

Bosnian Parties Prepare to Share Power

Author: [Janez Kovac](#)

Politicians in Bosnia are locked in negotiations on the formation of coalition administrations throughout the country

Bosnian politicians have begun tiring and complicated negotiations over power-sharing following November's inconclusive general election results.

Bosnian votes were almost equally split between progressive and nationalist parties.

Although some local and international officials appeared to be disappointed with the election results, the three ruling nationalist parties - the Serb Democratic Party (SDS), Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and Muslim, Party for Democratic Action (SDA) - together garnered less than 50 per cent of the national vote for the first time since 1990.

The elections also established the leading opposition Social Democratic Party, SDP, as the biggest party in Bosnia.

But while the results represent another positive step towards democracy in Bosnia, they have left the country politically unstable with no party having the necessary majority to form a government on its own at any level.

The real election winners will be decided in post-election negotiations, with the two third-strongest parties in each entity - the Party of Democratic Progress, PDP, in Republika Srpska and Party for Bosnia-Herzegovina, SZBiH, in the Federation - expected to play a critical role in shaping the new governments.

For example, while the SDS won in Republika Srpska it did not acquire an overall majority and will be looking to form a ruling coalition with the PDP - something the latter is reluctant to do because the international community has warned that it will cut aid to the entity if the SDS comes to power.

The prospect of drawn-out political negotiations will further try the patience of the international community. Frustrated with the pace of change in Bosnia, the West has been cutting back on financial aid to Bosnia as a means of pressuring local leaders into speedier implementation of the Dayton peace accord.

"The honeymoon is over for good. If we do not achieve a decisive breakthrough in 2001, Bosnia and Herzegovina will find itself isolated," Bosnia's top international mediator Wolfgang Petritsch said in his New Year's address to Bosnian citizens.

Petritsch, together with the rest of international community and many independent analysts, believes that an informal coalition of opposition parties led by the SDP, PDP, SZBiH of Haris Silajdzic, and the new Croatian Initiative (NHI) of Kresimir Zubak, could defeat nationalist parties and bring about long-awaited changes.

But such an alliance would be difficult to establish because of the conflicting political views of several of the prospective coalition members.

Nonetheless, there are signs that these parties are prepared to work together. Late last year, the PDP helped to elect SDP vice-president Sead Avdic speaker of the new Bosnian state-level parliament. Both parties also voted together in the election of several other officials.

The three nationalist parties, meanwhile, are cooperating closely in order to maintain their grip on power.

The fact that these parties, sworn enemies during the war, are now finding a common language against a common enemy - the block of reform-minded parties - makes a mockery of Bosnian politics.

While the SDS triumph in Republika Srpska is cause for concern, many analysts warn the HDZ and its leader Ante Jelavic poses the biggest threat to the Dayton peace accord.

Openly defying the international community, the HDZ organised an illegal referendum on election day, which increased ethnic tensions and bolstered support for the three nationalist parties.

In addition, throughout the pre-election campaign Jelavic and several other senior HDZ leaders frequently denounced the Bosnian state and the peace accord.

Some Western diplomats felt the party and its leaders should be banned for the inflammatory statements, but they chose not to invoke the sanction for fear of provoking violence.

HDZ officials are now warning that they will boycott the work of the joint institutions at all levels and even declare a separate entity unless they are granted a greater say in the running of the country.

What they want in effect is a third of power at state level, an equal share of power in the Muslim-Croat federation, and control of all the cantons where HDZ won any sort of majority.

"We want to participate in the leadership at all levels," said senior HDZ official Ivo Andric Luzanski at a recent press conference.

The international community has yet to respond to the threats, but given the tone of Petritsch's New Year address Western patience with obstructionist Bosnian politicians is wearing very thin. "Your officials must start acting responsibly, and you, the citizens, must hold them accountable, " he said.

Janez Kovac is a regular IWPR contributor

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