

14:34 02Jul08 -Merkel masters German media before 2009 election

By Madeline Chambers

BERLIN, July 2 (Reuters) - A passion for soccer has helped German Chancellor Angela Merkel enhance her image and remain popular with voters the year before a federal election.

Merkel was widely seen punching the air during Germany's matches at the Euro 2008 soccer tournament that ended on Sunday, gave several post-match comments and consoled German players after their defeat in the final.

Political analysts say her ratings are unusually high for a chancellor 15 months before an election, despite criticism by business leaders that her coalition government has failed to deliver much-needed reforms in Europe's biggest economy.

"The accomplished physicist is growing in her zest for her role as leader of the people. She's in the right place at the right time and hits the right note. Germans see her as a winner," media and political consultant Richard Schuetze said.

A Forsa opinion poll showed on Wednesday that 60 percent of those asked wanted Merkel as chancellor compared to just 10 percent who favoured Kurt Beck, leader of the Social Democrats with whom Merkel shares power.

In contrast to Merkel, Beck has faced an onslaught from media deriding him as an unsophisticated, rural politician.

He was seen this week wearing a Roman legionnaire's helmet which barely fitted him. Such images could damage his chances of standing against Merkel next year, political analysts say.

SUBTLE BUT EFFECTIVE

They say Merkel, who was a spokeswoman for the last East German government, has adopted a more subtle approach to the media than French President Nicolas Sarkozy or former Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, who often played up to the cameras.

After taking office in 2005, she initially seemed aloof. Foreign trips and appearances with world leaders created an impression of distance between her and sparring members of her Christian Democratic Union and the ruling coalition.

This strategy put her above the fray in the eyes of voters, political analysts said, although it also sparked criticism from foes who have accused her of failing to stick to her principles.

Merkel, now 53, has since then increasingly shown a more feminine and emotional side. Gerd Langguth, who is her biographer and a political scientist, says this has gone down well with voters and the media.

"I'm not sure she is a true football fan, but if she thinks it is necessary, she will show emotion because she is aware people think she is unemotional," Langguth told Reuters.

Since 2005 she has replaced her pageboy-style haircut with a softer cut and now wears lipstick. She caused a media frenzy this year by appearing with a plunging neckline on a visit to the opera in Norway.

"She needed a long time, as the daughter of a pastor in (former Communist) East Germany, to make it in a male-dominated political environment here but there is no doubt her strategy is clever and she is a true media professional," said Langguth.

While quick to spot a picture opportunity and often strict with camera crews, her guard does occasionally slip.

The weekly Der Spiegel reported last month how Merkel, usually well-spoken, lapsed into a strong east German accent when snapping at a cameraman not to film her from a particular angle.

(Editing by Timothy Heritage)

((madeline.chambers@reuters.com; +49 30 2888 5230; Reuters Messaging: ann.chambers.reuters.net@reuters.com))

Keywords: GERMANY MERKEL/MEDIA