

EUROPE

# Poland's Ruling Party Loses Control of Senate

Defeat in election sets up clash between the nationalist government and more liberal opposition



In a vote Sunday, Polish voters dealt a blow to the nationalist party that rules the government. PHOTO: JAAP ARRIENS/XINHUA/ZUMA PRESS

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**WARSAW**—Poland's ruling party lost control of the country's Senate, according to official results Monday, setting the stage for legislative clashes between one of Europe's most nationalist governments and its more liberal opposition.

The governing Law and Justice party will return to the next session with 48 of the 100 seats in Poland's upper chamber, the remainder held by a mix of rival parties and independents.

The unexpected result cast a shadow on what was otherwise a decent result for Poland's ruling party. Exit polls published on Sunday, the day of the election, projected Law and Justice would maintain its majority in the lower house of parliament, the more powerful of the country's two legislative chambers. That prediction held as official tallies came in Monday. The party will return to government with a margin of five votes in the 460-seat lower chamber, exactly its current standing.

But the opposition benefited from the first-past-the-post system that Poland uses to fill its Senate, and several parties signed pacts unifying behind individual candidates. Under the plurality-based system, the winning candidate is the one who gets the most votes, even if they don't add up a majority.

The outcome means Poland's nationalist government will face procedural hurdles in enacting its platform, which mixes domestically popular welfare spending with nationalist policies that have drawn criticism from the European Union.

"When it comes to the Senate, then of course it is not good from our point of view," said Law and Justice leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski on a televised speech Monday. "This is the price we had to pay."

Since 2015, Poland has been at the forefront of nationalism and concerns over democratic governance in Europe. Law and Justice has built a large base by expanding social benefits while pushing ahead on conservative social policies such as restrictions on gay rights or abortion. It won 44% of the parliamentary vote on Sunday, nearly twice the nearest rival.

But the party has also been accused by domestic opponents and within the EU of weakening democratic checks and balances. The party has packed loyalists onto courts and other government agencies. Under Law and Justice, parliament has often held sessions long after midnight to swiftly enact reforms over the complaints of its rivals.

Control of the Senate presents a shift in that balance of power. The chamber is the weaker of Poland's two legislative bodies, but has the power to hold up bills for up to 30 days. It can also dismiss or appoint official appointees to the government bodies ranging from court regulators to state media supervisors. Senators can call in government officials to testify before the legislature.

"Such a blitzkrieg, a speedy process, will be impossible," said Marcin Matczak, a constitutional law professor at the University of Warsaw. "The Senate is a kind of check and balance element. They are able to slow down, ask difficult questions."

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