Poland's Andrzej Duda’s Re-election - Ultra-nationalism

Why in news?

President Andrzej Duda of Poland got re-elected with a narrow victory over pro-EU Warsaw mayor Rafał Trzaskowski.

What is the significance?

- Mr. Duda is a staunch ally of the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party.
- The party, essentially, seeks to overhaul Polish society and institutions.
- In this context, Duda’s re-election is a critical iteration for Poland’s ultra-nationalist government.
- The government, notably, was involved in a stand-off with the European Union.
- This was over Poland's slide into authoritarianism and erosion of the rule of law.
- So, the conservative incumbent’s return is a setback to halting Poland’s slide into authoritarianism.

How was the opposition performance?

- Mr. Duda, a former lawyer, polled 51.2% of the vote, against 48.7% by his rival, Rafał Trzaskowski, the Mayor of Warsaw.
- Trzaskowski was backed by the centre-right Civic Coalition.
- He considerably narrowed the 13% lead he conceded in the first round held before.
- But that gain could not compensate for the obvious lack of initiative behind the fragmented opposition.
- Notably, there was a multi-cornered contest from the opposition in the earlier round.
- Mr. Trzaskowski was drawn into the race just days before the government decided to defer the polls originally scheduled in May 2020.
- His entry revitalised the election campaign, which had lost momentum.
- The opposition pinned its hopes on Mr. Trzaskowski to win and halt the country’s authoritarian slide.
- But the results turned otherwise.

What do the election results suggest of Poland?

- The conduct of regular elections was itself appreciable.
- This is because the government had passed legislation to restrict the franchise to a postal ballot following the COVID-19 pandemic.
- So, the impressive 65% voter turnout during both rounds of the election possibly speaks to the stark choices before the citizens.
- One was to return to the open and inclusive model of society advocated by the Civic Coalition that underpinned Warsaw's 2004 admission to the EU.
- The other was to continue with the politics of ultra-nationalism.
- This comes with an inward-looking emphasis on the country's Roman Catholic identity espoused by the PiS.
- The election also saw a generational divide, with young voters supporting Trzaskowski and older voters supporting Duda.

What are Mr. Duda's key policies?

- Mr. Duda's first term began in 2015 in the backdrop of a polarised atmosphere.
- He rejected the view that Poles (native or inhabitant of Poland) should apologise to the Jews for the 1941 Jedwabne pogrom during the Nazi Holocaust.
- During his re-election bid, Mr. Duda made critical comments about Poland's former communist rulers and LGBT rights, to appeal to his conservative constituency.
- LGBT rights were a key divisive point between the two presidential candidates.
- Duda promised to protect families from the "LGBT ideology", stating it was more dangerous than communism.
- Trzaskowski's platform, on the other hand, included support for -
    i. civil unions for same-sex couples
    ii. opposition to the tightening of abortion laws
    iii. restoration of state support for in-vitro fertilisation

What are the other concerns?

- **Democracy** - The incumbent's campaign and coverage by the public broadcaster were marked by homophobic, xenophobic and anti-Semitic rhetoric.
- The government's partisan coverage of PiS electioneering via the state-owned broadcasting houses came under scrutiny during the campaign.
- This suggests encroachments on democratic freedoms and the rule of law.
- They certainly fall into a broader pattern of political interference with judicial appointments.

- Now, with Mr. Duda's re-election, Poland’s backward march from democracy is likely to continue unabated.
- **EU** - Poland's election is not likely to improve relations with the European Union, which has criticised the country's judicial reforms.
- The EU has said the reforms jeopardise the separation of powers between the government and the judiciary.
- The EU launched its Article 7 procedure against Poland, determining that there was a risk to EU values and the independence of the judiciary.
- The proceedings could lead to sanctions including the loss of EU voting rights.
- In 2018, Duda had referred to the EU as an "imaginary community" that does little to help Poland.

How does the future look?

- It remains to be seen how the vote will impact Poland's future policies.
- However, Duda's re-election is likely to cement their socially conservative policies.
- But many have also credited the ruling party's contribution in lowering inequality through economic support measures and social welfare programmes.
- Duda has promised 'stronger alliance' with Donald Trump during U.S. visit.
- In all, the government is now free to pursue its agenda by controlling almost all levers of powers in the Polish political system.

Source: The Hindu, Euronews

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