

Under current circumstances, no single political party appears able to win an absolute majority of the vote in the next parliament. Coalition-building is therefore the order of the day. Most electoral alliances, however, have no moorings to the traditional left, right or centre. The electorate, in return, has very tenuous loyalties to the parties with opinion polls pointing to a high number of "undecided" voters.

The next government will almost certainly be a coalition dominated by either the ethnic Macedonian nationalist party VMRO-DPMNE, which formed the largest party after the 1990 elections, or the SDSM, the former Communists, who have dominated Macedonian politics since 1994. Here, even though SDSM is likely to win fewer votes than VMRO-DPMNE, it is probably in a stronger position, since it can work better with the ethnic Albanian parties and already has experience of negotiating a governing coalition.

The degree to which the elections are considered "free and fair" by the general public and international observers will be a good indicator of Macedonia's political maturity. If all political parties endorse the election results, an important political milestone will have been achieved. The balance between ethnic Macedonian treatment of their ethnic Albanian citizens and ethnic Albanian willingness to compromise is the key to preserving internal stability. Ethnic Albanian parties must continue to participate in Macedonia's political life or the country will see further deepening of its ethnic divisions. Much of this depends upon how much tolerance the government shows the Albanians, as well as the pragmatism of Albanian leaders. A VMRO-DPMNE-dominated coalition which attempts to exclude ethnic Albanian parties could upset the current balance in ethnic relations.

With this in mind, ICG recommends the following:

- Public confidence in the integrity and secrecy of the ballot must be restored in Macedonia. The international community should ensure that any declaration of "fair and free" elections is supported by an evaluation of the entire electoral framework rather than just polling day procedures.
- Should the election results be contested due to alleged electoral fraud or manipulation, the international community should work closely with the accredited election observers to investigate all complaints and written explanations of all conclusions made available to the general public as quickly as possible.
- The international community should encourage the new government to push aside its campaign rhetoric once the polling is complete. The first priority should be to form a working coalition rather than settle old political scores, especially through highly charged public hearings.
- The importance of cordial inter-ethnic relations should be key to forming a new government. Given the current situation in neighbouring Kosovo and Albania, the new government must ensure that it does not encourage