Tomorrow's Affairs
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By: TA | AP Insight

The new president of Ireland - a critic of Israel and Europe's growing militarization

Ireland's president for the next seven years is an independent lawmaker who has long spoken in support of Palestinians and has been vocal about her distrust of European Union policies.

Left-wing independent Catherine Connolly, 68, secured 63% of votes in a landslide election victory on Saturday, comfortably defeating her center-right rival, former Cabinet minister Heather Humphreys.

The politician won after Ireland's left-leaning opposition parties, including Sinn Féin, united to back her, and she is expected to be a voice unafraid to challenge Ireland's center-right government.

While Irish presidents hold a largely ceremonial role and do not have executive powers like shaping laws, they represent Ireland on the world stage and are often seen as a unifying voice on major issues.

Connolly will succeed Michael D. Higgins, a popular president who has been vocal about the war in Gaza and NATO spending, among other things.

Connolly vowed Saturday to be “an inclusive president” who would champion diversity and be “a voice for peace.”

From independent lawmaker to president

Connolly, a mother to two sons, has served three terms as an independent lawmaker for Galway West since she was elected to Parliament in 2016. In 2020 she became the first woman to be the deputy speaker of Parliament's lower house.

She grew up in social housing in a suburb of Galway in western Ireland as one of 14 children. Her mother died when she was nine years old, and her father worked at a local shipyard.

As a student, she volunteered with a Catholic organization to help older people and took on other community roles.

She has degrees in clinical psychology and law, and was a lawyer before she entered politics.

Connolly began her political career when she was elected as a Labour Party member of Galway City Council in 1999. Five years later, she was elected mayor of the city of Galway. She left Labour in 2007.

Outspoken views against Israel and the EU

Connolly has not shied from criticizing Israel over the war in Gaza.

In September she drew fire for calling Hamas “part of the fabric of the Palestinian people.”

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Prime Minister Micheál Martin criticized her for appearing reluctant to condemn the militant group's actions in the Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel that ignited the two-year Israel-Hamas war in Gaza.

She later maintained that she “utterly condemned” Hamas' actions, while also criticizing Israel for carrying out what she called a genocide in Gaza.

On Europe, she has repeatedly criticized the European Union for its growing “militarization” following Russia's full-scale

invasion of Ukraine, drawn comparisons with Nazi-era armament in the 1930s, and questioned NATO expansion in the east.

Critics have said those comments, along with others critical of the U.S. and U.K., risk alienating Ireland's allies.

Connolly has also stressed she wants to defend Ireland's tradition of military neutrality, in the face of calls for the country to contribute more to European defense.

During her campaign, she said there should be a referendum on a government plan to remove the “triple lock” — the conditions for the deployment of Irish soldiers on international missions.

Connolly's outspoken style and message of social equality and inclusivity have appealed to many, especially younger voters.

In televised presidential debates, she has said she will respect the limits of the office — though she also said in her acceptance speech that she would speak “when it's necessary” as president.

“Together, we can shape a new republic that values everybody, that values and champions diversity and that takes confidence in our own identity, our Irish language, our English language, and new people who have come to our country,” she said Saturday at Dublin Castle.