

European
Elections monitor

Journalist Thora Arnorsdottir is the favourite in the Icelandic presidential election, to be held on 30th June

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Analysis
1 month before
the poll

Until only very recently the Icelandic tradition held that no competitor stood against the outgoing President of the Republic if the latter was seeking a further mandate. The current head of state, Olafur Ragnar Grimsson, elected for the first time on 29th June 1996 with 40.9% of the vote, was renewed in his functions in June 2000 without any ballot being held. In 2004, however, there was a break with tradition (for the second time since 1988): although the President of the Republic had announced that he wanted a third mandate, two other people stood against him: the businessman and militant pacifist Asthor Magnusson (who had already stood in the 1996 presidential elections, when he obtained 2.6% of the vote) and the businessman Baldur Agustsson. Olafur Ragnar Grimsson was however easily re-elected, with 86.50% of the vote. In 2008, no presidential election was organised since no candidate stood against the outgoing President.

On 4th March, Olafur Ragnar Grimsson announced his decision to stand for a 5th mandate at the presidential election to be held on 30th June, after receiving a petition signed by 31 733 people in favour of his candidature. In his New Year speech in December 2011, the head of State had announced that he wanted to devote his time to other work, although he did not officially announce that he was not going to stand. «*The desire expressed by some Icelanders that I should stay at my post is due to the growing uncertainty with regard to government of the country and the position of the President of the Republic in the Constitution*», he declared. «*It is important to remain vigilant in terms of the place of our nation on the international stage*» added Olafur Ragnar Grimsson.

The role of the President

In Iceland the role of the President is essentially honorific. The head of State, often qualified as a «king without a crown» is however a symbol of national unity and he exercises moral authority amongst his fellow citizens. The presidential mandate lasts for 4 years and there is no limit set on the number of mandates.

All candidates for the role of president must collect at least 1 500 signatures in order to be able to stand in the elections. The ballot takes place over a single round and the candidate who wins the largest number of votes to his name is elected president of the Republic. Voters usually decide according to the personality of the candidates rather than their political leanings.

On 2nd June 2004, Olafur Ragnar Grimsson used

his veto against a law on the media which sought to combat concentrations deemed liable to restrict consumer liberties in economic and political terms, which had been voted on the previous 25th May by the Althing, Parliament's single chamber. This first presidential veto in the country's history had the effect of a thunderbolt on the island. The head of State, who had recalled the importance of the freedom of expression and the necessity for the media in Iceland to be free, justified his decision by the fact that the law voted by Parliament was highly controversial. According to article 26 of the Constitution, the law should have been put to referendum but the text was finally abrogated on 22nd July 2004.

On 2nd January 2010, Olafur Ragnar Grimsson announced his refusal to sign the law on the Icesave agreement, voted by Parliament during the night of 30th to 31st December 2009. A referendum was organised on 6th March 2010 which saw the Icelan-

Presidential election in Iceland 30th June 2012

ders follow their head of State and reject the Icesave agreement by 93% of the vote. Almost a year later, on 20th February 2011, Olafur Ragnar Grimsson again announced the organisation of a referendum on the new law on the Icesave agreement, voted by the Althing four days earlier. The following 9th April, 58.9% of voters rejected the text.

The candidates

There are 8 official candidates in the presidential elections:

- Olafur Ragnar Grimsson, 69, head of State since 1996, standing for a 5th mandate.
- Thora Arnorsdottir, 37, journalist for the State TV channel, announced her candidature on 4th April, after collecting the 1 500 signatures required in just one weekend. The first candidate to campaign whilst pregnant, she took a few days off to give birth to a baby girl on 18th May.
- Asthor Magnusson, businessman and militant pacifist with the international organisation Fridur 2000 (Peace 2000). He was unlucky in the presidential elections held on 26th June 2004 (1.9% of the vote) and is now seeking to ensure that his presidency acts as a symbol of peace.
- Herdis Thorgeirsdottir, 58, a solicitor and law professor at Bifröst University in Northurárdalur. She is president of the European Women Jurists Association and represents Iceland at the Venice Commission (European Commission for Democracy through Law at the Council of Europe).
- Ari Trausti Gudmundsson, 63, writer, geophysicist, former communist who now declares himself to be independent.
- Jon Larusson, originally from Selfoss (South), a police inspector in charge of tax fraud since 2008; he declares himself to be apolitical and is opposed to Iceland joining the European Union.
- Hannes Bjarnason, a farmer from Skagafjörður who has lived in Norway for 14 years, wants to put morality at the centre of the debate and promises to safeguard the nation's interests.
- Adrea Olafsdottir is president of the Hagsmunasamtök heimilanna association (the Coalition of

owners), and pleads in favour of paying the minimum wage (193 krona, i.e. € 1163) to the president of the Republic and members of parliament.

