

Losers Cry Foul As Macedonia Elects New President

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Albanians have helped elect the candidate of the Macedonian nationalist party. But widespread claims of electoral fraud have cast a shadow over the poll and will almost certainly lead to political conflict.

On November 14, Macedonia's citizens voted to elect a successor for outgoing President Kiro Gligorov.

Two candidates stood for the office, both ethnic Macedonian - Deputy Foreign Minister Boris Trajkovski, candidate for the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRODPMNE) coalition, and former speaker of the parliament Tito Petkovski, candidate for the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM).

In the first round ballot on October 31, Petkovski won 32.7 percent of the vote and Trajkovski 20.9 per cent. In a reasonably high turnout, 65.2 per cent of the electorate voted.

Only the Liberal Democrats endorsed one of the two remaining candidates, namely Petkovski, who had run on a similar platform as their own candidate, Stojan Andov.

Of the other parties, the ethnic-Albanian Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP) and the Democratic Alternative (DA) - a member of the ruling coalition - indirectly called on their supporters to stay at home on November 14. The third party in the ruling coalition, the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA), opposed a boycott but did not formally endorse either candidate.

According to the official results, Trajkovski won the second round with 52.9 percent, compared to 45.9 percent for Petkovski. But this victory was marred by a number of irregularities. Indeed there are indications that the elections might not have been as fair and democratic as the government claims.

Surprisingly the turnout for the second round was higher than the first, at 69.6 per cent.

It was in areas populated by ethnic Albanians that the most stunning results were recorded. The overwhelming majority of votes in that region, nearly 85 percent, went to Trajkovski.

Surprisingly, the turnout in electoral districts inhabited by ethnic Albanians was higher in the second round than in the first, despite the fact that no ethnic Albanian candidate was left in the race. In some places, it approached 100 percent, and in at least five polling stations, election officials found more ballots in the ballot box than there were voters on the electoral roll.

Turnout in those districts was also above the national average. Given that Macedonia's political division runs along ethnic lines, it is strange that more ethnic Albanians than ethnic Macedonians voted in an election where only ethnic Macedonian candidates were standing.

Similar irregularities also occurred in last year's parliamentary elections, often in the same electoral districts and polling stations. But they had not seriously affected the outcome, as the two major Albanian parties were, at that time, in an electoral alliance.

Macedonian Prime Minister Ljubco Georgievski hailed Trajkovski's victory a great success, applauding the fact that he had won votes from all ethnic groups in the country. The SDSM, on the other hand, complained of the biggest election fraud in Macedonian history and held protest meetings in Skopje and elsewhere. On November 15, an estimated 30,000 people gathered in Skopje's main square to protest.

While Petkovski declared himself the "moral winner" of the elections, SDSM chairman Branko Crvenkovski called for the vote to be annulled. The Social Democrats claimed that over 200,000 ballots had been stuffed by DPA activists as a result of a deal between Georgievski and DPA leader Arben Xhaferi, which would guarantee Trajkovski the ethnic-Albanian vote in return for concessions to that community.

Both Georgievski and Xhaferi dismissed these accusations and claimed Petkovski's defeat was a result of his anti-Albanian election campaign. State Electoral Commission chairman Josif Lukovski said the elections were democratic and fair and that the SDSM could provide no proof for their claims.

In total the SDSM has lodged 300 complaints with the State Electoral Commission and rulings are still pending on 294. But it is unlikely that the elections will be annulled as a whole. Re-runs in certain polling stations or even whole electoral units are more likely, but it is impossible to predict whether they will change the outcome of the November 14 vote.

Regardless of whether the elections will be repeated partially or as a whole, the damage has already been done. Relations between the main political camps have never been very good, especially between the SDSM and the VMRODPMNE. But now, the confrontation between them will undoubtedly come to a head.

The Social Democrats will undoubtedly try to capitalise on what could become a serious political crisis in order to force early parliamentary elections. The chances, however, of a majority of sitting MPs voting in favour of such an idea is unlikely. Many deputies are bound to lose their seats due to the public's mounting frustration with the government's poor record.

Meanwhile, the ruling coalition is endangered. Democratic Alternative leader Vasil Tupurkovski, who came third in the first round, lambasted the elections as fraudulent and said he was "extremely dissatisfied" with the way they were run. He said citizens' basic rights had not been respected, but that his party would wait for the final results before deciding on further steps. Tupurkovski, a member of the current administration, demanded that the coalition contract be renegotiated, adding that if the VMRODPMNE does not come up with proposals acceptable to the DA, "mutual cooperation has no more future."

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