

Polish elections: a clear rebuff to the Kaczynskis

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Voters delivered a clear rebuff to the right-wing government of Jaroslaw Kaczynski in the Polish parliamentary elections held Sunday, October 21. His party, Law and Justice (PiS), won 32.2 percent of the vote, an increase of 5.2 percent compared to the last parliamentary elections two years ago. But both of his former coalition partners, the right-wing populist farmer's party Samoobrona, with 1.5 percent, and the extreme right-wing League of Polish Families (LPR), with 1.3 percent, failed to gain enough votes to re-enter the Sejm (parliament). In all, the governing camp lost a total of 11.4 percent of the vote compared to 2005.

In particular, the right-wing free-market Citizens' Platform (PO) was able to profit from the slump in support for the governing parties. It achieved a total of 41.4 percent, an increase of 17.3 percent compared to 2005. The alliance Lefts and Democrats (LiD) increased its share by 1.9 percent to win 13.2 percent of the vote. In 2005, the biggest party of this newly formed alliance—the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), successor to the Polish Stalinist ruling party—suffered a devastating defeat. The rural-based Polish People's Party (PSL)—the only party to be represented in every post-Stalinist government—was also able to improve its share of the vote by 1.9 percent to a total of 8.9 percent.

The 55 percent election turnout was the highest since 1991. In particular, young people and workers used the ballot box to kick out a widely despised government. The PiS notched up its worst results among young Poles and in the large cities. On the weekend of the vote, young Poles unleashed an avalanche of SMS messages with the simple request: "Strip granny of her passport"—a code phrase aimed at preventing the re-election of the Kaczynskis.

The PO has announced its readiness to enter a coalition with the PSL, which has been part of nearly every ruling coalition since 1989 but had just as frequently quit or been forced out of government. In addition, neither the PO nor PSL has the 60 percent majority necessary to override the veto of the president—Lech Kaczynski, the twin brother of Jaroslaw—who was elected in 2005 in a separate vote. The PO therefore would either have to enter an alliance with the PiS—an alternative that was discussed quite openly in the run-up to the election—or work together with the ex-Stalinists of LiD in order to outvote the president.

The clear election result is significant in particular with regard to the aggressive election campaign of the PiS, which had little to do with established democratic practices. From the very beginning of the campaign, the government employed the police, secret services

and media against its rivals.

In July of this year, Prime Minister Kaczynski had organised a sting operation with the help of his creation, the Central Anticorruption Bureau (Centralne Biuro Antykorupcyjne—CBA), to get rid of his vice prime minister and secretary of agriculture, Andrzej Lepper, as well as Samoobrona and the LPR. He then called new elections and formed a minority cabinet from loyalists within the ruling camp, which conducted the affairs of state during the election campaign.

The CBA is an institution with broad police and intelligence powers, which is directly subordinate to the minister of justice. It has the power to easily assemble information on all Polish citizens from official authorities, telephone and insurance companies and store such data for an unlimited period. It has also resorted to broad surveillance operations and aggressive house searches.

Following unease in the ranks of his own party following the expulsion of Lepper, Kaczynski abruptly dismissed the head of the CBA, Zbigniew Rau, and Interior Minister Janusz Kaczmarek. Both were accused of attempting to prevent the intelligence operation against Lepper. The CBA was immediately assigned to search Kaczmarek's house and arrest him. The arrest was filmed and shown on television. Shortly afterwards, the interior minister was released because of lack of evidence against him.

In the election campaign, Kaczynski turned his sights on the PO. Just before the election, the Polish public television stations TVP 1 and 2 broadcast in primetime a CBA press conference in which evidence was presented to show former PO deputy Beata Sawicka receiving a bribe. Once again, this "bribery affair" had been cooked up by the CBA. Apparently, the PiS had worked closely with the CBA to come up with a corruption scandal that could then be made public just before the election.

The close cooperation between national television and the government was cemented in one of the first official initiatives of the PiS government: a change in the broadcasting law that gave the government sweeping control of the media. The TVP president is a close friend of the Kaczynskis and organised a media campaign for the CBA, which was presented as a "battler against corruption."

Based on the incestuous relations between the Polish media and state, it is quite possible that the numerous opinion polls of recent weeks, which repeatedly indicated majority support for the PiS, were in fact manipulated by the government.

The use of the state apparatus against any opposition, however, was not sufficient to shield the government from a broad-based

mood of rejection. The government's attempt to exploit religion and propagate crude nationalism in an alliance with right-wing extremists and impose authoritarian forms of rule backfired and led to a repudiation of the PiS at the ballot box.

