

Bosnian Opposition Leader Provokes Political Storm

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A key Bosnian opposition leader is facing unprecedented local and international criticism, increasing the likelihood of the ruling nationalist parties winning local elections in April.

Zlatko Lagumdžija, Bosnian wartime deputy prime minister and leader of the strongest opposition group, the Social Democratic Party (SDP), has long been viewed as a politician capable of bringing about the defeat of the republic's nationalist leaders.

But his leadership qualities are now increasingly being questioned by international organisations and his own party, which have both invested a great deal of hope in him over the years.

In the past few days, Lagumdžija, instead of exploiting western support, has clashed with the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) over its proposal for electoral legislation in Bosnia.

Lagumdžija, who has demanded the resignation of the OSCE experts responsible for the draft, claims it contravenes the European Convention on Human Rights because, under the proposal, voting is likely to remain along ethnic lines in presidential elections.

The OSCE and other international organisations have admitted that they are not entirely happy with the draft, but are concerned it may conflict with the Bosnian Constitution if Lagumdžija's criticisms are fully addressed.

The key problem is that the constitution was established to reflect the Dayton Peace Accord, which stipulates that the Bosnian Presidency must comprise three members, a Bosniak, a Serb and a Croat. Citizens of the Federation can only vote for a Croat or a Bosniak, while those in Republika Srpska, regardless of their ethnic origin, can vote only for a Serb.

The row has revived calls for changes to the peace accord, but the Office of the High Representative (OHR) has insisted that this can only be through the Bosnian Parliament with a two-thirds majority. This, however, is unlikely to happen as the nationalist parties, which hold majorities in all key Bosnian institutions, favour the status quo.

Indeed, after hours of heated debate, the latest parliamentary session voted against even discussing the OSCE draft proposal, despite being told that its adoption would be required for Bosnia to be admitted to the Council of Europe

"The OSCE is deeply disappointed with the outcome of the BiH Parliament vote," said Tanya Domi, OSCE chief spokeswoman. "The Parliament of Bosnia-Herzegovina has defeated the people of this country." "Following an abysmal debate that discussed just about everything but the substance of an election law, the Parliament took action which demonstrated its complete irresponsibility," she said.

Although this frustration was directed equally against all the parliamentary parties, several western diplomats admitted that international organisations were especially angered by Lagumdžija's behaviour.

"We didn't expect problems and attacks from that direction," said one western diplomat, claiming

Lagumdzija repeatedly refused to participate in secret negotiations on the drafting of the election law.

The election law issue has highlighted Lagumdzija's desire for a unified Bosnia, but he has come under fire from some members of his party for not working hard enough to achieve this goal.

Lagumdzija has been accused of failing to establish the SDP in territories controlled by Bosnian Serbs and especially Bosnian Croats, leaving the party, in effect, contesting elections only in Moslem-controlled areas.

Additionally, a number of high-ranking officials from the SDP have accused him of undermining support for the party.

In the past few weeks, several important SDP members left the party, following disputes with Lagumdzija. One of the most notable defections was that of the popular moderate politician and businessmen in Bosnian Croat-controlled west Mostar, Jole Musa.

Last week, he joined the candidate list run by the ruling Moslem SDA party, openly blaming Lagumdzija for his decision to leave.

As a result, several opinion polls conducted both by local newspapers and international organisations have showed that support for the SDP is flagging. Many analysts believe this, as well as the declining popularity of the SDA and its leader, Alija Izetbegovic, could play into the hands of co-prime minister Haris Silajdzic, one of the most highly rated politicians among Bosnian Moslems.

Silajdzic's Party for Bosnia-Herzegovina (SZBiH) recently ended its coalition with the SDA and some experts hoped that an eventual alliance between Silajdzic and Lagumdzija could unseat Bosnia's hard-liners.

But several low-level meetings between representatives of the two leaders have failed to bring about any concrete results, mainly, analysts believe, because of personal rivalries.

The political turmoil has increased calls for both local and parliamentary elections, scheduled for April and October respectively, to be postponed, as it seems that neither will effect any real change in Bosnia.

But leading officials both in the OHR and OSCE have insisted that April's ballot should at least be held as scheduled, as it has already been postponed once before.

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