Poland: Lech Kaczynski elected president in low voter turnout

Marius Heuser
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Lech Kaczynski of the nationalist Law and Justice (PiS) party overcame his rival, Donald Tusk of the right-wing Civic Platform (CP), in the final ballot for presidential elections held October 23 in Poland. Kaczynski received 54 percent of the vote and thereby becomes the new president of Poland. Voter participation stood at 51 percent, meaning that the winning candidate in effect had support from only a quarter of the electorate.

This latest ballot was necessary after both candidates failed to win an absolute majority in the first ballot held two weeks ago. Under conditions where the so-called left parties, the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) and Polish Social Democracy (SdPL), had thoroughly discredited themselves by implementing welfare cuts, and following numerous corruption affairs, the two right-wing candidates were able to dominate the election with 36.3 percent (Tusk) and 33.1 percent (Kaczynski) of the vote respectively.

During the past two weeks the country witnessed a fierce election campaign between two politicians whose policies in fact differ only insignificantly from one another. Their two parties will form a coalition in the next government. Both candidates stem from the right wing of the Solidarity trade union movement; both are demanding tax cuts for the rich and advocate a strong state based on religious values. Both Tusk and Kaczynski are promoting a more aggressive foreign policy towards Germany and Russia and favor closer relations with the US.

In numerous television debates, appearances and interviews both candidates endeavored to hide their "political friendship" (Tusk) and were supported by the large majority of domestic and international media outlets, which painted a picture of a neo-liberal, but internationally and socially oriented Tusk, and a nationalist and authoritarian Kaczynski. While the latter advocated a strong state, demands the reintroduction of the death penalty and stressed his distance from Germany, Tusk placed economic liberalism in the foreground.

In the second ballot Tusk was supported by the former governing party SLD, which won just 11.3 percent of the vote in recent parliamentary elections, and by the candidate of the SdPL, Marek Borowski, who received 10 percent of the vote in the first ballot. The outgoing president Alexander Kwasniewski also made clear that he was backing Tusk. By contrast, Kaczynski was able to mobilize right-wing forces in his support. Both the right-wing populist farmers' leader Andrei Lepper and the right-wing extremist and anti-Semitic League of the Polish Family (LPR) officially supported Kaczynski, who was formerly mayor of Warsaw.

While Kaczynski, who says all he knows from the neighboring country of Germany is the airport in Frankfurt, is undoubtedly the most narrow-minded of the pair, Tusk and Kaczynski nevertheless share the same program. Tusk also voted in parliament for the reintroduction of the death penalty and for wartime reparations to be paid by Germany. At the same time, Kaczynski's demand for a two-stage income tax rate of 18 and 32 percent and Tusk's proposal for a flat tax are both aimed at providing tax rewards for the rich.

The opinions of Tusk and Kaczynski complement one another in a variety of crucial areas. While Tusk prioritizes the necessity for budget cuts, handouts for the rich and the further privatization of state enterprises, Kaczynski declares how the same policies can be implemented against a hostile population. He extols the nation state and the Church and calls for the curtailment of basic democratic rights.

Kaczynski's victory in the election is closely bound up with the social demagogy he employed especially toward the end of the election campaign. "For us it is not just the rich who count," he told his opponent during a television duel. In this manner Kaczynski was able to gain support from more oppressed social layers in the poor eastern sector of Poland and those living in the countryside, while Tusk was able to win a hearing among university graduates and in the cities.

Approximately half of the electorate, however, thumbed their noses at both candidates and stayed away from the polls. Over the past 15 years the Polish people have painfully experienced how right-wing and left-wing governments have taken turns in cutting back welfare

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protections, denationalizing state-owned enterprises and restructuring the agricultural sector.

The predecessor organizations of the CP and PiS, the Election Action Solidarity (AWS) and the Freedom Union (UW), formed the government from 1997 to 2001 and have been punished by the electorate ever since. Since 1989 one government after the other has been voted out of office, while voter participation has continually declined.

The overwhelming majority of Poles have turned their backs on official politics. When one considers that the wining candidate won support from just one sixth of the total electorate in the first round and a quarter of the electorate in the second ballot, one can hardly speak of a democratically legitimate president.

The same applies to the parliament elected on September 25. With nearly 60 percent of voters abstaining the PiS won 27 percent and the CP 24.1 percent, amounting together to 288 of the total of 460 seats in the Polish parliament (Sejm). The designate prime minister of the PiS, Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz, has announced that both parliamentary groups will form a coalition government by the end of the month.

Currently the parties are negotiating what cuts are to be made in the budget. The Civic Platform is demanding savings of 14 billion zloty (€3.6 billion). In order to implement the cuts the government and president will not shrink from authoritarian forms of the rule, due to their lack of legitimacy and the fact that they represent the interests of a tiny layer of society.

The new president Lech Kaczynski belongs to the most right-wing and reactionary elements in Polish politics. In 1977 he joined the Committee for the Defense of the Workers (KOR) and since then has been active in the right wing of the oppositional trade union movement. Together with Lech Walesa he played an important role in subordinating the Solidarity movement to the Catholic Church. In 1989 he was a member of the round table, which organized the restoration of capitalism in Poland with all of its subsequent disastrous social consequences.

After falling out with Walesa, Kaczynski withdrew initially from politics but returned to take over the post of minister of justice in the AWS government between 2000 and 2001. In his short term in office he inaugurated a number of measures aimed at developing his profile as a law-and-order man. In November 2002 he was elected mayor of Warsaw.

In this office he has already made clear where he stands and what he thinks of democratic rights: in June Kaczynski banned a homosexual parade in Warsaw while permitting neo-Nazis to hold a counterdemonstration. The homosexuals defied the ban, only to be brutally attacked by the neo-Nazis. Afterwards Kaczynski criticized the police because they had protected the unregistered demonstration of homosexuals from the assault by fascists.

Recently, Kaczynski demanded that the homeless in Warsaw should he transported to container slums situated at the edge of the city, so they would no longer disturb the city center. In the election campaign Kaczynski explained that he wants to tighten up criminal law and strengthen the powers of the president. His goal is to move towards a “Fourth Republic,” cleansed of all socialist influences. He is also striving to increase the rights of the president over parliament and the government with an appropriate constitutional amendment and the introduction of an “ethical code.”

Kaczynski stands for a nationalist foreign policy and a transatlantic alliance. Recently he announced that his first state visit will be to the US: “This is our most important strategic partner.” He also wants to pursue Polish interests more aggressively against Germany and Russia. During his period as Warsaw’s mayor he put forward a calculation of over €30 billion for damage caused to Warsaw by Germany in the Second World War.

With Lech Kaczynski as president, the PiS, which is led by Kaczynski’s twin brother Jaroslaw, now holds the two most important public offices. The future prime minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz is considered to be a close trusted friend of the Kaczynski family. Political power in Poland is concentrated in a few hands.

Kaczynski’s victory also opens up further coalition possibilities for the PiS. Together with the right-wing extremist LPR and Samoobrona it would also have a parliamentary majority. At the first meeting of the new Sejm the PiS flexed its muscles and, together with the two right-wing parties, prevented the election of a candidate for the post of parliamentary president proposed by the Civic Platform.

Even if a coalition of the PiS with the ultra-right is improbable at present, it remains an option during the entire legislative period. Polish workers face violent attacks on their democratic and social rights.

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