Green Party aims high in regional elections

By Gerrit Wiesmann in Freiburg
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Germany's opposition Green Party used its annual congress in Freiburg this weekend to galvanise its supporters for regional elections next year that could see the youthful movement it challenging the mainstream parties for power

"We've been boring a hole in a big, hard board for thirty years, and I hope we've got through now," said Winfried Kretschmann, who looks set to lead the Greens into an unprecedented showdown with chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats in the Baden-Württemberg state election in March.

Once known for raucous meetings in which hard-left *Fundis* fought pragmatic *Realos*, the party presented itself as even more professional than it was when it was in national government with the Social Democrats from 1998 to 2005.

"It's easy to talk like a radical, but we want responsibility," said co-leader Cem Özdemir, who's idea of a "Green New Deal" is meant to address economic as well as ecological issues.

Polling 20-22 per cent, the party is twice as popular as it was in the past decade and at last autumn's national election – a rival to the Christian Democrats and the opposition Social Democrats, which both hover around 30 per cent.

The Greens have been given a lift by the unpopularity of Ms Merkel's government, which has contentiously extended the lifetime of nuclear power stations, and by the Social Democrats' paralysis after losing national office last year.

But popularity also seems to mirror social change. Environment and nuclear issues have moved from the periphery to being central issues in German society, according to Lothar Probst, a political scientist at Bremen University.

"The middle of society has changed. The bourgeoisie is culturally more liberal, is still economically rational, and has a bad conscience about the environment," he said, noting the party had lured more Social Democrats than Christian Democrats.

In Baden-Württemberg, a Christian Democrat stronghold, a contentious railway project in state capital Stuttgart has helped the Greens to reach 27-32 per cent in regional polls, half a dozen points behind regional Christian Democrats, making a "green-red" coalition with the Social Democrats a possibility.

In Berlin, where state elections are scheduled for September, the Greens are polling 30 per cent, six points clear of the Social Democrats, who have run city hall since 2001.

But the Greens would not be the Greens were they not questioning the sustainability of their rise. "There are bubble elements to our success," said Dieter Salomon, who became the Green's first big-city mayor, in Freiburg, in 2002. "But when the bubble bursts, there'll still be more left than we had before."

Any easing could jeopardise a political revolution in Baden-Württemberg, one that would also call Ms Merkel's chancellorship into question, which is why the Greens are trying to maintain the wave of popularity.

"We're aiming to underpin the trust people place in us with realistic political initiatives," said Alex Bonde, a member of the national parliament who is helping to draught the state-election manifesto.

Rather than just protesting, as in the past, the Greens are underlining their constructive side – calling for a new hunt for a safe nuclear-waste repository as a reaction to pro-nuclear policy, and for more direct democracy as a reaction to the rail protests in Stuttgart.

Chancellor Merkel has gone on the offensive, calling the Greens "the party that's against everything". She reckons the party's popularity would tumble should it lead a regional government faced with tough decisions, as polls in some states in which the Greens are in government suggest.

But, according to Elena Ségalen, a researcher at Göttingen University, "obituaries about the Greens" have been penned before. "So far the party ... has put up with many different and even contradictory debates – and it's managed to collect a lot of experience in government."

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