

Polish government forced to call off presidential elections at last minute

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The far-right Polish government of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) was forced to call off the May 10 presidential elections just days before the scheduled vote to prevent its fall. The Polish ruling class is now scrambling to find a solution amidst the deepest crisis since the collapse of the Stalinist regime in 1989.

The elections were not canceled until May 7. PiS and especially its leader Jarosław Kaczyński had insisted for months that the election not be delayed even though the country was under virtual lockdown and mired in crisis as COVID-19 cases continue to rise unabated.

The main rival of incumbent president Andrzej Duda, Małgorzata Kidawa-Błońska of the liberal Civic Platform (PO), had declared a boycott of the election back in March, and the government's push to go ahead with the election was deeply unpopular, with 73 percent of the population opposing it in polls.

The PiS government sought to push ahead, hoping that Duda would be reelected in the first round. Since PiS has only a slim majority in the Polish parliament (Sejm), it needs a president who is fully aligned with its agenda to continue its rule without opposition from other factions of the ruling class. However, the government was thrown into deep crisis when Jarosław Gowin, the head of PiS's main coalition partner, the Agreement party, stepped down as vice president and science minister on April 9 to protest the May 10 elections.

Gowin, a far-right politician, aligned himself with the demands for a postponed election of the liberal opposition and declared publicly: "I'm entirely scarred by my participation in this government. This can no longer continue. The May elections will cross all [red] lines and [signify] the end of democracy." The PiS government, the conservative *Rzeczpospolita* noted, faced a choice of either having its government coalition

blown apart by the conflict or losing the presidency, since Duda is unlikely to win in the first round at a later date.

Last Wednesday, Kaczyński and Gowin met and discussed for two hours behind closed doors and arrived at an agreement to delay the vote. The agreement provides for the Supreme Court to declare the elections null and void—even though they have not taken place yet. This will give all the parties the opportunity to choose new candidates and force them to resubmit signatures for the latter under conditions of a lockdown. Several Supreme Court judges have been fired and replaced by PiS-aligned figures in the last four years. Experts on Polish constitutional law have argued that the decision of the Supreme Court to cancel an election that never took place is unconstitutional.

Right after Kaczyński and Gowin reached their compromise, the Sejm pushed through a new bill sponsored by PiS, which relied on the votes of the Agreement party, that provides for the next presidential election to be held through mail ballot alone.

The agreement reached by Kaczyński and Gowin also specified that no state of emergency be declared even though state of emergency measures are *de facto* in place. An official state of emergency would make elections impossible until 60 days after the measure is lifted. It remains entirely unclear whether the elections will take place as early as May 23, or as late as July. Duda's term officially ends on August 5.

Polish media reports suggest that panic and chaos now reign in Warsaw. Gowin's party is deeply divided over the crisis and it is unclear whether it will back his agreement with Kaczyński, or whether he will be able to retain his position as party head. Jadwiga Emilewicz, Gowin's closest co-thinker and protégé, opposed his decision to step down in April and replaced him as

deputy prime minister, fully supporting the positions of Kaczyński and his prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki.

PiS and especially Kaczyński have emerged extremely weakened. Kaczyński had been the main figure pushing for the May 10 election day and had, according to the liberal *Newsweek Polska*, an “emergency plan.” Polls now indicate that Duda would not have won an election on Sunday in the first round anyway, and it is generally believed that his chances of winning will grow slimmer the later it takes place.

While the liberal Polish media has hailed the deep government crisis as a chance for the liberal opposition, that opposition too is in a crisis. In the eyes of masses of workers, the Civic Platform (PO) and its coalition partners are, above all, associated with many years of brutal austerity. Not a single opposition candidate who was advanced before the called-off elections stood a chance of winning even a third of the vote in the first round. The candidates that are now being discussed, most notably Donald Tusk, who has been a close ally of Angela Merkel in the European Union (EU), stand for a continuation of the unpopular policies of the PO-governments that preceded PiS.

During the five years that PiS has been in power, pushing through massive attacks on democratic rights and passing far-right legislation, such as a law censoring free speech on the Holocaust and Polish anti-Semitism, the opposition has focused on questions of foreign policy and on appeals to privileged layers of the middle class. The liberal opposition speaks for a faction of the Polish bourgeoisie that regards PiS’s almost exclusive focus on an alliance with US imperialism as dangerously one-sided, and favors a much closer cooperation with German imperialism, in particular, and the EU more broadly.

Another candidate who is not officially running for the opposition, but is viewed as having good chances in the presidential election, is the journalist Szymon Hołownia. His positions on foreign policy closely align with those of the PO and Tusk. His main advisor, Jacek Cichocki, was interior minister in the Tusk government, as well as the chief of the chancellery under both Tusk and Ewa Kopacz.

The conflicts within the Polish bourgeoisie over foreign policy have been enormously exacerbated as the coronavirus pandemic has heightened tensions between the EU and Washington. German imperialism

sees the coronavirus pandemic and the crisis of the Trump administration, in particular, as an opportunity to reassert its imperialist ambitions all the more aggressively.

No faction of the Polish ruling class has anything to offer the working class under conditions of the most far-reaching breakdown of world capitalism in history. While the official unemployment figures are still quite low, many workers have, in fact, been laid off. The three-month notice requirement for layoffs that many workers have in their contracts will run out in June or July, raising the likelihood that the elections will take place under conditions of the highest unemployment levels in decades. Inflation now officially stands at 4.5 percent, six times higher than anticipated.

The virus continues to spread in the country at an alarming rate. Poland’s confirmed cases now stand at 16,326, and 811 people have died. However, less than half a million tests have been performed. The region hit hardest now is Silesia, a predominantly industrial and working-class region in the west of the country, on the border with Germany. As elsewhere, essential workers have been hit the hardest. According to official statistics, those dying most often from the virus are industrial workers, taxi drivers, transit and construction workers, as well as cooks.



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