A duel between Olafur Ragnar Grimsson and Thora Arnorsdottir

The outgoing head of State, Olafur Ragnar Grimsson, justifies his repeat candidacy by his desire to work in the people's interests at a time of particular upheaval. In the newspaper *Morgunblathith* he has indicated that if he is re-elected he may leave his post before the end of his mandate. If Olafur Ragnar Grimsson were to be re-elected on 30th June, he would become the longest-serving President of the Republic ever at the head of the country.

Opinion polls still give the current resident at Besastathir, the name of the Icelandic presidential residence, about one third of the vote, a high percentage after 16 years in power. Most Icelanders nevertheless express their desire to see a new face in the role of President, which is why, a month before the vote, the favourite in the polls is Thora Arnorsdottir. Olafur Ragnar Grimsson is well aware of this fact and concentrates all his attacks on the journalist. He had no hesitation, for example, in saying that his adversary is «*dangerous for the country*» stating that she «*will do nothing but follow the government's will, particularly in terms of foreign policy*», whereas Iceland will have to negotiate its membership of the European Union (the current government, led by Johanna Sigurdardottir (social-democratic alliance party) is favourable to membership whereas Olafur Ragnar Grimsson has expressed his reservations on the subject). The outgoing President accuses the Icelandic media of giving Thora Arnorsdottir preferential treatment.

The latest opinion poll carried out by the Institute of Social Sciences at the University of Iceland, and published on 21st May, shows the journalist coming out on top in the presidential election on 30th June, with 46.2% of the vote, ahead of the outgoing head of State who would receive 37.8%. The gap is tending to narrow between the two, Olafur Ragnar Grimsson

has come back strongly and Thora Arnorsdottir has lost a few points. One should not forget, however, that she has been forced to put her electoral campaign on hold over the past few days, to give birth to her daughter. The outgoing President took advantage of this temporary withdrawal to occupy the whole of the stage.

If Thora Arnorsdottir wins the presidential election on 30th June she will not be Iceland's first female head of State (Vigdís Finnbogadóttir held the position between

1980 and 1996), but Iceland would find itself in an absolutely unique position: the country's top four positions in its political hierarchy would be held by women: President of the Republic, Prime Minister (Johanna Sigurðardóttir), the Speaker (Asta Ragnheiður Jóhannesdóttir, Social-democratic alliance party) and, finally, the head of the Church of Iceland (Sera Agnes Sigurðardóttir will become the country's first woman bishop on 1st July). The President's mandate comes to term on 31st July 2012.

Note on the results of the presidential elections held in Iceland on 26th June 2004

Turnout: 62.50%

Candidates	Number of votes	Percentage of the vote
Olafur Ragnar Grimsson	90 662	85,60
Astthor Magnusson	13 250	12,51
Baldur Agustsson	2 001	1,88

Source: Icelandic Interior Ministry website (<http://www.innanrikisraduneyti.is/forsetakosningar/upplysingar/nr/874>)

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.

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7 Day before
the poll

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 Guðmundsson, 63 years old, geophysician, a former communist, standing as an independent;
- Herdis Thorgeirsdóttir, 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 Olafsdóttir, 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 Arnorsdóttir 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 Arnorsdóttir 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 crea-*

ted ; 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 Reykjavík'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 Arnorsdóttir 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 Arnorsdóttir 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 Arnorsdóttir 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 Arnorsdóttir 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 Arnorsdottir 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 Bjarnason 0.7%.

Olafur Ragnar Grimsson re-elected for a 5th mandate as Head of State in Iceland

Olafur Ragnar Grimsson was re-elected as Presidency of the Republic of Iceland on 30th June last. He won 52.78% of the vote and beat his main rival, a journalist from the state TV channel RUV, Thora Arnorsdottir, who won 33.16% of the vote, thereby failing in her bid to bring about change to this island in the north of Europe. Independent candidate Ari Trausti Gudmundsson won 8.64%, Herdis Thorgeirsdottir, chair of the European Jurists Association, 2.63%, Andrea Olafsdottir, chair of the Hagsmunasamtök heimilanna association (the Property Owners' Association), 1.8% and farmer Hannes Bjarnason 0.98%.

Nearly 2/3 of the 235,784 Icelanders turned out to vote (69%), a score up by 6.5 points in comparison with the last presidential election.

The Icelanders preferred continuity to change even though the presidential election on 30th June did herald an era of change, since previously the outgoing Head of State was necessarily re-elected if he stood for election. "Thora Arnorsdottir's result illustrates the gulf that exists between the popular classes and the intellectual elites in Icelandic society," declared Rosa Erlingsdottir,

a political science professor at the University of Reykjavik.

