

European
Elections monitor

Corinne Deloy

D-7
7 Day before
the poll

The outgoing President Olafur Ragnar Grimsson is ahead in the polls just one week before the presidential election in Iceland.

Around 240,000 Icelanders are being called to elect the President of the Republic on 30th June next. Outgoing head of State Olafur Ragnar Grimsson is running for his 5th term in office. Just one week before the vote, journalist Thora Arnorsdottir follows hot on his heels.

3 men and 3 women are official candidates for the supreme office:

- Olafur Ragnar Grimsson, 69 years old, outgoing president in office since 1996;
- Thora Arnorsdottir, 37 years old, journalist at the State TV channel RUV;
- Ari Trausti Gudmundsson, 63 years old, geophysician, a former communist, standing as an independent;
- Herdis Thorgeirsdottir, 58 years old, notary and professor of law at the University of Bifröst in Norðurárdalur, chairman of European Women Jurists and Iceland's representative at the Venice Commission (European Commission for Democracy through Law at the Council of Europe);
- Hannes Bjarnason, farmer from Skagafjörður living in Norway for 14 years;
- Andrea Olafsdottir, chairperson of the association Hagsmunasamtök heimilanna (The Property Owners' Coalition).

The Committee supervising the presidential election invalidated the candidature of Asthor Magnusson, a businessman and pacifist sympathiser of the international organisation Fridur 2000 (Peace 2000) and the unfortunate candidate in the presidential election on 26th June 2004 (1.9% of the vote). The committee believed that the list of sponsors put forward by the candidate (a minimum of 1,500) was not in line with the requirements of the electoral law. Moreover Jon

Larusson, an inspector of police responsible for tax fraud, who was standing as an independent, withdrew from the race.

The two favourites in the election

Thora Arnorsdottir and Olafur Ragnar Grimsson are both running easily ahead in the polls. The former is believed to stand rather to the left of the political scale whilst the outgoing president lies more to the right. The latter has the support of the rightwing of the Independence Party led by Bjarni Benediktsson, which dominated the island's political life for a long time; he also has the support of the leftwing of the Left Movement-the Greens led by Steingrímur Sigfússon – both nationalist trends – as well as the Progress Party, a centrist farmers' party led by Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson.

Olafur Ragnar Grimsson criticises Thora Arnorsdottir for her lack of competence in international matters. *"It is dangerous for a presidential candidate to explain that his/her role will be to support the government's Foreign Minister,"* he declared. He is campaigning on the need for the country to have a reliable captain at the helm during a period of crisis and uncertainty. *"Today, no one knows what the next Icelandic Constitution will be like (on 27th November 2010 the Icelanders elected a Constituent Assembly comprising 25 citizens who*

were responsible for re-writing the Fundamental Law of 1944; a text that was presented to the Althing (Parliament) but which has not yet been adopted; new political parties have been created ; we are negotiating our possible entry into the EU; Europe is facing a serious economic crisis, and the situation has never been so uncertain," he declared.

Olafur Ragnar Grimsson justified the right to use his veto (twice, in 2010 and 2011) because of world developments which have led to a change in his role as head of State. *"I changed the presidential function but people have to understand that we have entered a new era and that the exercise of the supreme office has to be different from what it was in the 1950's,"* he stressed. He believed that his decision to call a referendum twice on laws approved by parliament over the Icesave law (which planned for Reykjavik's reimbursement of a 3.8 billion € debt to the Netherlands and the UK) enabled *"the unification of the Icelandic nation, to give power to the people and to strengthen faith of the latter in democracy."*

Thora Arnorsdottir has said that if she were elected on 30th June she would not interfere in domestic policy. Her programme can be summarised in two words: reconciliation and union. In her opinion Iceland is a divided country. *"My message has been the same since the start of the campaign: we have to work to bring the nation together focusing on its values rather than continuing along the path of disagreement (...) We must move forwards and put an end to our incessant division (...) The Head of State must unite and not make divisions worse,"* declared the candidate who says that she also wants to *"provide stability in the relationship between the nation and parliament."*

Concerning Olafur Ragnar Grimsson and the extremely uncertain situation in which Iceland finds itself, Thora Arnorsdottir replies: *"the truth is that the interpretation by the President of the Republic of what comprises his special reserve is the main factor in the present atmosphere of uncertainty and instability,"* adding, *"the role of the President*

of the Republic is to protect democracy not take an active part in political debates." Finally when asked about the qualities that a Head of State is supposed to have Ms Arnorsdottir quotes moderation, humility, honesty and respect for the people and the country. *"I do not consider the presidency of the Republic as a political position,"* stressed Thora Arnorsdottir who has said on several occasions that the Head of State should not give his opinion on a subject like Iceland joining the European Union for example.

The other candidates

Ari Trausti Gudmundsson is extremely critical of Olafur Ragnar Grimsson. In his opinion the outgoing president, whom he reproaches for having gone beyond the prerogatives granted to the head of State by the Constitution, has had his time and should withdraw from political life. He believes that on no account should the leading Icelander defend any political programme *"If this happens he takes sides and no longer represents the nation,"* he indicated adding that, *"the traditional role of the president of the Republic is apolitical and symbolic. He must unify and be the country's cultural ambassador."*

Hannes Bjarnason believes that article 26 of the Constitution (the possibility for the head of State to refuse to promulgate a draft law and to submit this to a referendum) must be used when the country's freedom is threatened and *"if the president of the Republic thinks that it is the only real way to take democracy forwards."* When asked about Iceland's possible accession to the EU he answered that the Head of State could give his opinion on this but he had to ensure that *"he did not use his position to influence or convince the electorate."*

Finally Andrea Olafsdottir regrets that the electorate now votes more in support of a personality than a programme in the presidential election.

According to a poll by Capacent Gallup for the TV

channel RUV, Olafur Ragnar Grimsson is due to win the presidential election on 30th June with 44.8% of the vote; 37% is due to go to Thora Arnorsdottir. Olafur Ragnar Grimsson has the support of those close to the Independence Party, and the Progress Party, the oldest voters and those living in the rural part of the country. Thora Arnor-

sdottir holds a majority amongst the supporters of the Social Democratic Alliance led by Prime Minister Johanna Sigurdardottir, the youngest voters, as well as the most urban and also the most qualified Icelanders. Ari Trausti Gudmundsson is due to win 10.5%, Herdis Thorgeirsdottir, 5.3% Andrea Olafsdottir, 1.7% and Hannes Bjarnson 0.7%.

You can read all of our publications on our site:
www.robert-schuman.eu

Publishing Director: Pascale JOANNIN

THE FONDATION ROBERT SCHUMAN, created in 1991 and acknowledged by State decree in 1992, is the main French research centre on Europe. It develops research on the European Union and its policies and promotes the content of these in France , Europe and abroad. It encourages, enriches and stimulates European debate thanks to its research, publications and the organisation of conferences. The Foundation is presided over by Mr. Jean-Dominique Giuliani.