

Albania's June 2017 Parliamentary Elections

A partisan boycott threatened Albania's 2017 parliamentary elections until an internationally brokered agreement paved the way for the opposition's participation in the vote on June 25. The incumbent Socialist Party (SP) of Prime Minister Edi Rama won a single-party majority, with 74 seats in the 140-seat parliament. The opposition Democratic Party (DP), led by former Tirana mayor Lulzim Basha, suffered a loss in votes, and returns to parliament with 43 seats. The SP's former coalition partner, the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI) – previously led by Ilir Meta who, since the elections, has become Albania's president –



Albania's Parliament.
(Gertjan R., Wikimedia, 2009)

– increased its seats to 19, and will move to opposition. The election was conducted in a calm atmosphere despite the crisis preceding it. Alleged vote buying and voter intimidation were reported by nonpartisan citizen election observers and international monitors.

As a candidate for European Union (EU) membership since 2014 and NATO member since 2009, Albania has taken steps to reform its judiciary to improve its fight against corruption and organized crime. It has undertaken reforms to 'de-criminalize' politics by prohibiting those with criminal records from holding public office. However, EU accession negotiations were delayed as a critical first step in the judicial reform process—the vetting of judges and prosecutors—fell prey to partisan squabbling prior to the elections. Other reforms needed to advance Albania's EU bid, including public administration reform, also stalled in the period prior to elections.

The Boycott

The June parliamentary elections were almost upended by a political crisis that began in February, when DP walked out of parliament and into peaceful street protests demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Rama and the installation of a technical government as a guarantor of a democratic election process. DP maintained that Rama's government would undermine the elections through vote-buying and other means to thwart the public's will at the ballot box. The protest failed to gain public traction, and caused some contention within DP ranks, which spilled out into open criticism of the party's tactics. Election deadlines such as candidate registration came and went, and DP remained defiant. Rama rejected DP demands saying that its actions jeopardized Albania's bid for EU membership and good standing in NATO.

Presidential elections went forward in April. The president is indirectly elected by parliament in a process meant to produce a consensus candidate. Given DP's boycott, a consensus candidate seemed hard to come by. SP eventually proposed SMI leader and Assembly Speaker Ilir Meta, who was duly elected, albeit without DP participation. Meta had positioned himself to mediate the crisis, having played a similar role in 2016 judicial reform negotiations.

The political crisis ended in May following EU/U.S.-led mediation, resulting in the so-called McAllister Package Plus, named after David McAllister (European People's Party), chairman of the European Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee. The agreement, signed by Rama and Basha, postponed the election date by one week to June 25, and paved the way for appointment of opposition representatives to government, dubbed technical ministers, ahead of the elections. In return, the opposition abandoned its demand for Rama to resign. Electoral provisions of the agreement produced changes to the Criminal Code, the Law on Audio Visual Authority, and the Law on Political Parties, to increase electoral transparency and fairness of competition. Changes to the Law on Political Parties, for example, required political parties to submit campaign donations and spending records within 60 days after the election, and placed limitations on campaign spending. Amendments to the Criminal Code and Law on Political Parties stiffened penalties, including imprisonment, for vote buying and selling and other criminal electoral conduct.

Some of these changes to the election procedure reflected prior discussions in an *ad hoc* parliamentary committee on election reform, which, although formed in 2016, failed to agree to legislative changes. And while the McAllister Plus Package was a welcome solution to the political crisis in addressing substantive reform, it underscored the parties' inability to negotiate similar reforms in parliament that would have enabled civil society groups to participate and given sufficient time for the Central Election Commission (CEC) to prepare, issue, and enforce regulations and guidance to its subsidiary bodies and to political parties.

The Campaign

In contrast to past elections, all political parties ran individually rather than in coalitions – a risk for smaller parties given the proportional district-based electoral system, which favors bigger parties. Under a slogan of “the Albania we want”, SP campaigned on economic growth, job creation, and rural development. The party began its campaign weeks ahead of DP given the latter's boycott. For its part, DP championed its economic program, fashioned with German expertise. DP brought a number of key opposition allies, including representatives of smaller parties like the Republican Party and Human Rights Union Party, onto its candidate lists. But public bickering within the DP over the protest and then the McAllister agreement, coupled with disputes over the candidate lists, hamstrung its campaign. Veteran DP politicians criticized Basha for sidelining party structures and circumventing consultations on party decisions. Several prominent politicians who had expressed reservations about Basha's protest and boycott were excluded from candidate lists. As a result, voters saw limited internal cohesion and unity and, with a delayed start to campaigning, DP struggled to turn out its base, let alone sway new voters.

SMI criticized the SP-DP agreement for lacking transparency and harming SMI and smaller parties. SP-SMI relations in government were often uneasy, and the campaign intensified their

acrimony. President-elect Meta alleged SP coercion against SMI supporters, drawing criticism that, as president-elect, Meta was obliged to refrain from partisan action. SMI's campaign promoted tax cuts to stimulate job growth, touted vocational education, and centered on youth, including by placing young activists in electable positions on its candidate lists.

