in 2009 and many analysts expect policy-making to be sacrificed increasingly in favour of electioneering.

"Things look good for Merkel now but there are signs it may not stay that way," said Frank Decker, a political analyst at Bonn University.

"The economic situation could well deteriorate, the SPD may not remain so weak in the longer term, and most of all she needs to make sure everyone knows what she stands for."

Merkel tightened her grip at this week's party conference of her Christian Democrats (CDU) and the Protestant leader basked in almost eight minutes of applause from her predominantly Catholic party, whose upper ranks are largely male.

"She has become a lion," said Berlin-based political consultant Richard Schuetze. "She dominates her pride and is respected and feared by the elite of her party."

But while her grip on the CDU is secure, she is finding it less easy to plot a course for her coalition with the SPD, which is shifting to the left to win back its traditional supporters.

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Critics accuse Merkel of failing to take the lead and of avoiding difficult policy decisions that will have to be resolved before the party draws up a 2009 election manifesto.

"This (party) conference is more about covering up the differences within the CDU rather than resolving them and it could be a problem at the next election if it is unclear what Merkel and the CDU really stand for," said Decker.

Most Germans expect two years of campaigning with the coalition partners agreeing on little and bickering over policies such as a minimum wage, childcare benefits and the privatisation of rail operator Deutsche Bahn.

Few experts expect the coalition to fall apart before the election, as neither side wants to lose power, but no one expects much in the way of reforms either.

On Monday Merkel made a pitch to woo centrist SPD voters and sought to portray her coalition partners as reform blockers.

By claiming the "political centre ground" -- a vague concept which is supposed to attract liberal capitalists as well as those buying into the SPD vision of a welfare state -- she risks alienating some in her party, said Schuetze.

"A bit right, a bit left but always in the centre? In the long term that can barely go well. He who says everything in the end says nothing," wrote top-selling Bild newspaper.

Some CDU members already feel let down by Merkel who abandoned some conservative policies, for example on nuclear power and Turkey's relations with the European Union, to form a government with the SPD in 2005.

Some feel Merkel has gone too far by agreeing to SPD demands to reverse some labour reforms introduced by former SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder.

Merkel has rejected a blanket minimum wage, which many in her party say could destroy jobs, but has said she will consider introducing one for those sectors who want one, a stance which angers more business-oriented CDU members.

"We have said we don't want a blanket minimum wage but we have one sector and then another and in the end we aren't far off a blanket minimum wage," CDU member Karl Lauk said on the sidelines of the conference.

There are signs the SPD may be feeding off the feeling of CDU drift although it still lags the conservatives' ratings, also including the Christian Social Union (CSU) of Bavaria, by 8 to 14 points in most polls.

"Come the national election, the SPD will succeed in mobilising its own vote. The CDU should be thinking about that," said Decker. (Reporting by **Madeline Chambers**)

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