
ALBANIA'S PRESIDENT CANCELS ELECTIONS, CITING TENSE CLIMATE

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Albania's president on Saturday canceled upcoming municipal elections, citing the need to reduce political tensions in the country.

President Ilir Meta said he acted because ``the actual circumstances do not provide necessary conditions for true, democratic, representative and all-inclusive elections" at the end of the month. The president said he would clarify his decision Monday.

Thousands of Albanians who support the political opposition assembled for an anti-government protest on Saturday. Opposition parties planned to boycott the municipal elections and threatened to prevent them taking place.

After sundown, smoke from tear gas and flares clouded the streets of Tirana. Some protesters hurled flares, firecrackers and Molotov cocktails at police officers outside the parliament building. Police responded with tear gas and water cannons.

``This union [of people] imposed the annulment of the June 30 election," Lulzim Basha, leader of the opposition Democratic Party, said, pledging to continue the battle.

Speaking at an election rally, Prime Minister Edi Rama said Meta's decision was wrong and insisted the local votes would be held as scheduled to prevent political ``blackmail" from being used to force the calling of early parliamentary elections.

The Albanian opposition, led by the center-right Democratic Party, accuses the left-wing government of links to organized crime and vote rigging. Opposition leaders are demanding Rama's resignation, the naming of a transitional Cabinet, and an earlier date for the next general election.

Opposition lawmakers also have relinquished their seats in parliament, where the government holds a comfortable majority.

The government denies the allegations and said opposition-organized protests that started in February have hurt the country's image as the European Union is set to decide this month whether to launch negotiations to include Albania as a member.

The United States and the European Union urged protesters to disavow violence and sit in a dialogue with government representatives to resolve the political crisis.

In an interview with private TV station Top Channel, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State

Mathew Palmer warned opposition political leaders, ``if there are acts of violence in future protests, we will consider them responsible."

<https://www.voanews.com/a/albania-s-president-cancels-elections-citing-tense-climate-/4951319.html>

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