

Poland: Outcome uncertain in Sunday's election

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Following weeks in which the ruling Civic Platform (PO) led in opinion polls, the outcome of Poland's parliamentary election on Sunday now seems to be uncertain. The PO's lead over the main opposition party, "Law and Justice" (PiS), is falling each day.

During its years in government, the PiS—led by former Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski and his twin brother Lech, who died in a plane crash in April 2010—thoroughly discredited itself. The PiS relied on right-wing demagoguery to mask the formation of authoritarian forms of rule, including anti-democratic laws such as a new Broadcasting Act and the creation of a central anti-corruption Bureau (CBA) to systematically move against political opponents. The PiS subsequently lost the last federal election four years ago.

Together with the PiS, the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD, successor to the former Stalinist state party) that headed the government from 2001 to 2005 and carried out deep social cuts, and the small Polish Peasants Party (PSL) are also likely to enter the new parliament (Sejm).

A new phenomenon in Polish politics is the emergence of the "Janusz Palikot movement" protest party. Polls indicate that it could win more than enough votes to clear the 5 percent hurdle necessary for parliamentary representation. The leading candidate of this formation is a millionaire businessman who quit the PO last December.

The Palikot movement includes a number of democratic demands in its program, such as equal rights for members of sexual minorities, the right to abortion and a clear separation of church and state. However, its economic program is basically aligned to that of the PO. Palikot has made a name for himself primarily through various provocative TV appearances.

Several media commentators have dismissed the emergence of Palikot, and rising polls for the PiS, as a product of their media campaigns. They argue that the Polish economy is booming and Kaczynski has merely sought to revise his conservative image and steal a few votes from the Civic Platform's Donald Tusk by surrounding himself with young, good-looking PiS supporters.

Given the lack of genuine alternatives in Polish politics, there is no doubt that such media campaigns play a role. But the growing support for the right-wing PiS has deeper roots.

Poland is the only European country that recorded economic growth in 2009 (1.7 percent) and increased its foreign trade, but this development is very fragile and highly dependent on the German and French economies. Above all, this growth has taken place at the expense of working people.

The legal minimum wage is just €347 a month; after deductions it amounts to slightly more than €250. According to a survey conducted by the SMG/KRC institute, 65 percent of households have no savings and their income barely covers daily expenses.

It is estimated that up to 13 million Poles, i.e., 35 percent of the total population, live in relative poverty. Within this group the number of those surviving on less than the official subsistence level of €80-98 per month is growing.

According to Eurostat, the official unemployment rate remains high at 9.4 percent, while youth unemployment has increased during Tusk's administration from 17.3

percent in 2008 to 24.9 percent in the second quarter of 2011. Only a small fraction of the unemployed in Poland are entitled to social assistance. The Polish Institute for Labour and Social Security (IPSS) notes that public expenditure for vulnerable families from 2005 to 2009 fell by 20 percent.

Studies also show that poverty is increasingly affecting those with full-time employment and well-trained workers, including university graduates. A third of all Poles dependent on social assistance have a regular job. This development is mainly due to low wages and widespread use of irregular and short-term work contracts.

In 2009, the Tusk government in cooperation with the two major unions, adopted a so-called anti-crisis package, including the further deregulation of labour relations and in particular the virtual abolition of overtime pay. In addition, the law permitted companies to introduce short-time contracts with sharply lower pay.

In line with its policy of favouring the wealthy and big business, the Tusk government sought to cut spending to bring the country's budget deficit under the stability pact limit of 3 percent. On this basis Tusk sought to free the way for entry into the euro common currency zone.

To this end the government has in recent years sold off many of the remaining state-owned enterprises. In 2009-2010 it undertook privatisations valued at €9 billion. For workers, privatisation meant wage cuts and deteriorating working conditions. In August this year rail workers took strike action to protest the privatization of the railways and low wages. A Polish locomotive driver can expect to earn only 1,500 zlotys (about €375) per month.

The Tusk government has also massively cut the number of public sector jobs, frozen wages and cut pensions for railroad workers and truck drivers with new legislation preventing early retirement. For the next legislative period Finance Minister Jacek Rostowski (PO) has proposed more job cuts and the expansion of pension cuts.

As WikiLeaks documents reveal, the government is currently discussing much more far-reaching plans. The economic adviser to the Tusk government, Jan Krzysztof

Bielecki, told US Ambassador to Poland Lee Feinstein that the government planned further privatisations. The health sector needed a "radical restructuring", offering experienced American investors a host of investment opportunities.

Due to widespread opposition to the privatisation of the health system, the government had kept such plans secret, while presenting plans to transform hospitals into private companies as a step towards permitting "more responsibility".

As in previous election campaigns, Kaczynski is raising this policy and drawing attention to social inequality in the country. At rallies he repeatedly declared that only a few have benefited from the policies of the PO and argued vehemently against any further privatisation of state enterprises.

With the SLD discredited by its social cuts, the PiS has been able to pose as a defender of the population on social issues, which it seeks to exploit while promoting a xenophobic and anti-democratic agenda.

A few days before the election, Kaczynski published a book titled *The Poland of our Dreams*, in which he portrays himself as the defender of an independent Poland fighting against Germany's imperial designs on the country. In fact, when in government the PiS specialised in securing its own sinecures and furthering the interests of Polish enterprises.

The fact that such an organisation can now win back support says a great deal about the condition of Polish society. Far from being stable, it is deeply divided along social lines. With no party putting forward a progressive perspective to overcome these divisions, pollsters expect an extremely low turnout.



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