

Ireland poised to get its youngest ever premier as Simon Harris elected leader of Fine Gael party

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Online Desk: Ireland is poised to get its youngest-ever premier next month after Simon Harris secured the leadership of the Fine Gael party on Sunday, replacing Leo Varadkar who announced his surprise resignation last week.

The 37-year-old Harris, who has been the coalition government's further and higher education minister, was the only candidate to put his name forward to succeed Varadkar, who had been Ireland's previous youngest prime minister, or what Ireland calls its taoiseach.

Harris is expected to be formally elected premier in the Irish parliament in early April after lawmakers return from their Easter break.

In his victory speech in the central Ireland town of Athlone, Harris said this was a "moment for Fine Gael to reconnect" with the people and pledged to fight against populist forces in Irish politics.

"I want this party to fight against populism and deliberate polarization," he said.

He confirmed Fine Gael as a "proudly pro-European party," condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine and called for an immediate cease-fire in Gaza.

"There is a hell of a lot to get done in the time ahead," he said.

Harris said nothing about the coalition government, which came into place at the end of 2020, but has previously said that he would remain fully committed to the program for government agreed upon with partners Fianna Fail and the Green Party. He has stopped short of ruling out a general election this year, but insisted such a poll wasn't his priority.

Varadkar, 45, has had two spells as taoiseach — between 2017 and 2020, and again since December 2022 as part of a job-share with Micheál Martin, the head of Fianna Fáil.

He was the country's youngest-ever leader when first elected at age 38, as well as Ireland's first openly gay prime minister. Varadkar, whose mother is Irish and father is Indian, was also Ireland's first biracial taoiseach.

He played a leading role in campaigns to legalize same-sex marriage, approved in a 2015 referendum, and to repeal a ban on abortion, which passed in a vote in 2018.

He led Ireland during the years after Britain's 2016 decision to leave the European Union. Brexit had huge implications for Ireland, an EU member that shares a border with the U.K.'s Northern Ireland. U.K.-Ireland relations were strained while hardcore Brexit-backer Boris Johnson was U.K. leader, but have steadied since the arrival of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak.