



By: TA | AP Insight

Merz reshuffles top posts as he tries to counter far-right advance



German Chancellor Friedrich Merz reshuffled top posts on Friday as he tries to boost the fortunes of his deeply unpopular government ahead of regional elections in which a far-right party could get its first state governor.

Merz's presentation of an incomplete set of changes, however, raised questions and risked undermining his effort to generate new momentum.

Merz **took office** less than 15 months ago with pledges to reform and turn around Germany's economy, Europe's biggest, after years of stagnation.

But that economic turnaround has been slow to start. And the middle-of-the-road coalition of Merz's center-right Union bloc and the center-left Social Democrats, two traditional rivals, has yet to persuade voters that it can produce results.

That has resulted in Merz's popularity sinking to rock-bottom levels, while the far-right **Alternative for Germany**, or AfD, has gained support on the back of widespread discontent.

Merz tries to seize an opportunity

Merz took the opportunity to make a series of changes after a senior ally quit as the leader of his bloc's parliamentary group over personal conduct that undermined his credibility. Merz plans to put his chief of staff, Thorsten Frei, in that job.

The German leader said Health Minister Nina Warken will take Frei's place at the chancellery, a post that is key to the smooth functioning of the government. She will be the first woman to take that job.

We are a reform government and want to continue showing that - Friedrich Merz

Another close ally, Carsten Linnemann, the

general secretary of Merz's Christian Democratic Union party, will become health minister.

Merz said there will be further Cabinet changes, but didn't offer details. He said those decisions will take "a few days yet, and perhaps more time."

"The personnel changes follow a clear line," he said. "We want a government that works with great vigor and pleasure and also represents the personal diversity of our society and politics. We are a reform government and want to continue showing that."

Difficult regional elections are ahead

The governing parties face three difficult regional elections in September. In the eastern region of Saxony-Anhalt on Sept. 6, AfD is hopeful of winning a majority that would give it control of a state government for the first time.

After months in which voters were turned off by squabbling in the coalition, Merz's government recently embarked on **big plans** for potentially painful change — including a proposed reform of the creaking pension system that would include raising the retirement age gradually, income tax cuts for low- and middle-income earners and an effort to slash red tape.

"The government has found its rhythm, despite some criticism," Merz declared last week. "We have delivered, and we have recognized the dimension of the tasks we face."

Ally quit over surrogacy

Only days later, though, he faced a new distraction. Jens Spahn quit as leader of the Union's parliamentary group — one of the most powerful positions in the coalition — after it emerged that he and his husband had

used the services of a surrogate mother in the U.S. to have a baby.

Surrogacy isn't allowed in Germany. Merz's party opposes allowing it, a position that it reaffirmed at a convention in February, and Spahn himself had spoken out against it in the past. That prompted accusations of double standards.

Frei will now take Spahn's job, a position he's widely considered better suited to than coordinating the chancellery. Frei was the Union's parliamentary chief whip under Merz when the center-right was in opposition.



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Warken takes his place at the chancellery after shepherding the first of the government's reforms, meant to curb rising costs in the German health insurance system, through parliament earlier this month.

Merz said she has showed that "she can push through reforms against resistance," praised her as a tough negotiator and said that "she is also at home with the security policy issues" that are important at the chancellery.

Linnemann, a conservative who lacks government experience, will take her place at the Health Ministry. Merz said that "we must maintain the course of reform" in health policy and that requires a "steadfast" minister.

Merz took no questions and didn't mention multiple German media reports that he also plans to replace Transport Minister Patrick Schnieder.

That issue remained open Friday afternoon amid reports that a candidate had first accepted the job, then changed his mind, and the uncertainty drew negative headlines.

Merz's coalition last year set up a **huge fund** to underpin an effort to upgrade worn-out transport infrastructure, but frustration remains — for example with the unreliability of the **national railway**.

AfD co-leader Alice Weidel argued that Merz had caused "yet more chaos" with his reshuffle and said in a post on X that the government being preoccupied with itself doesn't do justice to Germany's "many-faceted" problems.

"Germany needs new elections," she wrote. The next national election isn't due until early 2029.