

Right-wing parties dominate in run-up to Polish elections

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Polish Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski has called fresh elections for October 21 after only two years in office. His twin brother, President Lech Kaczynski, and Donald Tusk, the leader of the opposition Civic Platform (PO), had reached an agreement on this step just prior to the announcement. Now, deputies must vote by a two-thirds majority to dissolve the Sejm (parliament). If this does not happen, the prime minister has announced he will resign.

The early elections are the result of a series of government crises that have marked the Kaczynski cabinet from the beginning. In September 2005, the Kaczynski brothers and their Law and Justice Party (PiS) were only able to win the election because a majority of the population had rejected the alternative parties and Polish official politics in general.

Since the re-introduction of capitalism into Poland nearly two decades ago, the political system has been in constant decline, with a severe erosion of democratic forms. All economic and political decisions are taken by a small privileged layer that emerged from the former Stalinist state party PZPR (Polish United Workers Party), which then established the so-called “Democratic Left Alliance” (SLD), or from leading elements of the Solidarity trade union.

Poland has been governed by the representatives of the same privileged minority that appropriated the former state-owned assets, accumulating fantastic wealth. Faced with increasing popular discontent, this privileged political caste has constantly sought to regroup itself in various constellations. Not a single Polish government has managed to survive a complete legislative period, with no fewer than 13 heads of government sitting in the Sejm since the reintroduction of capitalism 18 years ago.

Popular support for the entire political system has continued to decline, with only 40 percent of the electorate voting in the elections two years ago. The Kaczynskis’ PiS received just 27 percent of the votes cast at that time, meaning they had the support of just 1 in 10 registered voters.

However, that did not prevent the two brothers from posing as “Poland’s saviours.” Their election campaign used a mixture of extreme nationalism and social demagogery to mobilise the most backward elements in Polish society, and they were able to rely on the political bankruptcy of the preceding government under the SLD, which had become completely discredited.

In their first eight months, the Kaczynskis tried to lead the country with a minority government. Toward the end of this period, they increasingly relied for support on two small, right-wing extremist parties—Samoobrona (Self-defence) and the League of Polish Families (LPR)—with which they finally formed the existing coalition that has now collapsed.

From the outset, the Kaczynskis presented their rule as a broom that would sweep away corruption and herald a “moral revolution.” They linked their nationalist agitation to promises of social improvements such as universal health provisions or support for poor families. They proclaimed the formation of a “fourth republic,” in which there would relentlessly settle accounts with the heritage of Stalinism and corruption.

But the result was the very opposite. The social crisis has continued to

intensify, while elementary democratic rights have diminished. “Since [the fall of Stalinism in] 1989, no other Polish politician has caused such great damage to the reputation of the Polish legal system as the doctor of jurisprudence Jaroslaw Kaczynski, who gave his party the fine name of ‘Law and Justice,’ ” writes Thomas Urban, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*’s Warsaw correspondent.

Originally, the PiS was set to form a coalition with the neo-liberal Civic Platform (PO), reviving the Solidarnosc Electoral Pact (AWS) from which both parties had emerged. The political dial would then have been turned full circle again—as in 1989 to 1993 and 1997 to 2000—with the old Solidarnosc leaders once more in power. The increasing instability of the situation, however, meant that the Kaczynskis decided to change the ground rules and set about establishing authoritarian forms of rule with the help of right-wing extremist parties.

But in bringing the LPR, and in particular Samoobrona, into government, the Kaczynskis were relying on extremely unstable elements. While the LPR had previously been known for reactionary and absurd initiatives, such as proclaiming Jesus Christ the King of Poland, Samoobrona had established itself primarily by leading farmers’ protests.

In order to impose discipline on their coalition partners, the PiS strove to undermine them by adopting their own nationalist and ultra-conservative positions. At the same time, the Kaczynskis systematically strengthened their control over the state apparatus.

The popularity of the coalition constantly declined, with the Kaczynskis failing to honour a single one of their pre-election promises. One of their first official acts was to implement the austerity budget of the preceding government, trying to cover their tracks through a purely cosmetic measure introducing child benefits. Countless public sector workers were thrown into poverty, and the Kaczynskis’ fight against “corruption” has become a fight for their own political interests, employing the methods of the mafia.

Tensions within the coalition grew as the government increasingly faced workers’ protests.

Several months ago, tens of thousands of hospital workers demonstrated and took strike action. The protests encountered support from broad social layers. At the same time, railway workers, teachers and miners announced strikes and protests in support of their pay demands. Faced with an increasingly precarious economic situation, they were seeking a living wage to provide for their families.

With an eye on poor poll results, the leader of Samoobrona, Andrzej Lepper, had expressed his support for the demonstrating nurses. But the Polish elite was not prepared to grant any concessions, particularly since joining the single European currency—the euro—depends on Poland lowering its budget deficit. The Kaczynskis decided to discipline their coalition partners once and for all or call fresh elections.

To this end, they deployed the Central Anticorruption Bureau (Centralne Biuro Antykorupcyjne—CBA), an elite investigation agency under Prime Minister Kaczynski’s control, against their coalition partners. Two CBA

officials posed as prospective customers interested in using agricultural land for speculative development and offered civil servants from Lepper's agricultural ministry almost 1 million euros to obtain the minister's signature on the deal. Although the civil servants agreed, the planned deal did not materialise. Lepper did not sign the paperwork on the agreed day, and the messenger who was supposed to bring the money failed to show up. Whether the agriculture minister had been informed about the deal or whether the civil servants wanted to pocket the proceeds without his knowledge still remains unclear, even after the CBA searched the ministry.