A new center-left, SP splinter party, LIBRA, stood for the first time, campaigning on tax reduction, education, and healthcare reform.

The Election

Approximately 1.6 million citizens voted, of nearly 3.5 million registered voters, for a turnout of 46.8 percent – some six percent less than in the previous parliamentary elections in 2013. The actual turnout rate is thought to be higher given that many voters reside abroad, and out-of-country voting is not allowed. A religious holiday and high temperatures may have depressed turnout, which prompted late-day CEC instructions to extend voting hours. Public frustration with the political crisis may also have dampened voting enthusiasm.

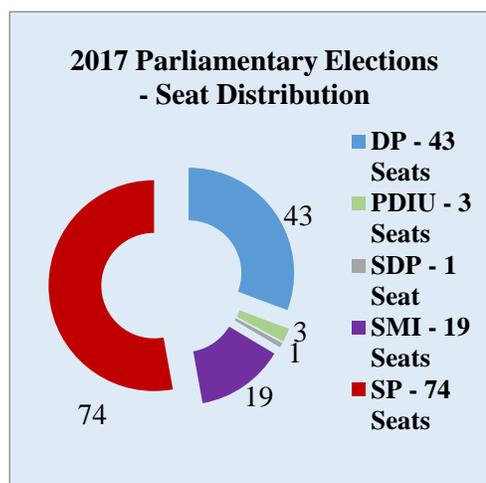


Residents scan a voter list in the northern city of Shkoder.

The nonpartisan Coalition of Domestic Observers (CDO), a domestic network of citizen election observer groups, stated: *“Election day proceeded in an orderly manner, although cases of violence were reported... [and] several serious procedural violations were observed.”* OSCE/ODIHR noted the lack of meaningful public consultation on amendments to the election framework, whose last-minute timing gave the CEC a set of complex challenges, requiring new guidance on valuing in-kind donations and developing criteria and procedures for appointing experts to monitor campaign finance. Last-minute replacements of polling station commissioners, a longstanding deficiency in the electoral process which precludes adequate training, also continued. CDO assessed: *“The incidents noted during the election administration process underline the necessity to orient the election administration body toward the spirit of law enforcement, the need for additional capacity building and the imperative that these bodies behave in a non-political, neutral and non-partisan manner.”*

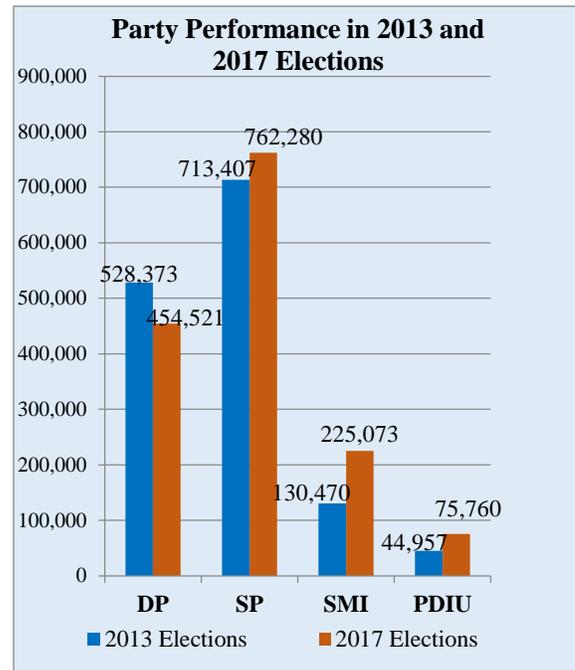
The Results

Election results saw SP win a majority, taking 74 seats in parliament, while DP will have 43 seats, including four held by smaller political parties that ran on DP lists. SMI will have 19 seats, up three from 2013; the Party for Justice, Integration and Unity (PDIU), a small party also in government representing the Cham community,



will have three; and the Social Democratic Party (SDP), which lost parliamentary representation in 2009, claimed one seat. Although securing 5,000 more votes than SDP across the country, LIBRA did not secure parliamentary representation in any district.

The three parties that had formed the exiting governing coalition – SP, SMI, and PDIU – grew their respective shares of the vote. SP’s increase in seats will be enough for it to form a government on its own, whereas the 2013 elections saw it just shy with 65 seats. Running on its own, SMI performed particularly well in the capital, Tirana, where it won an additional two seats from its 2013 result. DP dropped to 43 seats from 50 seats in 2013—a low mark for the party. DP struggled in traditional northern strongholds like Kukes, Lezhe, and Shkoder, where SP found similar levels of support as DP, and in certain places surpassed it. In Lezhe, DP saw its 31,600 votes in 2013 slide to 27,550, while SP claimed almost 4,000 more, garnering more than 30,000.