The social basis of the PiS has always been small. In its election victory two years ago, only one tenth of the electorate had actually backed the party. But due to the high rate of abstention, this was sufficient for the party to form a right-wing majority in parliament. Many voters were enraged at the corrupt and neo-liberal policies of the former post-Stalinist SLD government and turned their backs on the 2005 election, seeing no alternative. Since 1989, not a single Polish government has been re-elected.

The PiS draws its support mainly from backward rural circles in the underdeveloped east of the country and a layer of newly rich social climbers, who saw their own career chances blocked by the old Stalinist regime. Despite its social demagoguery during the election campaign in 2005, the Kaczynskis failed to implement any of their promises. Instead, the government adopted the budget policies of the previous government, making just a few cosmetic changes.

In addition to the cabinet crisis, which triggered the latest election, doctors and nurses took strike action and protested against the government for weeks. The population overwhelmingly supported their struggle. Railway workers and miners have also announced their intention to strike. Against a background of huge profit increases for major companies (average profits rose during the past two years by approximately 30 percent), workers are demanding a sufficient wage to at least feed their families. In the city of Kielce, the local government even employed a private security firm to expel striking bus drivers from their depot because it could not rely on the loyalty of the local police.

Voters clearly rebuffed the government and its policies in the election last Sunday under conditions where the Kaczynskis were no longer able to mask growing social tensions with their nationalistic and religious rhetoric.

The PO owes its election victory first and foremost to this rejection of the Kaczynskis. In common with other opposition parties, the PO did not conduct an especially vigorous election campaign. Following the expulsion of Samoobrona and the LPR, the opposition parties could have brought down Kaczynski's minority government at any time with a vote of no confidence, but they did nothing of the sort.

Only in the week before the election did the PO's leading candidate, Donald Tusk, seek to utilise the popular mood and take a sharp stance against Prime Minister Kaczynski in the course of a TV debate. Previously, the PO had merely stressed the necessity for a neo-liberal transformation of the Polish economy—with the PiS as possible coalition partner.

The reason for this restraint is the social programme of the PO. Like the PiS, it represents the interests of the small, rich top layer in the country, which is diametrically opposed to the population as a whole. Like Kaczynski, Tusk is more terrified of a mobilisation against the economic policies of this elite than a lost election.

The PO's central demand was the introduction of a uniform rate of tax of 15 percent—i.e., a massive redistribution of social wealth in favour of the rich and super-rich. Even on the weekend of the

election, Tusk used the opportunity to further limit the already minimal social budget.

While Tusk has been praised by political circles and sections of the media in western Europe for his pro-European stance, this has far more to do with his economic priorities than with any break with crude Polish nationalism. With the help of the European Union and deregulation of the economy, Tusk wants to transform Poland into a paradise for foreign investors. His avowed aim is the rapid introduction of the EU monetary currency, the euro. The necessary criterion for such a move is the reduction of annual new indebtedness to less than 3 percent of GNP—a measure that can only be achieved on the basis of massive attacks on the social rights of the working class.

In fact, the PO differs only insignificantly from the PiS, and prior to the last elections in 2005, a coalition between the PiS and PO appeared to be imminent. Following the latest election, Tusk has emphasised the continuity between his party's policies and those of his predecessors, and once again a coalition with the PiS is entirely possible. Both parties emerged from the Election Action Solidarity (AWS), after the latter had been completely discredited following four years in government led by Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek (1997-2001). The Buzek government had cut the national pension insurance, dismantled the health system and enforced comprehensive privatisations. At the time, Kaczynski and Tusk sat together in the government parliamentary faction.

Any annulling of the antidemocratic laws introduced by the PiS cannot be expected from the PO. In the presidential election of 2005, both Lech Kaczynski and Tusk competed to pose as the heirs of the Polish dictator and Hitler supporter Jozef Pilsudski. In 1992, Tusk told the Polish newspaper *Trybuna* that if necessary, any popular resistance to free-market economic policies should be beaten back with truncheons and rifles.

Nor will a new PO-led government either dissolve the CBA or revise the Kaczynskis' broadcasting law. It regards the measures already introduced by the PiS government as a necessary precondition for the implementation of its neo-liberal course. In this regard, a kind of division of labour exists between the old and the new government: while the previous government strengthened the state apparatus with the support of backward layers, Tusk and the PO are intent on fully using such powers in the interest of the elite.

It is difficult to judge to what extent the election of the PO is bound up with illusions on the part of workers with regard to an improvement in their living standards. Most voters have probably backed the PO as the best way to get rid of the Kaczynskis. Either way, the election victory of the PO augurs an intensification of class struggles in Poland. Future confrontations with miners, railway workers and health service workers are already on the horizon.



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