

Kosovo votes in election that could complicate dialogue with Serbia

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A woman passes by electoral posters of the Serbian political party Serbian List (Srpska lista), in the town of Gracanica, Kosovo February 13, 2021. (Reuters/Florion Goga)Â Â Â

Pristina: Kosovars began voting on Sunday in a parliamentary election that an anti-establishment party is expected to win, further complicating Western efforts to resolve a decades-long territorial dispute with Serbia.

Opinion polls predict the Vetevendosje party will win 45% to 55% of the vote among ethnic Albanians, who make up 90% of the 1.9 million population. While that would be nearly double its result in a 2019 election, the party may still need a partner to govern.

Vetevendosje leader Albin Kurti, who served as prime minister for five months last year, has won support on pledges to fight widespread corruption and on a stance that there should be no compromise in a dialogue with Serbia, which lost control over Kosovo in 1999 after NATO bombed its forces.

If Vetevendosje does not secure a majority of 61 seats it may have to join forces with either the now-ruling Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), or the opposition Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) or Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK).

Serbia, backed by Russia, does not recognise Kosovo's independence, citing the need to protect the rights of its Serb minority. Negotiators from the European Union and the United States have failed to secure a compromise to allow Kosovo to join international organisations such as the United Nations and NATO.

With one third of its workforce unemployed and a gross domestic product per capita of \$4,300, Kosovo remains the poorest country in the Western Balkan region.

Skender Habibaj, a pensioner in Pristina, said he hoped the election would bring a change of the political elite.

“I think people should not vote for those (politicians) who were in the parliament before but only for the new ones,” said Habibaj, who was out in bitterly cold weather and among the first to vote at a polling station in the city centre.

Almost 2,400 polling stations opened at 7 a.m. (0600 GMT) and will close at 7 p.m. (1800 GMT). The first official results are expected a few hours later.

“People want jobs, we want to get rid off of corruption,” said Luljeta Emini after she cast a ballot at a polling station in Pristina.

- Reuters