Dispute Delays Albanian Election Result

Author: Suela Musta

A parliamentary election that some believe the opposition won by default is proving controversial.

International organisations are concerned that long delays in declaring a final result in Albania’s disputed parliamentary elections could harm the country’s image and affect its European aspirations.

Prime Minister Fatos Nano has refused to concede defeat to the opposition Democratic Party of Albania, DPA, and candidates from his ruling Socialist Party of Albania, SPA, have made about 40 complaints to the Central Elections Commission, CEC. Dozens of other allegations of electoral wrongdoing have come from left and centrist candidates.

Most of the complaints concern the vote count and problems with voter identification and overcrowding at polling stations during the July 3 poll.

The CEC is investigating - a process analysts say could delay the announcement of the official results by at least a month and possibly until the end of the summer.

A US diplomat, Paul Jones, told the Permanent Council of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE, in Vienna, that the business of certifying the final results should be “completed without delay”.

Preliminary results show the DPA won 55 of the 100 single-member constituencies, compared with 40 for the SPA. The assembly has a total of 140 seats.

For Sali Berisha, the DPA leader, it will be his second turn in high office. His first period in power ended in Albania’s financial collapse in 1997, a debacle that was partly connected to failed pyramid schemes.

“Albanians have voted for change by saying no to the corruption and organised crime that were blocking the reforms needed for integration into the EU,” Berisha said at a press conference held in his party headquarters on July 4.

Despite the controversy, discussions over the future configuration of the next government are already taking place at DPA headquarters.

Jozefina Topalli, the party’s vice-president, said they had not worked out all the details but were “looking at which allies to include into the government”.

The DPA will have to find partners in the assembly to govern effectively.

Potential allies among the smaller parties include the Republican Party, which looks set to pick up 18 of the 40 seats allocated by proportional representation. This would ensure the government of an overall majority.
Topalli said the DPA was planning also to give some posts to top-quality non-party experts “who will bring with them a liberal spirit and enthusiasm to complete EU integration reforms”.

Local political analysts said the key factor behind the Democrats’ victory was the poor recent record of the left in government and Nano’s bad reputation.

Andi Bushati, a commentator from TV Klan, said, “Voters were intelligent enough to understand that you cannot choose people who have become associated with corruption allegations and mismanagement.”

The ruling party also suffered from damaging splits. In the election, it lost votes to an offshoot, the Socialist Movement for Integration, LSI, led by Ilir Meta, a former prime minister from 2001-2003.

“Berisha and the right have won because the left was divided and the man guilty for this is Fatos Nano,” said Meta, after the election.

The LSI, which was formed in September 2004, is expected to have five seats in the next parliament.

A turnout of only 57 per cent also suggested that many voters were indifferent about which party would govern Albania.

Albert Rakipi, head of the Albanian Institute for International Studies, believes the new Berisha government will face a major test of its ability in the international arena.

“It will be up to the next government whether the EU concludes a Stabilization and Association Agreement, SAA, with Albania, or not,” said Rakipi.

The European Commission, which reports annually on whether countries are fit to sign SAA agreements with Brussels, is unlikely to make its recommendation on Albania until early 2006.

Many members of the public seem sceptical about whether the right will do much better in the field of EU reforms than the left.

“I don’t expect rapid changes with this government,” said Kleart Kola, a Tirana University student. “This election was about punishing the Socialists, not about voting for reform.”

Apart from promising tax cuts and a fresh fight against corruption, Berisha said his mind was already focused on winning the local elections in 2006.

“Our priority will be to ensure that we have a completely democratic system in place for the municipal elections next year,” he said on July 8.

This may be the opening gambit in a struggle with Edi Rama, the popular Socialist mayor of Tirana. Many believe he will become the Socialist leader if Nano resigns.
Suela Musta is a regular IWPR contributor.

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