

German president under fire from own party
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BERLIN, Jan 11 — German President Christian Wulff drew criticism from his own allies on Wednesday for failing to disclose details of a home loan at the centre of a scandal that could cost him his job and hurt Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Wulff has come under intense pressure for trying to stop the top-selling newspaper Bild publishing a story about a private home loan he received from the wife of a wealthy businessman friend in 2008.

The conservative speaker of the lower house of parliament, Norbert Lammert, summed up many lawmakers' frustrations when he told Stern magazine there had been a "massive, wholesale loss of confidence" in the office of the president.

Wulff has rejected calls for his resignation from the media and opposition lawmakers but has been backed by Merkel, who wants to avoid a major distraction as she tries to focus on the euro zone crisis.

In an effort to defuse the scandal, the president made a contrite television appearance last week to admit making a "grave mistake" in calling the Bild editor.

Wulff said he would publish on the Internet 400 questions and answers on the loan. But his lawyers backtracked, and have instead released a summary of his position.

One of Merkel's closest allies - Peter Altmaier, the conservatives' chief whip in the lower house - tweeted: "I wish that Christian would keep his lawyers on a short leash and put the questions/answers on the Internet."

Wulff, who was conservative premier of Lower Saxony when he agreed the loan, has also refused to agree to the publication of a voicemail message left for the Bild editor.

According to the German media, he threatened "war" in the message if the story were published.

Germans take the largely ceremonial office of president seriously. A president is viewed as a moral compass for the nation who should uphold values, such as press freedom, that are enshrined in the constitution.

Opposition parties argue the scandal reflects badly on Merkel, who pushed for Wulff's election as president just 18 months ago against a popular opposition candidate.

However, a poll by the Forsa institute for Stern put the conservative camp up 1 percentage point at 36 per cent.

"People are not reproaching Merkel. They are simply judging the behaviour of the president," said Forsa chief Manfred Guellner, adding that most Germans do not view the

president as a party figure. — Reuters

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