

# Polish government insists on holding presidential elections in May despite coronavirus lockdown

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3 April 2020

As coronavirus cases continue to climb at a rapid speed, approaching 3,000 confirmed cases Thursday, the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party in Poland is ramming through changes to electoral law in order to ensure that the presidential elections be held on May 10. The country has been in a virtual lockdown for two weeks, with people banned from leaving their homes other than for buying groceries or pharmaceutical products.

With the exception of supermarkets and pharmacies, virtually all stores are closed, and many factories have shut down production. However, even though it has implemented policies that otherwise only occur under a state of emergency, the government has refrained from proclaiming one in order to make it possible for the elections to proceed as planned. If a state of emergency was proclaimed, elections could only be held 60 days after its end.

The incumbent president Andrzej Duda from PiS is widely expected to win the elections in the first round if they are held in May. His poll ratings have improved from a shaky 44 percent before the beginning of the crisis, which would not have guaranteed victory in the first round, to now over 50 percent. The ruling PiS party has a majority in parliament through a bloc with two other right-wing parties, but this is not sufficient to ratify laws without approval of the president. Hence, maintaining Duda as president is central for PiS to be able to continue to rule.

Duda's main rival from the liberal opposition party Civic Platform (PO) Małgorzata Kidawa-Błońska, who stands poor chances of winning, announced on Sunday that she was dropping out of the race and called upon all other candidates to boycott the election. So far, none of the other candidates have followed suit.

In polls taken last week, 73 percent of respondents opposed holding the elections as planned. Only 19 percent are in favour of it.

In an extraordinary move that flagrantly violates the constitution, PiS rammed through a change to electoral law

in a hastily adjourned morning session last Saturday which lasted from roughly 2 a.m. to 4 a.m. The new bill allows for seniors above 60 and those who are in quarantine to vote by mail. Seventy-three senators voted in favour of the bill with minor changes, no one voted against and only three abstained.

The Polish constitution bans such changes to electoral law in an expedited procedure. The Polish Constitutional court also ruled in 2006 that at least six weeks have to lie between a change to electoral law and the date of the election.

Unlike in many other countries, voting by mail is not allowed in Poland. The PiS government is expected to shortly try to ram through another change to electoral law, which would allow for votes by mail for all citizens eligible to vote.

The Saturday morning vote came shortly before the overwhelming majority of the Hungarian parliament voted to dissolve itself, enabling the far-right president Viktor Orban to rule the country by decree. Like the Hungarian government, to which PiS maintains close ties, the Polish government is seeking to exploit the crisis created by the pandemic in order to implement dictatorial measures that have long been in the making. As in the case of Hungary, the European Union has barely uttered a word of criticism of the events in Poland.

Over the past years, the PiS government has moved to eliminate the separation of the executive and the judicial branches, it has vastly expanded surveillance and built up a large far-right paramilitary unit that is directly subordinate to the defence ministry. The government has also systematically whipped up xenophobia and anti-Semitism, banning all mention of Polish anti-Semitism and participation in the Nazi-led genocide of European and Polish Jewry in World War II. Government officials have repeatedly marched alongside avowed neo-fascists.

PiS' determination to push ahead with the elections has triggered a massive crisis within the government itself.

Jarosław Gowin, who is currently the minister of science, is opposed to holding the elections in May and wants to push for a delay of the elections by one year. In an interview with the conservative *Rzeczpospolita* on Wednesday, Gowin stated that elections could only take place under conditions “where the life of not a single Pole” were in danger.

Gowin is the leader of the right-wing conservative Agreement party (Porozumienie) which has been in a coalition with the ruling PiS since 2015 (when it was still named Polska Razem). In the Polish Sejm (parliament), the Agreement party and Solidarna Polska are critical for PiS to maintain its majority bloc, informally called the “United Right.” Until 2013, Gowin had been a member of the liberal Civic Platform (PO), which he left after fierce controversies with Donald Tusk, a leading figure of the PO.

Gowin has now reportedly reached out to the liberal opposition to make an alliance with them to oppose the May 10 election date. The conflict could, according to the liberal *Newsweek Polska*, mark “the end of PiS government.” The government is now reportedly scrambling for an emergency plan to reconcile its different factions.

Underlying the bitter conflicts within the Polish ruling class and its move toward openly dictatorial rule is the rapid escalation of the social and economic crisis under the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. Last year, the PiS government was shaken by a 20-day national walkout of 300,000 teachers. In February, it just barely avoided a strike by miners by negotiating a sell-out with the unions beforehand. The fear of all sections of the ruling class is that the coronavirus crisis will see the emergence of mass strike movements by the working class directed against the capitalist system as a whole.

In Poland, the number of confirmed coronavirus cases hit 2,964 on Thursday evening. At least 57 people have died. The actual numbers are believed to be much higher, however, since Poland has conducted only a little over 60,000 tests, significantly fewer than neighbouring Germany and other countries.

After decades of social cuts by all major Polish bourgeois parties, the country’s hospitals are woefully unequipped to deal with this crisis. Many did not even have a single ventilator before the crisis began—equipment that is critical to treating COVID-19 patients that are in serious condition. Reports indicated that many hospitals ran out of personal protective equipment and other basic medical supplies and equipment days after they admitted their first patients. Dozens of hospitals and hospital units have already closed down after members of their staff have been infected, and the number is growing by the day.

On top of the medical disaster in the hospitals, a severe economic and social crisis is developing. The government

expects a recession this year and that up to 10 percent of the population will be out of work by the end of the year, the equivalent of 2 million people. Even these are likely significant underestimates, however. Workers are already being laid off by the thousands and many confront immediate financial destitution in a country where millions live on just a few hundred dollars a month.

*Newsweek Polska* quoted one worker who had just been laid off on Monday by OBI, a German home improvement supply company. He told the newspaper that he had no savings and no money except from his last remaining pay check for March. He said that he had almost no prospect of finding new employment in the current situation, “but I have to find something, otherwise I just cannot survive.”

In March, major European companies, including Volkswagen, Fiat and PSA, shut down production in most of Europe, including in Poland where they employ tens of thousands of autoworkers. The automobile industry is generally expected to be among the sections hardest hit by the economic crisis.

There are also an estimated 2 million Ukrainian migrant workers in Poland, many of whom work in gig economy jobs or construction. In a recent poll, 30 percent of them indicated that they had lost their job or had suffered very significant losses in income. Twenty-seven percent said they were facing problems at their workplace.

In the logistics industry, Polish Amazon workers have threatened to strike to demand safe working conditions and higher pay. In the US, Spain and Italy, Amazon workers have already walked out over unsafe working conditions.



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