

Commentary

Greenland's Election 2014: A Return to Pragmatism

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Following the resignations of Greenlandic Prime Minister Aleqa Hammond and four other ministers due to allegations of misuse of public funds, an extraordinary election was held on 28 November 2014. Under the new leadership of Kim Kielsen, Hammond's own social-democratic party, Siumut ('Forward') won the highest proportion of votes (34.6%), narrowly beating the nationalist/left-socialist party Inuit Ataqatigiit ('Community of the People') by a 1.1% margin. Both parties won eleven seats in Parliament. In order to secure the minimum of 16 seats needed to hold power in Parliament, Siumut has subsequently entered into coalition with two of Greenland's smaller parties – social-liberal Demokraatit ('Democrat') and conservative Atassut ('Solidarity'). Both share Siumut's stance in favour of economic liberalism.

From this outcome, it is possible to draw some lessons about the Greenlandic political landscape which are often overlooked by international commentators and audiences alike.

First, the Siumut party remains the long-standing, powerful, and dominant force in Greenlandic politics, regardless of how any individual leader, member, or group of members allegedly (mis)conducts themselves from time to time. While support for Siumut did suffer in the wake of the allegations against Hammond, in the end the party still managed to maintain its edge over its rivals, and, with it, the right to form government. This result is more than simply good luck on Siumut's part; at every single election since 1979 bar one, it has been Siumut which has formed government. This long, consistent experience of campaigning, governing and manoeuvring places Siumut in a highly advantageous position, within a political system where other parties split, reform, are born, or die on a quite frequent basis. Even in coalition, Siumut's large size has

ensured it has exercised – and continues to exercise – a pre-eminent influence over the direction and shape of the Greenlandic political scene.

The way in which Siumut achieved its electoral victory highlights a second lesson – namely, the importance of matching the personality, character and background of the leader with the mood of the electorate. This is particularly so in countries of small population size, where the social, personal and family links between ruler and ruled are so entwined. It is no accident that, in the aftermath of Hammond's expenses scandal, a well-regarded, former policeman with a reputation for integrity, honesty and down-to-earth pragmatism was appointed Siumut's acting leader. Kielsen's more modest style stands in stark contrast to Hammond's, with the controversial topics of Greenlandic independence and natural resource exploitation as the leitmotif of her premiership. While we can expect Kielsen's government to remain interested in future drilling and mining opportunities, it is likely that this interest will be counterbalanced by a renewed emphasis on boosting profits from existing industries firmly grounded in Greenland's economic present. Such emphasis is likely to include expanding value-added activities in Greenland's all-important fishing industry, and improving the infrastructure needed to in support of the growing tourism sector. Initiatives addressing other, everyday social issues of concern throughout the electorate – such as housing, education and unemployment – are also likely.

The final lesson to keep in mind is that, like other electorates of small population size, Greenland cannot afford to dispose of its political leaders too quickly, or without serious cause. Since the expenses scandal broke, the funds Hammond allegedly spent on personal costs have been repaid. In June 2015, Hammond was elected to one of two seats in the Danish Parliament reserved for Greenlandic representatives; she received the most personal votes of any of the candidates. At least one political consultancy firm is not willing to rule out a return by Hammond to Greenlandic politics sometime in the future.¹ It may be that if Kielsen succeeds in delivering financial gains in the short-term from Greenland's already-established economic sectors, there might be a real opportunity later on to pursue Hammond's grand visions of the future. For now, however, Greenland remains a country under construction'.²

Notes

1. See Polarisk Group, 'Greenland: 2014 Parliamentary Election Briefing #1' (October 20, 2014), <http://static1.squarespace.com/static/5389998be4b047723f046137/t/544637bce4b076f26051ce1c/1413887932673/POLARISK+Greenland+2014+Election+Brief+%231.pdf>.
2. The quote is from Kim Kielsen. See Noah Molgaard, 'Greenland Election: Eyes on the Possibilities' *The Arctic Journal* (November 25, 2014). <http://arcticjournal.com/politics/1163/eyes-possibilities>.