

Youthful premier seeks mandate in Jamaican election

Reuters

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KINGSTON, Dec 29 — Jamaicans cast ballots today in a closely fought general election as Prime Minister Andrew Holness, who has been in office just two months, seeks a popular mandate to tackle the Caribbean country's deepening economic woes.

Polls show Jamaica's two longtime dominant parties, the ruling Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) and the People's National Party (PNP), running neck-and-neck in a vote focused on the island's stagnant and debt-ridden economy.

Holness, a 39-year-old former education minister, hopes to keep the ruling party in power for a second consecutive term. The country's youngest-ever prime minister, he took office in October after the party suffered a blow when his predecessor surprisingly resigned.

The PNP is led by Portia Simpson Miller, a former prime minister who became Jamaica's first female leader in 2006 and has vowed to make Holness the shortest-serving premier in the island nation's history.

The winner of the election will face the challenge of reinvigorating the economy in one of the world's most indebted countries.

Although one of the Caribbean's more developed economies, Jamaica is saddled with a public debt load now totaling more than 120 percent of its gross domestic product.

Its burdensome debt has proved a drag on the economy, which is dependent on tourism and has failed to grow over the last four years, sputtering since the JLP took power.

Unemployment has risen from 9.8 per cent in 2007 to 12.9 per cent.

Analysts say the new government will likely be forced to implement unpopular austerity measures, including possible layoffs of state workers, in an effort to shore up the economy after it received a US\$1.27 billion (RM4.01 billion) lifeline from the International Monetary Fund last year.

The election comes a year earlier than originally scheduled.

Worried about the global economic outlook and its implications for Jamaica, Holness called the election in early December only weeks after being sworn in as prime minister.

Holness was chosen by JLP lawmakers after former Prime Minister Bruce Golding resigned over fallout from his handling of a US request for the extradition of a notorious Jamaican gang leader.

After initially fighting Christopher "Dudus" Coke's extradition to New York on drug-trafficking charges, Golding's administration bowed to US pressure in May 2010 and sent police and the military into the slums in the capital of Kingston to take him into custody.

Seventy-six people died in ensuing gun battles between government forces and supporters of Coke, once a strong JLP supporter who wielded powerful influence in the slums.

If Holness and the JLP lose the election, it would mark the first time Jamaicans had voted out an incumbent government after only one term and Holness would be the shortest-serving premier in Jamaican history. — Reuters

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