Elections in Kosovo - What can we expect from Vetëvendosje?

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February 14 will see the voters in Kosovo go the polls to elect a new parliament, just 16 months after the last elections and after two governments collapsed within a year. In Kosovo, many people expect that Vetëvendosje (self-determination - VV), which won the largest number of votes in the election on 6 October 2019, will achieve an even bigger victory this time. What does this party stand for and what can be expected from a government under its leader, Albin Kurti?

Vetëvendosje's electoral victory in 2019 had its origin in a fundamental political crisis in Kosovo. Both the major parties which had dominated the country until then, the Democratic League of Kosovo, LDK, of Ibrahim Rugova, the first president of independent Kosovo and the Democratic Party of Kosovo, PDK, of which Hashim Thaçi was a prominent leader, have lost a lot of support. They both supported the nationalist agenda for independence, the PDK having direct roots in the Kosova Liberation Army, KLA/UCK, of the 1990s, the LDK representing the decades long fight for democratic rights against national oppression by Yugoslavia/Serbia.

Both parties have based their strategy for independence on subordination to US-imperialism and, to lesser extent, to the European Union and German imperialism. The result is that Kosovo provides a strategic military base for the US in Europe, where they can do whatever they like. The United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo, UNMIK, still maintains military control and a strong political influence. For 13 years, successive governments have proved unable to free the country from a status close to that of a colony.

These governments have also been unable to develop the economy, to professionalise the administration or run an independent judicial system. Corruption is widespread, with politicians being bribed and wielding their political influence on behalf of their backers. Internationally, Kosovo is accused of being a centre both for trafficking drugs and women for prostitution. Kosovo has the third-lowest GDP/capita in Europe.

The elections in October 2019 were necessary, because former prime minister Ramush Haradinaj had to resign as he was accused of war-crimes. The same happened later to PDK President Hashim Thaçi. This presented political difficulties when it came to the formation of a government last year. After months of negotiations, a VV-LDK government under Albin Kurti of Vetëvendosje was formed in February 2020. Only six weeks later, the LDK left the government under pressure openly expressed by US president Donald Trump. Avdullah Hoti of PDK, was then elected by a majority of one vote in May 2020, but in December the constitutional court ruled that one of these votes was invalid.

The rise of Vetëvendosje

The popularity of Vetëvendosje is still increasing and it still describes itself as a civic movement. That is
justified in the sense, that VV is able to mobilise mass protest rallies and has tried not to involve itself too much in the unsavoury business of Kosovo’s politics. Nevertheless, it is doubtful that this clean image can be preserved. Kurti has already invited members of the other parties, or people who exercise a degree of power in their municipalities, to join the party or to run as its candidates. The most prominent example is Vjosa Osmani, the president of the parliament and interim president of the Republic.

The program of VV is very much focused on establishing "the rule of the law" and democratic structures. Taken seriously, this would mean a direct attack on the ruling class power based on capital, local political power and often patriarchal conditions.

In countries like Kosovo, bourgeois commentators often dub such a system as a rule by a "mafia", but Marxists should be careful with this term: patriarchal extended families, corruption and "criminal activities" have accompanied the rise of capitalism from its very beginning. Today, imperialist capital engages equally in bribing politicians in ?its? semi-colonies. Structures like the United Nations Interim Administration in Kosovo, UNMIK, support corruption while transnational companies evade paying taxes on a scale that makes local "mafiosi" look like amateurs.

Vetëvendosje’s programme includes the goal of national unification with Albania. Though it asserts that rights for minorities ought to be respected and all minorities should be recognised as citizens, Albanian would be the only official language. At the same time, VV wants to end the UNMIK-mission and abolish the Ahtisaari-Plan, which defined the administration of the country and the remaining ties of the Mitrovica region to Serbia.

VV also has ambitious social demands such as a progressive taxation system and reversal of "unnecessary" privatisations in the healthcare and education systems.

VV is therefore likely to win votes from the popular masses, including the working-class, the peasants and the petit-bourgeoisie. It appeals to young people who have not been given a future by previous governments and suffer high levels of unemployment or are forced into emigration. Many will support VV for their social demands, others for the radical anti-Serbian programme.

What could a VV government achieve?

The plan of Albin Kurti, the main leader of VV and its central strategist, seems to be to use this mass support to pressure certain parts of the bourgeoisie to act more in the interests of the country rather than their own. In no way is VV an anti-capitalist or socialist party. It fully supports capitalism and does not attack capitalist exploitation either by Kosavar or international capital. Kurti wants the state to act in the interest of the whole bourgeoisie. His method is to use populist mass mobilisations to give the state a stronger position towards certain sectors of the ruling class. In Marxist terms this is a bonapartist strategy.

Whether this can be successful has to be seen. Maybe it will end in a compromise. The inclusion of certain persons of former governments can been interpreted as a signal towards his domestic enemies. The strategy can also fail, if Kurti cannot deliver on his promises to the masses.

In any case, a new Kurti-government will face strong opposition from the US and Germany/EU. None of these imperialist powers have any interest in Vetëvendosje putting the carefully equilibrated status quo that they are responsible for in question once again. They will not remove UNMIK or allow the Ahtisaari-Plan to be touched, because the existing status of Kosovo as a backward semi-colony suits them just fine. Kosovo provides the US a military and air base and, for the EU, it provides a reservoir of cheap labour, especially people to do the dirty jobs. However, VV does not have any strategy for a conflict with these imperialist
powers.

In fact, VVs programme of a general subordination to them makes it unfit for any sort of anti-imperialist struggle. Its perspective of a Union with Albania brings Kosovo little strength (only Albania) but many enemies in the Balkans; Serbia, but also Macedonia, Greece and probably Montenegro and Bulgaria will oppose this move, too. In addition, it could also provoke civil war in Kosovo itself. It will be very easy for any forces to stir up an ethnic conflict in northern Kosovo/Mitrovica using VVs nationalist agenda and putting the blame on them.

For a socialist/Marxist alternative

As VV is standing on an openly bourgeois platform, socialists cannot call for a vote for such a party. It pursues a nationalist road, which has proved time and again no solution for the working people and youth of Kosovo. The secession from Serbia was justified by the national oppression and terror of Serbia but led immediately to discrimination and oppression of national minorities within Kosovo.

VV is not a reformist workers' party, rooted in trade unions, or in the class struggle, that could allow revolutionaries to call for a critical vote for it in order to put it to the test of government.

Of course, if a VV-led government actually tried to apply any of its progressive social or democratic demands, these should be supported, just as this government should be defended against any attempts by the imperialist states to undermine or overthrow it.

Socialists should use these elections to call for the construction of a socialist alternative:
- Its goal must be the expropriation of capital in order to develop infrastructure and plan production
- To raise the productivity of agriculture in a sustainable way, farmers’ cooperatives, supported by state resources, are necessary
- Cooperation with all the other peoples of the Balkans for common economic development
- To fight against all instances of national oppression and ensuring equal rights in languages, culture etc. embodied in a regional federation of socialist states.

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