

Albanians hold parliamentary vote amid wide political divide

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Albanian voters have started casting ballots in parliamentary elections on Sunday amid the virus pandemic and a bitter political rivalry between the country's two largest political parties.

An Albanian woman casts her vote ballot during parliamentary elections in capital Tirana, Albania on Sunday, April 25, 2021.

Tirana, Albania: Albanians voted Sunday in a parliamentary election amid the pandemic, opposition allegations of official corruption and a bitter rivalry between the country's two largest political parties.

Some 3.6 million eligible voters, including Albanians overseas, were electing 140 lawmakers among 1,841 candidates from 17 political parties or coalitions, along with some running independently. No early or postal voting was allowed and people infected with COVID-19 cannot vote.

Following the approval of electoral reforms last year, a new voters' electronic identification, a partial depoliticizing of the electoral commission and a pilot project on full digitalization of the voting and counting process are being applied. The hope is that post-communist Albania's 10th parliamentary election will be free and fair. To date, voting always has been marred by irregularities.

Preliminary turnout at 2 p.m. was 35.7%.

An Albanian man casts his vote during parliamentary elections in capital Tirana, Albania on Sunday, April 25, 2021.

Albanian president Ilir Meta flashes victory sign as he casts his vote during parliamentary elections in capital Tirana, Albania on Sunday, April 25, 2021.

Albanian leader of the opposition Lulzim Basha flashes victory sign as he casts his ballot during parliamentary elections in capital Tirana, Albania on Sunday, April 25, 2021.

Albania's socialist party leader Edi Rama casts his ballot during parliamentary elections in Suresh, near Tirana, Sunday, April 25, 2021.

A police officer stands near to a damaged car on central Skanderbeg square, after an incident, in Tirana, Sunday, April 25, 2021. A man drove his car into the Albanian capital Tirana's main square where vehicles are not allowed, the local media and police reported on Sunday. The driver broke the barriers to enter the Skanderbeg Square. A young man

managed to stop the driver entering from the window. Then people dragged him out of the car. No one was injured. The car stopped near two big tents where people get vaccines and a smaller tent raised from the Syri Television private channel to cover the voting.

A man casts his ballot during parliamentary elections in capital Tirana, Albania, Sunday, April 25, 2021.

Albania, a NATO member since 2009, is looking forward to launching full membership negotiations with the European Union later this year and Sunday's vote is considered a key milestone on that path.

Prime Minister Edi Rama of the governing Socialists, who are seeking their third consecutive mandate, wants to boost Albanian efforts in tourism, energy, agriculture and digital projects. Pre-election polls showed Rama's left-wing Socialist Party likely to place first.

Yet Lulzim Basha of the opposition Democratic Party accuses the government of corruption and links to organized crime, and pledges lower taxes, higher salaries and more social support.

Confrontations between supporters of the two main parties culminated Wednesday in central Elbasan city, where a leading activist of the Socialist Party died. Police said the victim was shot, allegedly by a member of the opposition Democratic Party, during an argument.

Though officially impartial, President Ilir Meta has turned into a strong government opponent, accusing Rama of concentrating all legislative, administrative and judicial powers in his hands and running a "kleptocratic regime" that has bungled pandemic response and delayed the country's EU integration.

There were some glitches Sunday. The electronic identification machines did not operate in 142 out of 5,199 polling stations after no operators to work them were found in those remote areas, according to Ilirjan Celibashi, head of the Central Election Commission.

An Albanian man was arrested after photographing the ballot, something not allowed by law.

Political leaders called on people to vote as they cast their own ballots. Kosovar Prime Minister Albin Kurti, also an Albanian citizen, voted, too.

"For the Constitution, for the republic, for democracy, for Albania in Europe," said Meta.

Scores of foreign observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and Western embassies were monitoring the vote.

"We hope that every Albanian citizen goes and votes, free of fear, free of interference," said U.S. Ambassador Yuri Kim at a polling station in northern Shkodra. "This is your day."

Albania has seen a significant fall in daily coronavirus cases in the past week despite political rallies being held around the country. More than 400,000 people have received a vaccine jab. An overnight curfew has been enforced with restrictions on gatherings and mandatory mask-wearing.

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