

Pressure for Jamaica PM to concede loss

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KINGSTON, Jamaica --

Jamaica's first female prime minister faced pressure to concede defeat Tuesday as officials began a final tally of ballots from an election praised by international observers as "professional and transparent."

With her party apparently suffering a razor-thin defeat in Monday's vote, Prime Minister Portia Simpson Miller refused to give up, saying the final count - expected to take about two days - could shift enough close races for her People's National Party to win.

Preliminary returns gave the opposition Jamaica Labor Party 31 of the 60 seats in the House of Representatives - a margin just large enough to end the governing party's nearly 20 years in power.

Simpson Miller complained of irregularities, alleging that some candidates campaigned after the cutoff point mandated by election rules and 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.

The Organization of American States issued a statement defending the election process, saying that voters could find their names on the rolls "almost without exception" and that the ballot was held in a "professional and transparent manner."

"I believe this election can stand international scrutiny," said Albert Ramdin, the organization's assistant secretary-general who led a team of about 40 observers.

In an editorial Tuesday, the Gleaner newspaper urged Simpson Miller to accept defeat once the final tally is completed. "Political leaders need to both show statesmanship and encourage calm and good sense, not the opposite," it said.

The two main parties did not have stark ideological differences on how to address Jamaica's deep-seated poverty, lack of jobs and crime.

Simpson Miller, who became the first woman to head the island's government in March 2006, was once wildly popular, but her support waned amid complaints she responded poorly to Hurricane Dean two weeks ago and a perception she did not fare well in a debate with Bruce Golding, leader of the Jamaica Labor Party.