

Bosnia: Abdic Turns Spotlight on Bihac

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Fikret Abdic's bid for the Bosnian presidency has turned the spotlight on his bitterly divided and economically shattered former fiefdom.

A controversial former Bosniak tycoon on trial in Croatia has startled Bosnia's political establishment by announcing his intention to run in elections for the country's presidency.

Though it remains unclear whether Sarajevo's new election commission will allow Fikret Abdic, the president of the Democratic People's Union, DNZ, to contest the poll from a foreign prison, his declaration will inevitably focus attention on the political and economic chaos prevailing in the corner of Bosnia he once dominated.

After mounting a revolt against the Sarajevo authorities from his headquarters in Velika Kladusa in north-west Bosnia, Abdic fled into exile in Croatia in August 1995. But he lost the backing of the Croatian government after the death of President Franjo Tudjman and the subsequent defeat of his Croatian Democratic Union party.

He has been in prison in the Croatian town of Karlovac since last spring, held on war crimes charges stemming from his failed attempt to negotiate a peace deal with the Bosnian Serbs during the 1992-5 war.

Abdic, who controlled part of the so-called Bihac pocket, which now comprises much of the Federation's Unsko-Sanski canton, was unusual for defying the traditional Bosnian template of ethnic-based conflict.

His revolt sparked fierce fighting between his followers and Bosniaks loyal to the Sarajevo authorities. More Muslim died in this conflict than in defending the pocket against the Bosnian Serbs.

Abdic was well-known throughout Yugoslavia in the 1970s and 1980s for having built from scratch one of the country's largest companies, the food-processing giant Agrokomerc, based in his hometown of Velika Kladusa, in the north of the Bihac pocket. The company provided tremendous employment opportunity for the economically undeveloped region.

It was through this business success that Abdic, known to his supporters as "Babo" (father), was able to cultivate such a loyal following.

Abdic almost led Bosnia's presidency after the Yugoslav republic's first multi-party elections since the Second World War in 1990, when he won the most votes for the seven-man presidency.

A backroom deal led him to cede the presidency chairmanship to his rival, Alija Izetbegovic, from the Party of Democratic Action, SDA, in exchange for gaining influence over cabinet appointments.

He served as a presidency member while remaining boss of Agrokomerc as Bosnia lurched towards independence in 1992. The ensuing war with the Bosnian Serbs led to a break with Izetbegovic, as Serbs overran almost two-thirds of the state, cutting off the Bihac area from Sarajevo.

In defiance of Izetbegovic, Abdic sought a quick peace deal with the Serbs and in 1993 declared an Autonomous Republic of Western Bosnia, based on his Velika Kladusa fiefdom. The move sparked conflict with Sarajevo loyalists in the south, effectively splitting the pocket in two.

The Unsko-Sanski canton remains paralyzed politically by the divisions created in those years. In the cantonal assembly, Abdic's DNZ controls the balance of power between the SDA and the Alliance for Changes which rules at the national level. The two refuse to cooperate with one another.

The DNZ has put a high price tag on its cooperation with the two parties, at one point demanding the post of cantonal prime minister in exchange for voting with the Alliance, an unreasonable request given its unpopularity in much of the canton.

Efforts to resolve the canton's political difficulties by setting up governments of technocrats have come to nothing. Since last year there have been three cantonal prime ministers and numerous ministerial dismissals and appointments.

The Office of the High Representative, OHR, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE, have intervened directly in the canton several times, most dramatically in November 1999 when they fired the then-president, Mirsad Veladzic, who led a hard-line faction of the SDA.

Local politicians failed to take advantage of Veladzic's removal by making a stab at some form of reconciliation, which would have gone a long way to dispelling the atmosphere of fear in which both the SDA and DNZ thrive.

In the past, a South African-style reconciliation commission has won the backing of several internationals, but garnered little support on the ground, with local leaders viewing the politics of division as the best way to stay in power.

Corruption thrives, meanwhile, and goes unpunished. Public sector employees, including teachers and doctors, regularly strike in protest at months-long delays in salary payments.

But nothing has been done to reform the bloated cantonal administration, many of whose officials drive Skodas with chauffeurs, all paid from the public purse.

There are few solutions in sight. With a weak and splintered opposition, rampant corruption and a collapsed economy, Abdic's prison-cell demagoguery only heightens the climate of fear that strengthens the SDA and DNZ.

Few dynamic young leaders appear ready to confront the status quo and implement true reform, while the stale collection of current leaders on all sides seems content to allow the place to fester as long as their interests are not affected.

But until Sarajevo feels the direct consequences of continued instability in Bihac, the authorities there seem likely to continue their policy of ignoring the troublesome canton in the hope it will just fade away.

Luke Zahner was Spokesperson of the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina from 2000-2001. He was the OSCE Press and Media Development Officer in Bihac from 1996-1997 and a special advisor to the OSCE Ambassador for the Unski-Sanski canton in 2000.

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