

June Elections: High stakes in Kosovo

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by Naim Rashiti

The campaign starts officially on 28 May with elections only ten days later, on 8 June - but the parties have been in campaign mode for weeks if not months. Kosovo's political elites are trying to signal a shift with slogans like "New Mission", "The Turn", "The New Direction" and "The Alternative". This is a big change from traditional slogans about status, Serbs and Serbia, which are not part of the campaign so far. Kosovo voters like hearing about employment, agriculture, subsidies and investments. Bill Clinton's maxim rings true: it's the economy, stupid.

The current, PDK-led government made considerable progress in integrating the Serb minority, dialogue with Serbia, international recognition and concluding SAA talks with EU, but failed in home affairs, the fight against corruption, and the economy still struggles. After six years in power the PDK has weakened but Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi is still strong and popular. Helped by a weak opposition, he often sets the course alone. The opposition followed his lead on talks with Serbia on integrating the Serbs of northern Kosovo. Weeks after Thaçi launched the "fund for employment", opposition parties developed strategies along similar lines.

The campaign is focused on candidates for the post of Prime Minister. LDK leader Isa Mustafa and a candidate for the head of the government, challenged Thaçi to a televised debate. Balkans Group together with 37 other civil society organisations signed a letter urging party leaders to agree to public debate. Thaçi has not responded and seems likely to decline. Kosovo's democracy and its voters can only benefit from more debate.

The 2010 general election was the worst in recent history with 45 percent of ballot boxes tampered with. The outgoing parliament has been ineffective, failing to pass important laws including the election of the ombudsperson and electoral reform. Despite strong international pressure, election reform did not pass, probably because Thaçi and Mustafa did not want it to pass.

The November 2013 municipal elections had numerous shortcomings but were held in a positive atmosphere, and [represented a significant improvement in Kosovo's democracy](#). Will the June 2014 elections show further progress? A member of the Central Election Commission gives a simple answer: no. The oligarchs that control party branches will once again determine who wins in their territory, he said. The stakes are much higher in

national elections and the motive for fraud is stronger, he warned. A LDK parliamentarian told Balkans Group "I am the party in my area, and I determine who speaks in our gatherings". A PDK member said that he was asked to pay for votes he wants to get in a town in central Kosovo. A new member of the AKR admitted he had to accept the rules set by village representatives to be able to campaign in the area he controls.

While leaders compete, party strong men try to control voting in the areas they come from. Fraud also happens within parties. The current law allows voters to pick one party and five members from its list. In 2010, strong men pressured voters on which names to pick and in some areas, altered ballots after the boxes were opened. Local party leaders are appointed by pressure or connections, and are not elected in fair party elections. The new parliament urgently needs to pass an electoral reform law, but parties need to democratise internally. Regular members should have a say in choosing mid level leaders through party elections. Public administration is heavy politicised and all parties use the civil servants of the institutions they control.

There are new faces prominent members of civil society, businessmen, academics and veterans of international organisations have joined parties. But most candidates represent the old guard. Thaçi struggled to purge unwanted members, promising posts to some should they agree to be left off the candidate list. With a party rocked by defections and criminal charges, the PDK campaign centres on Thaçi, who is seeking a third mandate as Prime Minister. Mustafa also failed to renovate the LDK leadership, and his party has its own problems with corruption. Recently 10 LDK members working in the Pristina city administration were arrested. Isa Mustafa's loss to Shpend Ahmeti of Vetëvendosje in the mayoral race continues to sting.

After a disappointing loss in the November elections, Ramush Haradinaj's AAK is rapidly improving its campaign. The AAK's "New Direction" campaign focuses on agriculture, economy, health and the rule of law. AAK fights to get the third place, against Vetëvendosje, to win the position of kingmaker in the talks for the formation of the new government. Vetëvendosje (V) is changing too. Ahmeti's victory in Pristina has echoed throughout the V, whose voters want new faces. Party leader Albin Kurti has given FER members much more space. The AKR of Behgjet Pacolli has come back, winning two important towns, Gjakova and South Mitrovica, in November mayoral elections.

Usually reliable polls between March and May gave the PDK 30 percent, ahead of the LDK's 26 percent. V leads the AAK, 16 percent to 11 percent. AKR is between 6 to 7 percent. Personally, Thaçi is far ahead of Mustafa by 11 percent. Feeling confident, the PDK has indicated that if it party wins Thaçi will invite the LDK in the government; the LDK still refuses a coalition with PDK. In case LDK wins, Isa Mustafa prefers a coalition with the AAK and/or V. The LDK hopes to form a coalition with AAK and V even if PDK leads in the overall vote.

The June elections bring another change. For the first time since 2001, Serbs from all over Kosovo are participating. The Belgrade-supported and organised "Srpska" citizens' initiative has made peace with the Independent Liberals (SLS), a party they until recently denounced as "Thaçi Serbs". Srpska won nine of the ten Serb-majority municipalities in November and is likely to win most of the ten seats guaranteed for Serbs. The main parties do not want a coalition that depends on Serb votes, as the current one does, but bypassing a large Serb bloc will be hard. The Belgrade-backed group will be an important player in the new government.

The new government will face difficult issues that, if not resolved, may risk the viability of the young state. Improving the economy, generating growth, suppressing corruption and organised crime, building an impartial and effective administration and judiciary, advance the EU agenda and integrating the Serb minority are serious challenges. But the next government will be handicapped from the start unless Kosovo can prove it can organise a free, fair and clean election, at least as good as November's local contest.

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