

Bulgaria: Turkish Party Urged to Rethink Policies

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Party representing Bulgaria's Turkish minority is facing calls to broaden its narrow focus on ethnic issues and concerns.

Interethnic relations are dominating political debate in Bulgaria in the run-up to June's parliamentary elections, as the opposition and public question the role of the ruling Turkish minority party, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, MRF.

MRF, which is a junior partner in the governing coalition led by the National Movement Simeon II, NMS, is facing challenges from its political rivals - both Turkish and ethnic Bulgarians - and resentment from many Bulgarians.

Analysts say that the party is perceived in two ways.

There are those who see it as an important contributor to Bulgaria's ethnic peace and a protector of the rights of the Turkish minority, which comprises some eight per cent of the eight million population.

But there are others who view the MRF as a remnant of the post-communist politics of the early Nineties - when it was formed in response to the communist regime's persecution of the minority - and believe it needs to be reformed.

The MRF's rhetoric has long been dominated by ethnic concerns, with some observers arguing that it may have to prove that it's a national party rather than a purely ethnic movement if it is to retain power in the June 25 election.

Antonina Zheliazkova, head of the Centre for Interethnic Relations in Sofia, thinks that the MRF still reflects Nineties' priorities and is bound to change when Bulgaria enters the European Union.

"The MRF chose to have a human rights profile because at that time this was the main concern, not only of the minorities, but also of many Bulgarians," she said. "Its future in relation to Bulgaria in Europe will lie in its role [as a liberal force in] ethnic relations in the Balkans."

The opposition, meanwhile, accuses the party of political cynicism for the way it plays the ethnic card.

The Democrats for Strong Bulgaria, DSB, a right-wing party led by former prime minister Ivan Kostov, has described the MRF as an undemocratic ethnic party which manipulates its members under the pretext of protecting their rights.

Kostov has also accused the MRF's leader Ahmed Dogan of being a "curse over Bulgaria", alleging that he is holding back further reform by focusing on ethnic issues.

In February 2005, the MRF opposed the privatisation of Bulgaria's largest tobacco company, Bulgartabak,

which was backed by the government and the European Union, on the grounds that the industry traditionally employs ethnic Turks. The resulting crisis led to the resignation of vice premier Lidia Shuleva.

The MRF also faces criticism from the Bulgarian public, much of which resents the party for what is seen as its habit of switching loyalties for political gain.

Throughout the Nineties, the MRF has been in formal and informal coalition with both the ex-communist Bulgarian Socialist Party and the main opposition United Democratic Forces.

In the 2001 parliamentary elections, the MRF won around eight per cent of the vote, gaining 21 seats and several ministerial posts. Since then it has been the main supporter of the centre-left government led by former Bulgarian king Simeon II Saxe-Coburg.

At present there are three other Turkish political factions that oppose the MRF's politics. These groups - which recently united to form the Balkan Democratic League - are the Movement of the Democratic Wing, DDK, led by Osman Oktai; the Party for Democracy and Justice, PDS, led by Nejim Genchev; and the Union of the Bulgarian Turks, SBT, led by Seihan Turkan. The latter claims that it has the support of around 300,000 Turkish Bulgarian citizens in Turkey - twice the number of Turkish voters living in Bulgaria.

These parties allege that the MRF's leadership has failed the Turkish community, some 70 per cent of which is unemployed.

Yet the MRF's opponents face serious problems, not least the widespread view among the Turkish minority that it is not ready to consider other political options and must have its interests protected by a strong leader.

Many analysts believe that Dogan, who has led the party since 1989, will be hard to challenge.

Dogan has consistently pursued power and is known for his political shrewdness. While he has done little to investigate the persecution of Bulgarian Turks under communism, he is a popular figure in the Turkish community and has reliable supporters in the upper echelons of the MRF and among the former communists.

Zheliazkova believes that Dogan is capable of changing the MRF from an ethnic to a national party. "He has been working hard to open up the party to all citizens and has encouraged the MRF's supporters to be free to vote for non-ethnic parties," she noted.

Konstantin Dimitrov, a leading DSB figure and national security analyst, views Dogan's policies in the broader context of Bulgaria and Turkey's eventual membership of the EU.

"The MRF needs to leave its ethnic identity behind," he said.

But given the brutality of the communist regime is still fresh in the minds of Turkish voters - who still feel discriminated against in spheres like employment, the health service and education - the MRF's policies of championing the community's rights still lead the way.

However, the challenge for the MRF in the remaining weeks before the election will be to reverse the perception that it is an ethnic party which has been capitalising on the failures of the former communist regime.

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