

Polish parliamentary elections: record abstentions and swing to right

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Poland's recent parliamentary elections have resulted in a thundering rejection of the entire Polish political establishment. Scarcely 40.5 percent of the country's 28 million voters took part, constituting the lowest turnout in a Polish national election since the collapse of the Eastern Bloc in 1989.

Less than 5 percent of the electorate voted for the ruling post-Stalinist Democratic Left Alliance (SLD)—a slide from 41 percent in the 2001 parliamentary election to 11.3 percent in this year's poll. A survey showed that only 3 percent of Poland's young voters supported the SLD.

The extreme nationalist law-and-order party, Law and Justice (PiS), was the strongest contender with 27 percent (9.5 percent in 2001). This represents support from hardly more than one registered voter in ten, although the party will occupy 155 of the 460 seats in the Sejm, the Polish parliament. The pre-election favourite, the radical neo-liberal Citizens' Platform (PO), emerged as the second strongest grouping and the PiS's most likely coalition partner with 24.1 percent (12.7 percent in 2001).

Both the right-wing populist rural party, Samoobrona, and the clerical-nationalist League of the Polish Family (LPR) were able to slightly improve their results with 11.4 percent (10.2 percent in 2001) and 8 percent (7.9 percent in 2001) respectively. A year ago, surveys had forecast far greater support for both these parties. Neither the SLD split-off party, Social Democracy of Poland (SdPL), nor the new Democratic Party (PD) attained the 5 percent threshold required for seats in parliament. The SLD's former coalition partner, the PSL, which emerged from the bloc of farmers, won just 7 percent (9 percent in 2001).

The PiS and PO, with 48 and 35 seats respectively, will occupy 83 of the 100 seats in the Polish upper house, the Senate. Members of the Senate are elected by direct vote in the various regions, entailing an over-proportional representation of the strongest parties in the upper house. Nevertheless, a majority of 83 members of parliament is unusually high. Until now the SLD together with the Union of Labour (UP) held 75 seats.

In view of the record abstention rate, the right wing's success in the election can hardly be attributed to its popularity. Rather, its victory is the result of the complete discrediting of the current government. The SLD—the political home of the 10-year incumbent President Aleksander Kwasniewski—lost all popular support owing to its right-wing policies of social cutbacks and privatisation.

Since coming to power in September 2001, the Left Alliance

(SLD) had done everything possible to advance the interests of a corrupt elite at the expense of the Polish people. The restructuring of the agricultural sector and the privatisation of state-owned enterprises—both of which were prerequisites for entry into the European Union—led to an official unemployment rate of almost 20 percent. In wake of the so-called Hausner Plan in recent years, the government continued to reduce its already scant provision for health insurance and social benefits. Millions of families now struggle for mere survival.

Under such conditions, it is no wonder that the SLD, involved as it was in numerous corruption scandals, was unable to win voters to its program. Prior to the vote the PiS had increasingly played the social card, promising to implement certain welfare measures such as renovation of the dilapidated health service. Election observers believe this tactic gave the PiS its lead over the PO.

The election results do not merely expose a sweeping rejection of the current government's policies. They also point to the population's entrenched hostility towards the political elite as a whole. The voting out of the SLD was only the latest in a series of crushing defeats suffered by every Polish governing alliance since 1989.

Between 1989 and 1993, no less than five different governments with origins in the Solidarity movement came and went. In 1993, the electoral alliance SLD—at the time dominated by the former official Stalinist party—was able to claim victory in a poll involving about 52 percent of the electorate. After this alliance had produced three prime ministers, right-wing forces grouped around Elect Solidarity (AWS) and the Freedom Union (UW) won the election in 1997. Voter turnout, however, had fallen to 48 percent.

Having transformed itself into a party with the support of the former OPZZ state trade union in 2001, the SLD won 41 percent of the votes in a turnout of only 46 percent and was able to form the new government. The AWS was no longer represented in parliament, its place being filled by the PO and PiS.

Each of these governments—like the SLD today—completely discredited itself in the eyes of the population owing to policies involving social cuts, privatisation and nepotism. With each new change of government, it became increasingly obvious to the people that nothing was to be achieved by participating in elections.

In view of the 40.5 percent turnout and invalid votes amounting to a further 3.6 percent, it is no longer possible to speak of any sort of democracy prevailing in Poland. Almost two-thirds of the

population registered its disapproval of all the political parties. Right-wing forces won only because there was no political alternative.

