

Jamaican PM concedes but vows to fight

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KINGSTON, Jamaica --

Jamaica's Prime Minister Portia Simpson-Miller finally conceded defeat in this week's tight election, though she said her party might still challenge the results of some parliamentary races.

"The People's National Party, as part of its highest traditions, respects and will always respect the voice of the Jamaican people and their will as expressed in the vote," Simpson said in a statement issued late Tuesday night and reported by the Associated Press.

Simpson Miller had been under increasing pressure to concede after preliminary results gave the opposition Jamaica Labor Party a 32-28 lead in the 60-seat parliament, enough to end the PNP's 18-year hold on power.

If the current tally holds, opposition leader Bruce Golding faces a tough challenge in leading Jamaica. Not only does he have to unite a country divided for the past two years over contentious politics -- and ruled nearly two decades by the same political party, the PNP -- but must now also find a way to govern with a razor-thin majority.

Political analysts add that the 59-year-old businessman must also keep his own members from switching parties. Two JLP members have joined the PNP in the past year.

At the same time, should the PNP mount a successful court challenge to some of the JLP's wins -- including claims that two winning candidates should be disqualified because they are naturalized U.S. citizens -- Golding and the JLP can quickly go from being the government to the opposition.

"It's an unprecedented situation," said Brian Meeks, a professor of social and political change at the University of West Indies Mona Campus in Kingston. "We have never had this kind of election so close."

One possible scenario that haunted Jamaica political watchers was a 30/30 parliamentary tie. Several years ago, the parliament in nearby Trinidad and Tobago was split down the middle, and the country was forced to hold new elections. Meeks said he hopes that is "an avenue we don't have to take."

Although there is little ideological differences between the two parties, Golding has campaigned on issues such as constitutional reform that would require at least a two-thirds majority.

Still, despite dire predictions from commentators Tuesday, the chairman of the Electoral Commission of Jamaica and the head of the Organization of American States international observation team both said they were hopeful that Jamaica would work out its current crisis. Both noted there are legal procedures in place to address candidates' grievances.

"We are a country committed to the democratic process we have practiced for 60 years. We are a country that abides by the rule of law," said Errol Miller, the ECJ chair. "We have changed governments seven times between the two parties involved."

The country, which has a history of political violence, remained relatively calm Tuesday with some isolated reports of gunfire as supporters on both sides awaited the final tally from the recounts, expected as early as Wednesday but more likely to come on Thursday.

What happens next in Jamaica, and over the next few years, will very much depend on the leadership of Golding and Simpson-Miller, Sobion said.

"In Jamaica, things could easily descend into serious social disturbances unless the political leaders -- not only Bruce Golding alone but Portia Simpson-Miller -- display a certain display of political maturity," he said. "Unless you have political maturity and responsibility coming from the leadership, you could descend into some chaos."

In a brief speech to supporters Monday night, Simpson-Miller declined to concede the election, saying that she was waiting for the official vote count. She said the PNP would be "taking action" over some seats.

Golding stopped short of claiming outright victory but called for the transition of power to take place peacefully. "However perplexing some may find the results, the fact is that the people have spoken," he told supporters clad in green, his party's color.

Political analysts said that with a low 60 percent voter turnout, the election was not a "decisive mandate" to the JLP. But it still reflected voter frustration with Jamaica's soaring murder rate, lack of jobs and slow economic growth after 18 years of PNP rule.