

Polish ruling party tries to broaden appeal as support wanes

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WARSAW - With a year left until a parliamentary election, Poland's ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party is trying to broaden its appeal to voters outside its core conservative-nationalist constituency, amid signs that its support is waning.

But PiS faces a hard slog winning over liberal urban Poles following years of clashes with the European Union over the rule of law in Poland, the bloc's largest ex-communist member state, and its flirtations with the far-right.

In local elections last month, PiS lost a high-profile race for Warsaw mayor, though it made some limited gains elsewhere.

An opinion poll by Kantar Millward Brown (KMB) last week put support for PiS at about 33 percent, down five percentage points from September and from the 2015 national election. Its popularity has been hit by a corruption scandal that led to the resignation of the PiS-appointed financial regulator.

"The party is on the defensive - it's unable to solve the problems that it created," said Jaroslaw Flis, a political scientist at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow.

"The crisis (over the financial regulator) and (tensions) over European matters have given a boost to the opposition before next year's elections... These issues could make it hard for PiS... to win over a more centrist electorate."

PiS, which champions Poland's traditional Catholic values and heritage, remains comfortably ahead of its main centrist and leftist rivals, helped by a buoyant economy, low unemployment, generous welfare handouts and its patriotic rhetoric.

But in a nod to Polish liberals, the government on Nov. 21 reversed changes it had made in the country's Supreme Court that the EU had condemned as undemocratic, allowing judges who had been forced to quit to return to their jobs.

The reform was a centerpiece of the PiS government's years-long legal battle with the EU that has culminated in an unprecedented investigation by the executive European Commission into the rule of law in Poland.

"PiS wants to represent a broad, multi-million-member group of Poles who respect national traditions," Zdzislaw Krasnodebski, a senior member of the European Parliament and a PiS ally, told Reuters.

FAR-RIGHT MARCH

But while Polish liberals welcome a less combative approach toward the EU, they have been dismayed by the government's overtures toward the far-right, notably during this month's celebrations to mark the centenary of the modern Polish state.

After Warsaw's mayor tried to ban an annual march by the far-right to mark independence day, the government agreed with organizers after last-minute talks to hold a joint event to mark 100 years since Poland's 1918 declaration of independence.

Participants in the Nov. 11 march chanted anti-EU slogans and waved banners that read "God, honor, homeland".

But PiS officials said they had successfully reined in the far-right, noting that the march was largely devoid of the white supremacist and racist slogans that have marred it in previous years.

However some liberals accuse PiS, which says it rejects anti-Semitism and racism, of pandering to the far-right.

"It's hard to accept such standards of liberal democracy," said Rafal Pankowski, a sociologist and deputy editor of Polish anti-fascist magazine, Never Again. "The government legitimized an extremist group."

Such concerns - along with the possible fallout from the corruption scandal - could harm PiS and bolster opposition parties in the countdown to European Parliament elections next May and next autumn's parliamentary polls in Poland.

"We will have to seriously think about how to mobilize these (centrist) voters," said Adam Bielan, a senior lawmaker from a small center-right party now in coalition with PiS. REUTERS

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