

Centre-right parties set to hold power in Ireland

AFP – The incumbent centre-right parties Fianna Fail and Fine Gael looked set Monday to retain power in Ireland as vote counting in the European Union member's general election continued, with coalition talks looming.

With 153 of 174 seats in the lower chamber of parliament decided since Friday's vote, the two parties were ahead of the main opposition, the left-wing nationalist Sinn Fein.

Fianna Fail, led by the experienced Micheal Martin, had the largest vote share with nearly 22 percent.

Fine Gael, whose leader Simon Harris is the outgoing prime minister (taoiseach), was running second with nearly 21 percent, while Sinn Fein was in third with 19 percent.

To form a majority, a party or coalition requires at least 88 seats. So far, Fianna Fail was projected to win 40 seats, Fine Gael 33, and Sinn Fein 34.

Both centre-right parties have repeatedly ruled out entering a coalition with Sinn Fein.

"Overall the centre has held up in Irish politics," Paschal Donohoe, a top Fine Gael minister in the outgoing cabinet, told reporters in Dublin after his re-election to parliament.

"But we do have a lot of work to do," he added.

The centre-left opposition parties Labour and the Social Democrats are seen by Fine Gael and Fianna Fail as the most likely junior coalition parties, according to media reports.

– Horse-trading –

The Green Party was the third member of the previous coalition but its support collapsed nationwide, with all but one seat

likely to be lost.

At the last general election in 2020, the pro-Irish unity Sinn Féin – the former political wing of the paramilitary Irish Republican Army – was the most popular party but could not find willing coalition partners.

That led to weeks of horse-trading, ending up with Fine Gael, which has been in power since 2011, agreeing a deal with Fianna Fail.

During the last parliamentary term, the role of prime minister rotated between the Fianna Fail and Fine Gael leaders.

The final seat numbers, which will not be confirmed until later this week, will determine whether Harris returns as taoiseach or Martin takes the role under a similar rotation arrangement.

The new parliament is due to sit for the first time on December 18, but with coalition talks likely to drag on a new government might not be formed until next year.

Martin told reporters in Cork that there was “very little point” in discussing government formation until seats were finalised.

“I think there’s capacity to get on,” he said, when asked if there is trust between Fianna Fail and Fine Gael.

Fine Gael’s Donohoe said there was “a chance” a government might still be formed this year.

The three-week campaign, launched after Harris called a snap election on November 8, was dominated by rancour over housing supply and cost-of-living crises, health, public spending and the economy.

“It’s all been an anti-climax as far as I’m concerned,” Michael O’Kane, a 76-year-old semi-retired engineer, told AFP

in Dublin.

“It’s more of the same. The two parties who dominated the government last time are back again... but with the (fresh coalition partners) it might be a little bit less stable,” he said.

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