

# Jamaica prime minister won't concede

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KINGSTON, Jamaica --

Jamaica's first female prime minister refused to accept a razor-thin defeat that apparently ended her party's nearly 20 years in power.

The opposition Jamaica Labor Party won 31 of the 60 seats in the House of Representatives Monday -- just enough to oust Prime Minister Portia Simpson Miller and her People's National Party -- according to preliminary returns.

Simpson Miller said several races that were so close that they could switch in a recount and complained of irregularities.

"We are conceding no victory to the Jamaica Labor Party," she said.

But the head of an international observer team called the election "free, fair and credible."

Albert Ramdin, assistant secretary-general for the Organization of American States, said Tuesday that while there were a few minor problems in Monday's vote typical of any election, nothing was serious enough to undermine the Labor Party victory.

"I believe this election can stand international scrutiny," Ramdin, who headed a team of about 40 observers, told The Associated Press.

The final count began Tuesday morning and typically takes about two days as election officers in each of the 60 precincts go through the ballots, according to Jamaica's Electoral Commission.

Jubilant JLP supporters drove through the streets of Kingston honking their horns, while passengers leaned out the windows. Hundreds of supporters cheered and waved green flags at party headquarters as Golding took the stage to the strains of the Bob Marley song "Coming in from the Cold."

Golding said the "tenuous" victory could make governing a challenge. He also noted the PNP won three seats by less than 100 votes and his side's margin could widen.

Simpson Miller alleged that some candidates campaigned beyond the cutoff point mandated by election rules and were "buying votes." She also said that some members of her party were prevented from voting.

"We're not going to stand by and allow people to use criminals to decide the future of the Jamaican people," she said.

Simpson Miller became the country's first woman prime minister when party delegates chose her to replace P.J. Patterson upon his retirement in March 2006.

In a rare episode of violence, ruling party supporters fired shots at an East Kingston Methodist church, according to witnesses who said the attackers had quarreled earlier with opposition backers. Heavily armed soldiers and police quickly swarmed the area and no injuries were reported.

The two main parties do not have stark ideological differences and the determining factor in the election seemed to be which leader has a better chance of easing Jamaica's deep-seated poverty, creating jobs and reducing crime in a country with one of the highest homicide rates in the world. Both Golding and Simpson Miller are longtime parliament members.

Known as "Sista P," and "Mama P," the 61-year-old Simpson Miller is known for her plain speaking style and support of the poor.

Once wildly popular, her support has waned amid complaints she responded poorly to Hurricane Dean two weeks ago and a perception that she did not fare well in a debate with Golding.

Golding, 58, has promised to streamline government bureaucracy and attract foreign investment.