Nevertheless, Kaczynski immediately sacked his agriculture minister. Samoobrona and the LPR did not immediately quit the coalition, as they were too fearful of fresh elections. Despite the dismissal of its leader, Samoobrona stayed in office and agreed with the LPR to continue the coalition. Lepper justified this self-humiliation with the ridiculous sentence: "One thing stands above one's own ambition and private interests, and that is our Poland."

This did not satisfy the Kaczynskis, and they demanded their coalition partners relinquish their political independence and pledge absolute obedience to the PiS. But for the smaller parties this was a step too far, and they left the coalition.

Even if current polls put the opposition PO at 35 percent, clearly leading the PiS's 25 percent, the election results are by no means certain. The PiS is utilising the state apparatus and its control of a large section of the media to push the outcome of the elections in its own favour.

Through various laws and regulations, the Kaczynskis have systematically extended their control over important parts of the state apparatus and the media. One of the first official acts of the PiS government was to change the broadcasting law, giving them direct access to the state television and radio channels. The brothers' crusade found its preliminary high point in the creation of the CBA, which they then used against Lepper.

The CBA unites the authorities of the police, secret service and state attorneys, and its powers can be compared to those of the former Stalinist secret police. The 500-strong body is equipped with the most modern technology in order to spy on, bug and then arrest anyone deemed suspicious—without any judicial oversight.

The CBA officials are authorised to obtain and store personal data from banks, telephone companies and airlines—regardless of whether an individual is then charged with a crime or not. The information covered includes extremely personal information, such as an individual's health, personal relations and religion. In April of this year, the former building minister, Barbara Blida (SLD), committed suicide during an aggressive search of her apartment by the CBA. She had been accused of bribery.

Arrests by CBA officials clad entirely in black are often accompanied by television cameras and the media to supposedly show the fight against corruption. In reality, the CBA is a political instrument used to intimidate and eliminate those regarded as troublesome in science, politics and the media. The head of the CBA can be dismissed or appointed at any time by the prime minister.

Prime Minister Kaczynski has also made use of this power in the midst of the cabinet crisis. On August 9, he dismissed the previous CBA chief Zbigniew Rau and replaced him with one of his closest confidantes. Interior Minister Janusz Kaczmarek was also forced to vacate his post. Both were accused of tipping off Lepper about the investigations being launched against him. The CBA was immediately ordered to search Kaczmarek's house, without finding anything incriminating.

On August 13, Kaczynski then officially dismissed the ministers of the LPR and Samoobrona and replaced them with fellow PiS members and political intimates. Those sacked included the LPR chairman and education minister Roman Giertych, Rafal Wiechecki (LPR) responsible for maritime trade, as well as labour minister Anna Kalata and building

minister Andrzej Aumiller of Samoobrona. Most of the new ministers have stressed the need for continuity in their departments. The new education minister, Ryszard Legutko, even announced he was maintaining his predecessor's extremely unpopular laws introducing school uniforms and the reactionary education reforms.

Above all, the Kaczynskis are mainly concerned with bringing the state apparatus, strengthened by numerous laws they have passed, under their control just before the elections. They are deploying the CBA, an allegedly "cleaned-up" secret service, and the state media as directly as possible against their political opponents.

Lepper has already warned that the prime minister has collected extensive secret service material concerning the leaders of the PO, Samoobrona and the LPR that he intends to use in the election campaign. The PiS has already booked numerous advertising spots on television and radio. In view of previous developments, the direct manipulation of the elections or even their suspension cannot be excluded.

Popular opposition to the government is growing. Nevertheless, the outcome of the election is still an open question, not only because the PiS government is using the CBA and secret service against its adversaries, but also because the opposition parties provide nothing in the way of a political alternative to the hated Kaczynski twins.

In the last elections, the PO, the largest opposition party, and its presidential candidate, Donald Tusk, engaged in a competition with the PiS as to who had the most right-wing positions. Like Lech Kaczynski, Tusk had also held up the former Polish dictator and anti-communist Jozef Pilsudski as a model. However, the PO proposes more right-wing neo-liberal policies and calls for the rapid privatisation and break-up of the welfare state. In foreign policy, it is regarded as less Euro-sceptic, but also seeks a strong alliance with the US and supports combat missions by Polish soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Like Samoobrona and the LPR, who have united into the "League and Samoobrona" (LiS) in order to increase their chances of clearing the 5 percent hurdle needed for parliamentary representation, the SLD is running in an alliance—called "Lefts and Democrats"—with the recently formed Democratic Party. The SLD's record when in government has generated popular hostility, and it only received 11.3 percent of the vote in the last elections. Finally, there is the former Farmers Alliance Party (PSL), which has formed a coalition with practically every other party at some time or other.

Under these conditions, the announcement of fresh elections is a farce. A majority of the Polish population sees no possibility of opposing the growing attacks on social and democratic rights within the context of the existing political framework. The building of an independent party that opposes the hysterical nationalism of official politics and that represents the interests of working people on the basis of an international socialist programme is a pressing necessity.



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