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Sharp Turn To The Right?

The Swiss People's Party's anti-immigration message could help it win big in next week's elections

BY HELENA BACHMANN/GENEVA

In St. Gallen, a conservative provincial town one hour east of Zurich, the right-wing Swiss People's Party (SVP) had its campaign posters — bearing the caricatured features of a black man and the slogan **THE SWISS ARE THE NEGROES OF SWITZERLAND** — all ready to go. But amid accusations of racism, party officials withdrew the posters from their campaign for national parliamentary elections on Oct. 19.

Now the face of another black man casts a mischievous eye from campaign ads in newspapers across the country. **IF MORE AND MORE SWISS FEEL LIKE NEGROES**, the man says with a smile, **THEN PARLIAMENT NEEDS TO GET ITSELF A REAL ONE**. The grinning face belongs to Andrew Katumba, who's the son of asylum seekers from Uganda, a naturalized Swiss citizen and a candidate for parliament. He's running under the banner of **Secondos Plus**, a left-of-center group made up of foreign-born Swiss who promote simplified naturalization and integration of foreigners into Swiss society. "Like it or not, Switzerland is a multicultural country now," Katumba says. "We're here to stay."

Katumba, 32, is right — and not everyone in Switzerland is happy about it. The dramatic increase in the country's foreign-born population is fueling the popularity of the SVP, the furthest to the right of the major parties. Some 20% of Switzerland's population is foreign-born, one of the highest percentages in Europe, and last year more than 26,000 asylum seekers and refugees came to the country — costing the government \$590 million. As it has in the past, the SVP is making immigration (legal and otherwise) a hot-button issue. But this time around the party is breaking out of its traditional elderly, agrarian base to attract younger and more liberal voters — like Pierre-Alain Favre, a 42-year-old computer programmer from Geneva who has always voted for more moderate parties. "Every night I see African drug dealers on the streets and I'm getting sick of it," he says. "I want these people out, so this year I'm voting for the SVP." If the party wins big on Sunday — it currently leads the polls with 25% — Switzerland's placid political culture could be in for a shake-up.

Started in 1971 and led by Christoph Blocher, 63, the head of Swiss

chemicals company EMS-Chemie Holding AG, the SVP has always been staunchly opposed to opening Switzerland's borders to asylum seekers and immigrants. Pre-election opinion polls indicate that this issue preoccupies a large number of Swiss, many of whom also believe that closer European integration will open up the country to more foreigners. The SVP is making the most of the electoral opportunity. "More and more people believe that we can make a positive difference in their lives," says Aliko Panayides, the SVP's deputy secretary general. "There's a growing discontent, and no other party is offering solutions." Last month, SVP president Ueli Maurer offered some solutions at a rally on the mountain of Aggli in central Switzerland. From the 1,650-m summit, between bouts of yodeling and flag waving, he implored about 250 local party delegates to protect their country from refugees and asylum seekers. "Instead of protecting us, politicians and courts show lenience toward these criminals," he said, telling his audience that the vast majority of Switzerland's convicted criminals and drug dealers are foreign. In fact, statistics show the actual number is slightly more than half.

Elsewhere in Europe, populist parties become part of coalition governments that blunt the sharper edges of their policies. But in Switzerland's referendum-based version of direct democracy, the SVP could use a victory as a bully pulpit from which to call for more anti-immigration referendums. "The Swiss system based on grassroots participation is a double-edged sword," says Thomas Held, director of Avenir Suisse, an independent social and economic think tank. "The danger is that the party will overdramatize the issues and frighten the voters into rejecting reforms or adopting restrictive measures, as is the case with the asylum issue."

One of the SVP's top priorities would be to launch a referendum on expelling all refugees and asylum seekers, without the possibility of appeal. Refugees determined to be at risk if returned to their own country would be sent to a safer destination. Another SVP referendum would seek to give local authorities the right to decide whether foreigners living in their areas receive Swiss citizenship, meaning that residents of a given town or village could vote on a candidate's suitability to become Swiss.

The town of Emmen, an industrial suburb of Lucerne, adopted a similar measure three years ago, but it was suspended by local authorities due to widespread criticism after townspeople rejected all the citizenship applications from non-E.U. nationals, mostly people from former Yugoslavia. A strong showing on Sunday could give the SVP more mainstream appeal and help them collect the 100,000 signatures needed to push through these referendums. "Some of the party's methods are grotesque," says Held. "They mobilize the public by creating drama — and they are overdoing it."

The SVP would have to truly dominate the election — winning a majority of both the popular vote and of Switzerland's 26 cantons — to grab a second seat in the seven-member Swiss cabinet. That isn't likely, so the delicate balance that has made Swiss governments so stable for the past 44 years probably won't be upset. "We'll be satisfied to get additional seats in Parliament to boost our voting power," says Panayides. Passing out election leaflets on the rain-soaked streets of Zurich, Secondos Plus candidate Katumba also appears confident. "The Swiss are smart enough not to panic," says Katumba, a product manager for an Internet company. "We

can't go back to the way it used to be 50 years ago." He seems to have persuaded Petra Brunner, 22. "The fact that he is running shows courage and determination," she says. "This is a very liberal town, so I think he has a good chance." Zurich may still be liberal, but what about the rest of Switzerland? The country's self-image may soon be revised.

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