

Parliamentary Elections in Kosovo February 2021

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Another snap election

Under unprecedented circumstances, as the country was plunging in the deepest political, institutional, and socio-economic crisis, snap elections were declared. On 22 December, the highest court – the Constitutional Court – has ruled that the country must hold snap elections. The Constitutional Court has annulled a vote that installed the government led by Avdullah Hoti, thus declaring the current government illegal. This decision fueled further turmoil in Kosovo’s fragile democracy. Snap elections, however, are not new for Kosovo citizens. Since 2014, the country has been going through deep political crisis on several fronts. Since 2008, no government has managed to finish the entire mandate. The upcoming elections will set a new record taking place only sixteen months after the elections of 6 October 2019. On average, Kosovo has held elections every two years, thus preventing the country from effectively focusing on the reforms and democratic transformation.

Government changes, lack of progress

Political instability has generated weak governments and constant political reshuffle of governments. During 2020, Kosovo has changed three governments. The year started with the caretaker Haradinaj government (which had resigned in July 2019 as a result of a decision made by a Special Court for war crimes to question Haradinaj), continued with Kurti’s short-lived government (which was overthrown after an orchestrated action of the old ruling elite), and concluded with the illegal Hoti government (declared so by the Constitutional Court). The change of the governments left little space for meaningful political progress. As a matter of fact, the overthrow of the Kurti government on the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic reflects the lack of solidarity that the political elite has had with its own citizens in the darkest hour of the country while facing multi-frontal crisis. The frequent changes of the government prevent the country from delivering on substance and meaningful reforms needed for consolidation of democracy.

Who gets to vote?

According to the Central Elections Commission (CEC), 1,794,862 people have the right to vote in the elections on 14th February 2021. These elections mark the highest number potential voters from diaspora reaching 130,000 registrations to cast their vote by post.

To date only 60,000 have been vetted and confirmed via phone by the CEC. Number of accusations have been directed to the CEC for allegedly violating the diaspora electorate's rights by creating obstacles in the process. Around 15,000 voters have been cleared out of the list; this addressed the findings of the international monitoring reports in the October 2019 elections in relation to the high number of deceased people on the list – which created opportunities for the empty ballots to be misused. The list also cleared the persons holding UNMIK documents (outdated since 2008); which impacts the local Serbian community members who refused to get Kosovar documents.

Who gets to run and who gets to win?

Kosovo has a multi-party system. For the elections of February 2021, the CEC has registered and certified 28 political parties/subjects running for 120 seats in the Assembly. Three political parties/subjects, the Vetëvendosje Movement (VV), the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) and the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), are aiming for the Prime Minister Office and have elected their candidates for Prime Minister, whereas the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK) is running for the President with Ramush Haradinaj as candidate, albeit in the Parliamentary Elections. Vetëvendosje Movement is led by Albin Kurti, followed by Vjosa Osmani, who is running for MP, although she claims the post of president of the country.

The largest Kosovo Serb political entity, Lista Srpska, and other parties of other national minorities have also registered to run in these elections. The Serbs outside of the Lista Srpska, however, have limited political power and their chances to get a seat in the parliament are very low. Ten seats are reserved for Kosovo Serb representatives and another ten seats for other minorities living in Kosovo.

According to the polls, VV is projected to be the winner by a large margin, the follow-up parties are PDK and LDK – which are showing a serious shrinkage since the last elections. The sources are different, however, and there is no scientific verification nor are the sources confirmed. Nevertheless, the polls and projections are reflecting the situation in the ground and the trend of increase of political support and approval for VV and the Kurti-Osmani duo.

Overall turnout in 2021:
47%

28 Parties running in
the elections

120 seats in the
National Assembly

Candidates left out of the list

A large-scale debate took place after the CEC had not certified 47 candidates running for a seat in the parliament. The CEC followed up and implemented the decision of the Constitutional Court which prohibits the right to run for people who have been convicted in the past three years. The most vocal candidate, which triggered serious backlashes leading to accusations toward the CEC is the Kurti case. Albin Kurti has not been certified to run in the upcoming snap elections; this means Kurti was removed from the list of the Vetevendosje candidates and the votes for him will not be counted. Kurti was found guilty in January 2018 of releasing tear gas in the parliament chamber in 2015 and a court in Pristina has handed down a suspended jail sentence for him. The CEC has been accused of being ‘captured’ by the old ruling elite preventing Kurti from running and trying to disrupt the voting process.

Elections in times of COVID- 19 pandemic

Kosovo held elections in two municipalities (Podujevo and North Mitrovica) in November 2020 under strict COVID-19 measures. Kosovo has been severely challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic on many fronts. The underdeveloped healthcare system did not have sufficient capacities. The number of tests has been relatively low, whereas there is not a clear timeline for the COVID-19 vaccines as the current caretaker government did not even manage to secure a minimal number of doses.

