

Albania: a fourth term for Prime Minister Edi Rama

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On 11 May, parliamentary elections were held in Albania, resulting in a sweeping victory for the ruling Socialist Party (PS), led by Prime Minister Edi Rama, who has been in power since 2013. According to preliminary results, the PS received 52.3% of the vote and secured 83 seats in the 140-member parliament. The largest opposition coalition, led by the Democratic Party (PD) under Sali Berisha, garnered 33.8% of the vote and won 50 seats. Three deputies will represent the Social Democratic Party (PSD). Three new anti-establishment groups also entered parliament: the liberal party Chance (Mundësia), which won two seats, as well as the centrist coalition Initiative /Albania Becomes (Nisma / Shqipëria Bëhet) and the left-wing Together Movement (Lëvizja Bashkë), each of which secured one seat.

Voter turnout stood at 42.3%, nearly 5 percentage points lower than in the previous election, reflecting growing political disengagement. For the first time, members of the diaspora were able to vote by post; 245,000 people registered to do so, primarily in Italy and Greece. The OSCE and European Parliament observation mission concluded that the Socialist Party's control over the public sector and media provided it with a significant advantage over its rivals. The mission also documented numerous voting irregularities.

Despite numerous corruption scandals and a sharp rise in the cost of living – particularly affecting the poorest – the Socialist Party significantly improved its performance compared with the 2021 election. This points to the consolidation of a clientelist system and is likely to result in further centralisation of power in the hands of Edi Rama.

Commentary

- **The main axis of the political conflict, as well as the election campaign itself, revolves around the personal rivalry between the leaders of the two main parties:** Edi Rama (Prime Minister since 2013 and former Mayor of Tirana from 2000 to 2011) and Sali Berisha (President from 1992 to 1997 and Prime Minister from 2005 to 2013). Both figures are supported by oligarchic and criminal networks competing for economic and political influence. The electoral system favours large parties, which combined with entrenched clientelist structures hinder the emergence of any alternative formation capable of challenging the dominance of the old establishment. Efforts by the new parliamentary parties to steer the campaign towards issues on the parties' political agenda, genuine anti-corruption measures, and reforms aimed at improving living standards proved largely ineffective.
- **The results confirmed the dominance of the PS, which continues to win successive elections by capturing state institutions – allowing it to exert pressure on public sector**

employees – and maintaining control over the media. Moreover, it has extended its networks of influence to the diaspora and was the only party with the resources required to run a campaign abroad. The PS was not significantly affected by the pre-election arrest of prominent party figure Erion Veliaj, the Mayor of Tirana, nor by corruption allegations against ministers from its ranks, including those responsible for health and the environment. Even the flight abroad of Deputy Prime Minister Arben Ahmetaj to avoid arrest did not undermine its position.

- **The result achieved by the opposition Democratic Party (PD) may be considered a relative success,** given the party's weakened state due to internal power struggles and corruption allegations against its leader. He, along with members of his family, has been sanctioned by both the United States and the United Kingdom for the embezzlement of public funds and attempts to influence the judiciary. Berisha modelled his campaign on that of Donald Trump, even hiring the US president's former advisers. He portrayed himself as a victim of the domestic establishment and the US Democratic Party. It is likely that, as in the past, the PD will challenge the integrity of the electoral process.
- **Rama's main campaign slogan was a pledge to achieve European Union membership during the next parliamentary term.** However, this goal is unrealistic due to the limited administrative capacity of state institutions, which have been captured by the ruling party. Albania began accession negotiations in 2022 and has so far opened three of the six negotiating clusters. One notable success, under pressure from the EU and the United States, was the establishment of an independent anti-corruption and organised crime prosecution body (SPAK), which has proved effective in investigating high-ranking political figures. Nevertheless, widespread corruption and organised crime remain among Albania's most pressing challenges, and SPAK faces criticism from both major political forces. Rama himself is reluctant to implement reforms aimed at strengthening institutional independence and professionalising the civil service, as required by the EU, since such reforms would weaken the ruling party's grip on power.
- **The new government is expected to continue its current foreign policy course, maintaining close relations with Washington and advancing EU integration,** benefiting from the support of both EU member states and the United States gained due to agreements favourable to these partners – such as the deal with Italy on relocating migrants to Albania – and its image as a stable Western ally in the Balkans, with a strong pro-Atlantic orientation and free from bilateral or internal ethnic conflicts.