Nevertheless, the Polish people are now confronted with a government that is intent on pushing through further welfare cuts, privatisations and tax breaks for the rich. A coalition between the PiS and the PO under the leadership of the PiS is considered inevitable. Only concrete plans and allotting of posts have yet to be decided.

On September 27, the PiS's chairman and leading candidate, Jaroslav Kaczynski, announced that he would not be standing for prime minister. Instead, he nominated the relatively unknown Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz for the office.

The 46 year-old Marcinkiewicz was deputy minister for education from 1992 to 1993, and headed the advisory council in the AWS government led by Jerzy Buzek from 1997 to 2001. According to the Austrian publication *Tagblatt*, his period in office at this time was notable for alleged nepotism. His last post was as chairman of the Sejm's privatisation commission. The PO leadership has accepted Kaczynski's recommendation and has invited Marcinkiewicz to participate in the first round of coalition negotiations.

Marcinkiewicz's nomination is an obvious political manoeuvre on the part of Kaczynski. He wants to avoid a situation in which his own assumption of governmental leadership would impair the chances of his twin-brother, Lech Kaczynski, in the coming presidential elections. Surveys indicate that the great majority of the Polish population would object to both posts being occupied by the brothers. Donald Tusk, the PO candidate, would certainly win the presidential election if Jaroslav Kaczynski took over as prime minister.

Kaczynski has deliberately put Marcinkiewicz forward as a loyal follower from the lower ranks in order to continue his manipulation of proceedings from behind the scenes. The PiS remains firmly in the hands of the Kaczynski brothers, who stand on the extreme right-wing of the political spectrum. As attorney general between 2000 and 2001, Lech Kaczynski toughened numerous laws, distinguishing himself as a law-and-order man.

As he himself admits, he has been waging a cultural war against "liberal currents from the West" in his post of mayor of Warsaw since 2002. In June he offered flimsy excuses for banning a demonstration by homosexuals in Warsaw, while permitting a gathering of neo-Nazis "as a normal event." The homosexuals decided to assemble anyway and were brutally attacked by the neo-Nazis.

Kaczynski later criticised the police for protecting the unauthorised demonstration and implied there was a national conspiracy in the air. The return of the death penalty, abolished after the Stalinist era, is a central feature of the PiS's political programme. In its election campaign, the party promised to build up the Fourth Republic so that socialism could finally be overcome.

A strong PiS state is the party's answer to the deep social tensions within Polish society. It is prepared to implement authoritarian rule to force through further cuts and maintain social divisions within the country.

The PO will deliver a corresponding economic programme. It announced in the election campaign its intention to introduce a uniform tax rate of 15 percent. Such a flat tax would mean enormous tax gifts for the richest sectors of society and would cause a huge budgetary deficit. At the same time, the last state-owned businesses are to be privatised, entailing a steep rise in unemployment.

Both of the future governing parties are extremely nationalist and make continual use of anti-German and anti-Russian slogans. In May this year, Jaroslav Kaczynski declared to the German newspaper *taz*: "We want to ensure that we are once again accepted as one of the great nations of Europe. It is high-time we assumed equal footing." In the same interview, he refrained from ruling out demands for reparations from Germany for damages suffered in the Second World War.

At the beginning of this year, the PiS and the PO demanded that Poland's President Aleksander Kwasniewski boycott Moscow's celebrations of the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the war. They insisted that the invasion of the Red Army did not mean liberation for the Poles. At the climax of the diplomatic tussle between White Russia and Poland over the Polish minority last summer, PO presidential candidate Tusk travelled to Minsk at the beginning of August and announced that he would be promoting Poland's interests much more aggressively in the event of an election victory.

Although the overwhelming majority of Poles reject Poland's participation in the war in Iraq, both Tusk and Lech Kaczynski appeared in a television broadcast on September 26 to confirm their total support for the military occupation. They also applauded the departing president Kwasniewski for his solid support of Ukraine's Orange Revolution, which had brought into power a government favourably disposed to US interests.

The new Polish government will intensify cooperation with the US and take a more aggressive stance against the European Union—and particularly Germany. Jaroslav Kaczynski has already made it known that he wants "at all costs" to obstruct the planned German-Russian gas pipeline through the Baltic Sea. Such policies will sharpen internal European conflicts even further. Prime Minister Leszek Miller's notorious rhetorical bombast, which helped sabotage negotiations on the EC constitution at the end of 2003, stemmed from the pen of Jan Rokita, the PO's leading candidate.



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