

Nationalists win parliamentary elections in Kosovo

By Markus Salzmann
14 October 2019

Following snap parliamentary elections on October 6 in Kosovo, and a week of coalition talks, there will in all likelihood be a change of government.

The nationalist Vetevendosje (Self-Determination) won the most votes (25.9 percent). It was followed by the Democratic League (LDK) with 25.2 percent. The loser of the election, the Democratic Party (PDK), which has been in power since 2007 and achieved only 21.3 percent in last week's poll, has conceded defeat.

The election had little to do with democracy. Twenty years after the Western powers bombed the former Yugoslavia, plunging it into a bloody civil war and establishing a protectorate in Kosovo where bitter poverty and crime are commonplace, corrupt, nationalist and reactionary cliques are fiercely fighting for power. The turnout of just 44 percent shows that the majority of the population rejects the policies of the narrow layer that runs the country.

The governing coalition of former Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj's Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AKK) with the PDK and the smaller party Nisma, also lost votes, achieving around 11 percent. The outgoing government was dubbed the "war coalition," as all three parties emerged from the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), which fought an armed struggle against Serbia.

The election became necessary following Haradinaj's resignation in July. The former KLA commander, accused of committing war crimes in the 1990s, and current interim head of state Hashim Thaci, also a former KLA commander and war crimes suspect, symbolize the elite that has ruled since independence in 2008.

The probable head of government will be the leading candidate of Vetevendosje, Albin Kurti. The former student leader had organized nationalist student protests in the late 1990s, specifically to stir up ethnic tensions with the Serbian population. Until recently, he had argued for the establishment of a "Greater Albania," which included Albania and Kosovo, as well as the Presevo Valley in southern Serbia and a significant part of Northern Macedonia and the Greek region of Epirus. In the election

campaign, he moderated his tone so as not to repel influential financiers and possible coalition partners. For example, saying, it was not possible to carry through such a unification "at the moment."

Kurtis' most likely coalition partner is the LDK. The party is headed by lawyer Vjosa Osmani, who set herself the goal of fighting corruption in the country. Osmani, who holds a doctorate from the University of Pittsburgh, has strong links with the IMF and the World Bank. She regards the rampant corruption in Kosovo as an obstacle to the boundless exploitation of the poverty-stricken land by Western companies and banks. The LDK is associated with Germany's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and is favoured by most European powers as a party of government.

But the prospects of forming a stable government look bad. Twenty of the 120 seats in parliament are reserved for different ethnic minorities, and the faction of the oppressed Serbian minority has 10 seats. In the north of the country, in the predominantly Serb-inhabited areas, the list supported by Belgrade won almost 100 percent of the vote.

Around 120,000 Serbs live in Kosovo. Their stronghold lies in the city Mitrovica, divided between ethnic Serbs and Albanians. In the rest of the country, they live in about a dozen enclaves. Like Russia, China and some EU countries, Serbia did not recognize the independence of the former Serbian province of Kosovo in 2008.

A minority administration of the former governing parties might also be possible, which would then depend on receiving support from the minority representatives in parliament. The latter had supported Haradinaj partly because they were afraid of losing all rights under a Kurti government. Kurti not only announced that he would limit the rights of minorities, he has long demanded a ban on imports of goods from Serbia.

This would represent another escalation going beyond the introduction of the 100 percent duty on Serbian goods. This tariff, which excludes products of American, European and Asian manufacturers, was enacted by the old government.

As a result, the prices for basic foods exploded.

Especially in the Serbian part of Mitrovica, where there are close economic links with Serbia, this has led to dramatic supply shortages. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić accused the government in Pristina of wanting to force the Serbs in Mitrovica to emigrate and continue the ethnic cleansing—which cannot be dismissed out of hand.

Kurti rejects a coalition with the former governing parties because they are not nationalist enough in his view. He accuses them of having other concerns than putting the nation first. A government led by Vetevendosje would further aggravate conflicts within Kosovo and in the entire region.

Kosovo is of strategic interest to the EU and the US, but also increasingly to Russia and China. Several EU countries, including Germany and Austria, favour the prospect of EU accession for Kosovo. Above all, they support the LDK, which is pushing for reforms in order to create the necessary conditions for this. The German Bundestag (parliament) recently voted to open accession talks with Albania and Northern Macedonia. However, this course is controversial within the EU; Spain, for example, is one of the countries that did not recognize Kosovo.

The reason for the urgent accession talks is to counter the growing influence of Russia and China. The conservative Austrian Member of the European Parliament, Lukas Mandl, said on broadcaster ORF: “The deciding factor is that other parts of the world—such as Turkey, China or Russia—do not take over dominance in Kosovo and in the western Balkans through external investment. But that the European identity is strengthened.”

Russia has traditionally had good relations with Serbia and supports the pro-Serb forces in Kosovo. China, which has also not recognized Kosovo as an independent state, has made significant investments in the Balkans in recent years. Beijing is investing billions, mainly in transport routes, ports and power plants in several countries that are considered transit routes. The media are already talking about the “Balkan Silk Road.”

The US is also seeking to defend its interests in the region. Recently, President Donald Trump appointed Matthew Palmer as Special Representative for the Western Balkans and Richard Grenell as Special Representative for the Serbian-Kosovo Dialogue. The two new representatives for the region may be more at odds with the KLA politicians in Kosovo than their European counterparts. “Whether Vetevendosje can finally co-govern after the election will also depend crucially on the future US West Balkan policy that is undergoing change,” *Der Spiegel* commented.

Conflicts between the US and EU have existed for quite some time in the region. In 2018, the presidents of Serbia

and Kosovo proposed a territory swap. Kosovo would exchange the predominantly Serb-inhabited province in the north of the country with Serbia’s Presevo valley, which is predominantly inhabited by Albanians. In return, Serbia agreed to recognize Kosovo. The US government supported the proposal, while Germany and other EU members strictly rejected it.

Twenty years after the Kosovo war, tensions in the Balkan region have again risen in recent years. “The dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, which was previously moderated by the European Union, is dead,” remarked *Der Spiegel*. The war rhetoric from both the Serbian and the Kosovar side is becoming louder.

In 1999, NATO bombed Serbia and established Kosovo as a protectorate. From 1999 to 2008, the UN Unmik mission administered the country. Around 13,000 people lost their lives in the struggle for “independence.” The KLA insurgent movement, which later formed the country’s narrow political elite, quickly turned out to be a criminal, corrupt gang that provokes ethnic conflict with countless attacks against the minorities in Kosovo.

Kosovo is a social disaster area. According to a survey by pollsters NDI, corruption and unemployment were the main topics in the election campaign. Young people in Kosovo are particularly affected by unemployment. There are no official unemployment figures. Careful estimates put the jobless rate at between 25 and 60 percent, depending on the region. Most young people want to leave the country as soon as possible.

Recently, as everywhere in the Balkans, the class struggle is erupting in walk-outs and protests. In August, there were several days of strikes in the capital Pristina. As the Kosovar news website N1 reported, there were massive delays in air traffic, after the airport was hit by strike action. Earlier this year, a wave of strikes rolled over the country as blue- and white-collar workers were demanding higher wages. Over the course of the year, tens of thousands have protested in Albania, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro against their corrupt and hated governments.

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