In the election campaign, all parties are violating the anti-COVID-19 law that they have pushed and voted for in the Assembly. They organize gatherings of large numbers of citizens in closed environment without respecting the basic measures that have been strictly imposed on the citizens since March 2019. This behavior has been criticized by EU ambassadors present in Kosovo. Political parties are promising better management of the pandemic while seriously exposing and risking the health of the citizens. This will have a detrimental effect which can lead to the increase of number of infections in a country without clear strategy on how to secure the vaccines.

A Deeply Polarized Political Landscape

Kosovo has been going through a consecutive political crisis since 2014. Since 2019, Kosovo has changed three governments, while internal polarization among political parties has skyrocketed. One of the most critical moments in this regard was the Assembly session to overthrow the Kurti government which took place as the people were protesting outside to support Kurti, whereas the old ruling partners organized and joined their forces to overthrow what looked like a reformist government. This not only polarized the political parties further but also divided the entire society. This can have a detrimental impact as Kosovo is a multi-party system which usually requires for coalitions to form the

government. This polarization does not allow space for pragmatic cooperation between political parties, thus plunging the country in deeper political crisis. In Kosovo, there is a growing trend of making ‘us and them’. “Us” being the potential winners – Vetëvendosje – and reformist party seeking to disentangle state capture, and “them” being the old elite – LDK, PDK, and AAK – which have governed and captured the state together. The closer Kosovo gets to the elections date, the more polarized the society is becoming.

Reforms and the fight against corruption

The buzzwords of these elections are democratic reforms and fight against corruption. These are also present in the programs of the political parties who have been part of corruption scandals, have shown lack of political will to fight corruption, and have played an active role in capturing the state as well as weakening the rule of law.

When Vetëvendosje came to power in cooperation with LDK in 2020, Kurti had announced reforms in the country starting from the vetting process in the judicial system, the changes of board in public enterprises, and pledged to fight corruption during his term. This, however, was halted upon the fall of the government. The Hoti government did not follow up on the initiated reforms, even worse his government dismissed the anti-corruption task force – a decision widely criticized by the international community. During the Hoti government, 2 million Euro have been stolen and transferred from treasure to other accounts, and the government did not take responsibility for this act. These scandals and those which had taken place previously, have seriously diminished the citizens’ trust toward these parties; thus, making Kurti the only credible candidate in this regard. So far, Kurti does not seem to have a clear plan or program on how to progress in this direction, the chances for him to be blocked by the ruling elite are very high, however, many citizens perceive him and his party as the only way out or the last hope to make positive changes.

Dialogue with Serbia and EU Integration

Events unfolding in the framework of the Dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia have triggered a political crisis leading to the fall of two governments (Haradinaj and Kurti). With the change of the Presidents in the United States and the EU’s political will to push Kosovo and Serbia towards a final resolution, the political elite does not seem to be prepared for this process. First, no political parties have presented their concrete plans on how to approach this process from within – meaning unify the political elites in Kosovo and develop the Kosovo position in the process – and from outside – how to navigate with the new administration in the US after signing the deal in Washington DC in September 2020 and re-vitalize the process in Brussels. While the dialogue has not been listed as a priority for the citizens, there is a growing pressure to reach a final deal in order to ensure regional stability but also unblock Kosovo’s and Serbia’s

path toward the EU. Similarly, the political elite did not include the EU integration process explicitly in their programs. While there is a general trend to discuss democratic reforms, which will positively contribute to the overall process of fulfilling the EU conditionality, the uncertain future of the country in this process has caused a general reluctance to include it in the agenda. This applies also to the visa liberalization process which has been traditionally used to political consumption during the elections.

**Weak Economy
before and after
COVID-19**

The pandemic devastated the already collapsing and fragile service-based economy which has been taken a hit as a result of the lockdown measures imposed by the government. Reports by the World Bank show that by the end of the year 100,000 jobs will have been lost, whereas economic damages will take years to alleviate. Economy is the key aspect of the political programs in Kosovo. Political parties are promising billions of Euros as an injection to the devastated economy, but do not have any clear step-by-step plan on how to effectively deliver in this regard. The situation is getting serious and more devastating, especially after the inability of the Hoti government to pass the Economic Recovery Law timely. The delays have also limited the effectiveness of the state intervention in revitalizing the economy.

Party	Main candidate	Political Ideology
Levizja Vetevendosje	Albin Kurti Vjosa Osmani for President	Centre-Left
AAK	Ramush Haradinaj (for President)	Centre-Right
LDK	Avdullah Hoti	Centre-Right
PDK	Enver Hoxhaj	Centre-Right
NISMA	Fatmir Limaj	Centre-Left

The results of the elections

As predicted, the outcome of the latest elections marked a clear victory for Vetëvendosje, the party of Albin Kurti in coalition with the independent candidate Vjosa Osmani, the actual ad interim president. The coalition received 48% of the total votes, while the challengers the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) and the Alliance for the future of Kosovo (AAK) obtained only 13% and 7% respectively. Despite this unprecedented victory, Kurti is still in need of coalition partners in order to reach the 61 seats required to form a majority in the parliament. Should he succeed, Kurti might have a historic opportunity to start a new era both in terms of reforms and anti-corruption measures as well as regarding foreign policy, including the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue.

