

Ahern seeking ally for third term after Irish election count

DUBLIN (Reuters) Opposition leaders begin weighing up Sunday whether to support a government led by Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern after final election results confirmed he was on track to secure a third successive term.

As counting drew to a close in the early hours of Sunday, two members of Ahern's Fianna Fail party were the only remaining contenders for the last unassigned parliamentary seat.

That means he will emerge from Thursday's general election with 78 seats which is five short of a majority but one more than a potential opposition 'rainbow' alliance of Fine Gael, the left-leaning Labour Party and the Green Party.

Ahern's junior coalition partner the probusiness Progressive Democrats suffered a collapse in support, however, losing six of the eight seats they held in the last Parliament.

Fine Gael leader and would-be Prime Minister Enda Kenny said he still hoped to cobble together a coalition to deprive Ahern of a third term but it looked unlikely given he would have to woo a fourth party and independents into the 'rainbow' grouping.

Kenny's opposition ally, Labour leader Pat Rabbitte, conceded defeat but also indicated that his party's membership was unlikely to switch sides in order to back Ahern.

"Mr. Ahern is in the driving seat and has a number of options in terms of forming a government. In that sense, Labour will be in opposition," Rabbitte said.

Ahern could secure a slim majority with the remaining



TREVOR SARGENT, leader of the Green Party, leaves RTE's television studios in Dublin on Saturday.

REUTERS/PHOTO

Progressive Democrats and a handful of independents but after a decade in power he has stressed that he wants the stability to be able to serve another full five-year term.

That means the Greens are the bookmakers' favorite to enter government for the first time but party leader Trevor Sargent said he would want support for reform of the country's environmental and planning policies before entering a coalition.

"There are huge opportunities in this country but it does require an acceptance that business as usual is not an option," he said. "Therein lies hopefully the makings of a good stable government with the Greens at the center."

Days of internal party discussions are now likely to follow before negotiations begin on shaping the next government.

"I think you can take it that (Finance Minister) Brian Cowen and myself by mid-week will be sitting down to work out our strategy," Ahern told broadcaster RTE.



IRISH PRIME MINISTER Bertie Ahern leaves a party office in Dublin on Saturday.

AP/WIDE

Final Irish election results

Party	Seats won	Gains/losses
Fianna Fail	78	-2
Fine Gael	51	+19
Labour	20	-1
Progressive Democrats	2	-6
Green Party	6	
Sinn Fein	4	-1
Others	5	-9
Total	186	
Alliances		
Fianna Fail/Progressive Democrats*	80	
Fine Gael/Labour/Greens**	77	

* Includes the speaker of the lower house, who is automatically re-elected.

** The Green Party has not asked itself to a rival for this election, but a pact with Fine Gael and Labour is the only realistic opposition coalition.

Reuters