Olafur Ragnar Grimsson, whose popularity had declined sharply in the polls in the wake of the serious economic crisis that struck the country in 2008 (Iceland just escaped bankruptcy), managed to improve his rating in the polls, notably by using

Results

his right to veto twice. On 2nd January last he refused to sign the Icesave Agreement law approved by parliament just a few days prior to that date, which planned for Reykjavik's reimbursement of a 3.8 billion euro debt to the Netherlands and the UK. The result of this was that a referendum was organised on 6th March 2010 in which the Icelanders rejected the Icesave agreement to a total of 93%. Nearly one year later on 20th February 2011, Mr Grimsson announced the organisation of another popular vote on the new Icesave Agreement that had been approved by MPs. On 9th April 58.9% of the electorate voted against the text. In his electoral campaign the President of the Republic repeated that his decision to use his right to veto and organise the referenda "enabled the unification of the Icelanders, gave power to the people and strengthened the latter's faith in democracy."

"Many people who had never voted for Olafur Ragnar Grimsson say they are ready to do so because the President of the Republic stood up and defended Iceland against Icesave," stressed Bryndis Hlodversdottir, the dean of the University of Bifröst. "Thanks to this political manoeuvre Olafur Ragnar Grimsson has developed a reputation of being an independent, strong man who reassures the electorate in these times of uncertainty," indicated the sociologist of the University of Reykjavik, Thoroddur Bjarnson, who added that the confrontation between the outgoing Head of State and Thora Arnorsdottir was symbolic of the "implosion of a society whose economic collapse had reshaped the political landscape." "In the end we witnessed the bipolarisation of Icelandic society. On the one hand, on the left we now have extremely radical people who are demanding the introduction of increasingly direct democracy and who find the government's action inadequate in this area. On the other hand, on the right there are all of those who play down the 2008 economic crisis, qualifying it as an "upset" and who believe that the biggest problems are due to government decisions," said Thoroddur Bjarnason.

Olafur Ragnar Grimsson had already used his right to veto on 2nd June 2004 after the vote on

the media law. This first presidential veto in the country's history hit the island like a thunderbolt. The law should have been submitted to referendum but the text was finally repealed on 22nd July 2004.

Alongside the position and the role of the President of the Republic, Iceland's bid to join the European Union was the second most important issue in the election on 30th June. The head of State is fiercely against it, whilst Thora Arnorsdottir supports it. Again the president of the Republic succeeded in playing the nationalist card. During the entire campaign he used his experience to stand as the people's protector. "I think my experience and my knowledge will help to appease dissension, conflict and controversies that the country has to face better than any others," he declared.

Aged 69 and from Isafjordur, Olafur Ragnar Grimsson is a political science graduate from the University of Manchester in the UK, he was also the first Icelander to acquire a PhD in this discipline. Professor of Political Science at the University of Iceland, he directed the Icelandic TV/radio from 1966 to 1971. A member of the Young Progressives from 1966 to 1973, Mr Grimsson was elected MP in 1974 on a list put forward by the People's Alliance, a political party he chaired from 1987 to 1995.

Finance Minister from 1988 to 1991 in the government led by Steingrímur Hermannsson, he was elected President of the Republic for the first time on 29th June 1996 with 40.9% of the vote. He was re-elected to office in June 2000 without any vote being organised, since no other candidate stood against him. In 2004 he faced two opponents, but was easily re-elected with 86.5% of the vote. In 2008 he was re-elected without an election taking place. On 30th June he was re-elected as head of State in an exceptional presidential election, which was unusual in that he faced five other candidates.

Olafur Ragnar Grimsson is therefore about to undertake his 5th presidential term in office in the

Bessasthathir, the name of the Icelandic head of State's residence. Since its independence (17th June 1944) the country has had 5 presidents, 3 of whom (Asgeir Asgeirsson, 1952-1968, Kristjan Eldjarn, 1968-1980 and Vigdis Finnbogadottir, 1980-1996) undertook 4 terms in office. Olafur

Ragnar Grimsson is the first to win his 5th mandate.

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 Bjarnason 0.7%.

Results of the Presidential Election on 30th June 2012 in Iceland

Participation : 69%

Candidates	No. of votes won	% of votes won
Olafur Ragnar Grimsson	101 155	52,78
Thora Arnorsdottir	63 997	33,16
Ari Trausti Gudmundsson	16 211	8,64
Herdis Thorgeirsdottir	5 366	2,63
Andrea Olafsdottir	4 013	1,80
Hannes Bjarnason	2 021	0,98

Source: <http://kosningasaga.wordpress.com/forsetakosningar/forsetakosningar-2012/>

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