Women took a step forward in these elections. Of 2,666 candidates, 1,074 (40.3 percent) were women, and 52 were listed first on district lists. However, the codified gender quota – whereby women must constitute a minimum of 30 percent of candidates and both genders should be reflected among the first three candidates on a district list – was not fully respected. DP and SP opted to pay the fine (SP in Berat, and DP in Berat, Elbasan, Fier, Gjirokaster, and Kukes). SMI was fined for not respecting the gender quota in Tirana, where, notably, it failed to include a man in the top three positions of its candidate list. The new parliament welcomes 39 women members of parliament (22 from SP, 11 from DP, 5 from SMI, and one from PDIU). At 28 percent, this is a record number in comparison to the 17 percent elected in 2013.

The Aftermath

Following DP’s loss, Basha froze his duties as chair and called for a leadership election. Opponents launched an insurgent campaign, but Basha won re-election with more than 90 percent of the vote. His challenger, a founding member of the party and former member of parliament (MP), Eduard Selami, called the race “unequal” but declared he would work with Basha for a strong opposition against the Rama government. Critics, including former DP deputy chair Jozefina Topalli and former MP Astrit Patozi, alleged fraud in the voting. Several have since declared they will operate as a faction within the party to strengthen political transparency and accountability through reform of party statutes, including rules requiring resignation of the party leader following two straight electoral losses and mandating that major political agreements – such as the pre-election agreement that ended the crisis – be endorsed by the party congress.

Prime Minister Rama has outlined 10 priorities for the new government, including a “co-governance coalition with the Albanian people” through an online platform, purging of corrupt civil servants, ending of illegal drug cultivation and trafficking, and broader anti-corruption measures. The Prime Minister is reportedly considering government down-sizing to minimize the number of ministries, potentially from 19 to 10. In days following the elections, Rama has offered a conciliatory tone, indicating that his government will seek to cooperate with other political forces for the good of the country, regardless of the past.

Illir Meta took the oath of office as the new President on July 24, with DP, SP, and SMI officials in attendance. His spouse, Monika Kryemadhi, a politician in her own right, has been elected SMI chair, becoming the first woman to lead a major political party in Albania.

The Future

Opinion research conducted last year by the Institute of Democracy and Mediation (IDM) with NDI support showed high levels of public mistrust in political leaders and institutions. The partisan brinksmanship in this cycle, coupled with reported transgressions by the political parties in the election process, are likely not to bend public attitudes to the positive. But these elections may reflect a wide turn in Albanian politics to more constructive behavior by political parties in showing that political boycotts carry costs, not rewards.

Fundamentally, the elections show that Albania’s democratic institutions must be allowed to work in the ways in which they are intended. Albania’s political establishment, in consultation with civil society and other relevant stakeholders, needs to redress evident shortcomings in the electoral process—political, administrative, and legal—and move forward on improving how the country is governed. In so doing, the country’s political stability and EU membership aspirations will improve markedly.

- Parties should use the tools of the Assembly to legislate in a manner that welcomes consultation and debate to better respond to citizens’ needs. Parliament’s *ad hoc* election reform committee needed political space and resolve to furnish amendments in consultation with civil society, smaller political parties, and other relevant stakeholders, and to do so sufficiently in advance of the vote to allow for secondary legislation and administrative resource allocation. Future efforts at electoral reform should hew to recommendations by international and citizen election monitoring groups that focus on de-politicizing the election administration and to improve regulation of campaign finance to ensure transparency and strengthen the powers of bodies in charge of oversight and enforcement.
- Parties should engage meaningfully with citizens. Outside of election campaigns, politicians should utilize resources at-hand, including party branches, youth and women’s party forums, and parliamentary constituency offices, to meet with citizens on policy issues.
- Parties should double-down on their commitments to public transparency through full compliance with legal obligations on political finance, including, among others, new instructions to report in-kind donations as well as full cooperation with institutions charged with oversight and enforcement. Likewise, parliament should ensure that the CEC, as the

main regulator of political finance, is fully resourced through an expanded budget and more robust staffing, and its institutional independence is strengthened, to enable it to effectively carry out its oversight and enforcement duties.

- Parties should protect themselves from internal conflict and splintering by opening internal decision-making to structured involvement of members, including women and youth and dissent voices.
- Civic groups should harness the public's increased willingness to engage with political parties on government accountability and foster new and varied venues for politicians and citizens to interact, particularly but not uniquely through the legislative process and use such tools as the Open Government Partnership – a global, standards-based set of commitments to governmental transparency, of which Albania is a member – to this end.
- With significant challenges ahead for Albania, including ensuring implementation of judiciary reform, stepping up public administration reform efforts, fighting corruption, ending drug cultivation and trafficking, and implementing property rights, among others, the government must find partners to work with to advance legislation and govern in a way that represents all citizens. Achieving Albanian's common goal of EU membership will require the prioritization of consensus-building over political gamesmanship.