Figure 1: Parliamentary Elections results in 2017

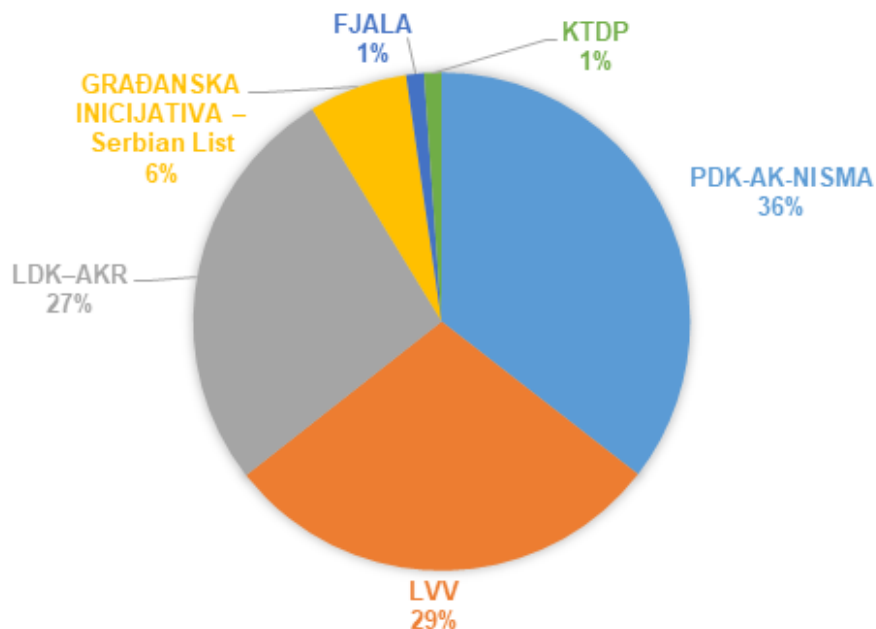


Figure 2: Parliamentary Elections results in 2019

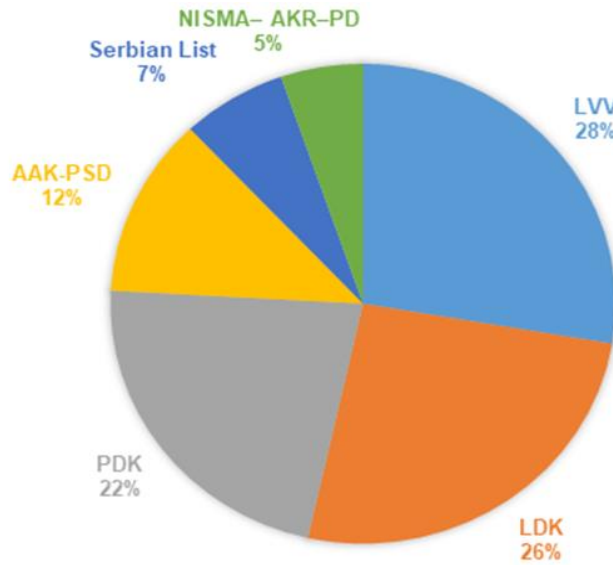
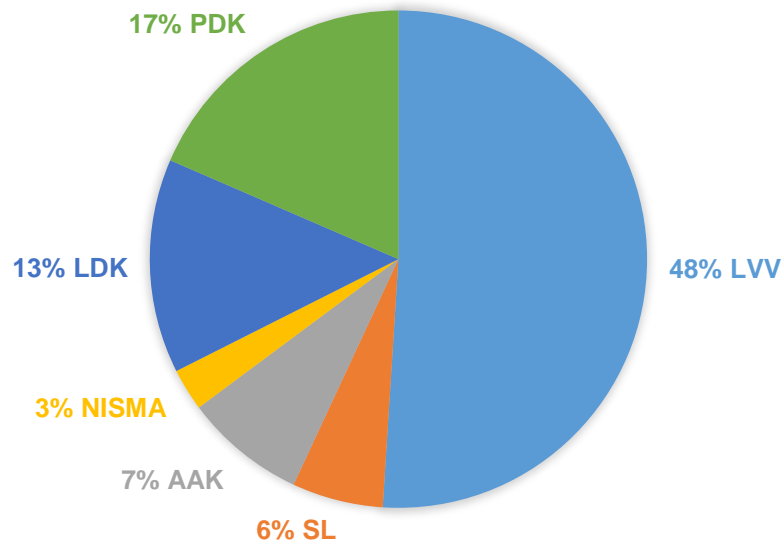


Figure 3: Parliamentary election results in 2021¹



¹ Kosovo Central Election Commission: online under: <https://rezultatet2021.org/en/parl/t3>